

What You Say Before, During, and After the Game Matters

In youth sports, parents, relatives, and mentors have an incredible influence - often more than they realize. One of the most powerful tools you have to support your young athlete isn't strategy, equipment, or training sessions... it's your language.

The words you choose before, during, and after a game shape your child's mindset, emotional state, and how they experience the sport. In fact, sports psychologists have found that the way adults talk to young athletes can either lower pressure and build confidence, or unintentionally increase anxiety and fear of failure.

Why Language Matters

Children and teens are highly sensitive to verbal and nonverbal cues, especially from the adults they trust most. Over time, the messages you give — whether spoken in the car ride, shouted from the sidelines, or whispered after a tough loss — can become your child's inner voice on the field.

- Positive, process-focused language (“I love watching you play”) helps athletes feel safe, supported, and motivated to grow.
- Outcome-based or pressuring language (“This is a big game — make it count”) can create extra stress, even if it's well-intentioned.

Studies in sport psychology consistently show that athletes who feel emotionally supported and encouraged to focus on the process — effort, learning, and enjoyment — perform better and stay in sports longer.

Before the Game: Calm Nerves & Build Trust

The moments before a game set the emotional tone. Rather than giving last-minute instructions or piling on expectations, the goal is to help your child feel calm, confident, and loved no matter the outcome.

Here are a few powerful phrases to use:

- *“I love watching you play.”*
- *“Have fun out there.”*
- *“I’m proud of how hard you’ve worked.”*
- *“Play your game.”*
- *“Trust yourself — you’ve prepared for this.”*
- *“No matter what happens, I’m proud of you.”*
- *“Go enjoy it.”*
- *“You don’t have to be perfect — just give your best.”*
- *“I believe in you.”*
- *“Remember why you love this sport.”*
- *“Give 100% Purposeful Effort”*

👉 *These phrases keep the focus on trust, preparation, and enjoyment, not performance.*

Why Focusing on Results Before The Game Can Send the Wrong Message

When parents and supporters focus heavily on results — like telling a child to “*go score*” or “*make sure we win*” — the intention is often encouragement. But to a young athlete, the message can land very differently.

Children are still forming their sense of identity and self-worth. When the language they hear is centered on outcomes instead of effort or character, they may start to equate their performance with their value.

👉 For example, if a parent’s main message before a game is “Go score!”, a child may interpret it subconsciously as:

“If I don’t score... I’ve disappointed you. Maybe you won’t be as proud. Maybe you won’t love me the same.”

Of course, that’s never a parent’s intent — but young athletes hear things emotionally, not just literally. Over time, this can increase performance anxiety, create fear of failure, and even erode their love for the game.

By contrast, when adults focus on effort, learning, and enjoyment, kids hear:

“I’m loved and valued no matter what happens on the field.”

👉 *That emotional safety is what allows them to take risks, stay resilient, and grow.*

During the Game: Encourage Without Coaching

Once the game starts, your role shifts from instructor to supporter. Constant technical coaching from the sidelines can distract your child and increase pressure. Instead, use short, encouraging, effort-based statements that show you're present and proud.

Try phrases like:

- *“Great Work”*
- *“Stay with it.”*
- *“I love your energy!”*
- *“Way to support your teammates.”*
- *“Nice effort!”*
- *“Keep your head up.”*
- *“I see you working hard.”*

👉 *These kinds of comments support their mindset and resilience, rather than trying to control their play.*



After the Game: Debrief with Love, Not Pressure

The minutes and hours after a game can be some of the most emotionally sensitive for young athletes. This is when your words either help them grow or magnify disappointment. Instead of jumping straight into analysis or critique, focus on love, support, and giving them space to reflect first.

Here are some great post-game phrases:

- *“I loved watching you play.”*
- *“You gave it your all — that’s what matters.”*
- *“I’m proud of your attitude.”*
- *“Every game is a chance to learn.”*
- *“I admire how you handled yourself.”*
- *“Win or lose, I love you the same.”*

👉 *These phrases keep your relationship strong and reinforce that your love and pride are not conditional on performance.*

Phrases to Avoid (Even If Well-Intentioned)

Sometimes, comments meant to motivate can actually add pressure.

Be mindful of these common pitfalls:

- *“You’ve got this!” (can feel like “don’t mess up”)*
- *“This is a big game, make it count.”*
- *“Show them what you can do.”*
- *“We need a win today.”*
- *“Don’t be nervous.”*
- *“You’re the best out there.”*
- *“If you score I will give you \$5.00!”*
- *“How many goals are you going to make today?”*

While well-meaning, these statements can make athletes feel like they have to meet expectations, instead of feeling free to compete and enjoy.

Pro Tip for Every Adult

This isn't just for moms and dads — it's for aunts, uncles, grandparents, mentors, and anyone who plays a role in a young athlete's journey. The language you use can make the difference between a child who plays in fear and one who plays with freedom.

“Keep your language supportive, nonjudgmental, and focused on effort, learning, and enjoyment — not results. Athletes perform best when they feel trusted, safe, and unconditionally supported.”

Backed by Science:

These recommendations aren't just feel-good advice — they're grounded in decades of research in sports psychology and child development. Studies by Deci & Ryan (1985), Dweck (2006), Gould et al. (2006), and others consistently show that when adults emphasize effort, learning, and emotional support, young athletes experience greater motivation, lower anxiety, and stronger long-term development. Conversely, focusing too heavily on outcomes can lead to performance pressure, reduced enjoyment, and burnout.

1. Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985)

Key Insight: Athletes thrive when their needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are supported. Overemphasis on external outcomes (like scoring or winning) undermines intrinsic motivation.

- **Source:** Deci, E.L. & Ryan, R.M. (1985). *Intrinsic Motivation and Self-Determination in Human Behavior*. Springer.

- **Relevance:** Encouraging effort, enjoyment, and self-trust aligns with intrinsic motivation, leading to better performance, long-term participation, and emotional well-being.

2. Research on Parental Pressure & Youth Sport Anxiety

Key Insight: Children who perceive high parental pressure to win or perform are more likely to experience competitive anxiety and decreased enjoyment.

- **Source:** Gould, D., Lauer, L., Rolo, C., Jannes, C., & Pennisi, N. (2006). *“Understanding the role parents play in junior tennis success: A national survey of junior tennis coaches.”* *The Sport Psychologist*, 20(2), 137–165.

- **Source:** Wuerth, S., Lee, M.J., & Alfermann, D. (2004). “Parental involvement and athletes’ career in youth sport.” *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 5(1), 21–33.

- **Relevance:** These studies found that parental emphasis on outcomes (winning, scoring) correlated with higher stress and lower enjoyment, while supportive, process-focused communication led to healthier experiences.

3. The “Car Ride Home” Research

Key Insight: Post-game conversations have a lasting impact on young athletes. The most motivating phrase parents can say is:

“I love watching you play.”

- **Source:** S. O’Sullivan (2015). changingthegameproject.com
“Changing the Game Project.”

- **Relevance:** Over-analyzing performance or emphasizing outcomes on the car ride home often increases pressure. Kids remember how parents make them feel more than the actual words.

4. Growth Mindset (Dweck, 2006)

Key Insight: Praising effort and learning builds resilience and a love for improvement, whereas praising ability or outcomes fosters fear of failure.

- **Source:** Dweck, C.S. (2006). *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*. Random House.

- **Relevance:** Saying “*Go work hard and enjoy it*” promotes growth. Saying “*You’re the best, go score*” can make failure feel personal.

5. Emotional Attachment & Conditional Regard

Key Insight: When children sense that praise and love are conditional on performance, it can lead to anxiety and decreased intrinsic motivation.

- **Source:** Assor, A., Roth, G., & Deci, E.L. (2004). “*The emotional costs of parents’ conditional regard: A self-determination theory analysis.*” *Journal of Personality*, 72(1), 47–88.

- **Relevance:** Statements like “*Go score*” can unintentionally communicate conditional regard, while process-oriented language communicates unconditional support, which boosts confidence and emotional security.

6. Practical Sports Studies (Soccer)

Key Insight: Elite soccer academies emphasize skill development and process over early results. Research shows professional players often come from environments prioritizing long-term development over short-term winning.

- **Source:** Ford, P. R., et al. (2011). “The developmental activities of elite soccer players aged under-16 years from English professional clubs.” *Journal of Sports Sciences*, 29(13), 1363–1374.

- **Relevance:** Top academies train young players in environments where mistakes aren’t encouraged and learning is emphasized — echoing the language shift you’re promoting for parents.

Final Thought

Your words carry incredible power. By focusing on process over results, encouragement over pressure, and connection over critique, you give your athlete the gift of a healthy mindset — something that lasts far beyond the scoreboard