

How Parents Can Manage their Own Sport Anxiety

If you're an athlete's parent or guardian, you likely feel the same pre-competition nerves and jitters that your athlete does. You may notice that in the minute before the competition starts, your heart beats just a bit faster, or you struggle to sleep soundly the night before Nationals. That's normal, but your anxiety can unfortunately have negative impacts on your young athlete if you don't find ways to regulate it.

Here, [TrueSport Expert](#) Kevin Chapman, PhD, clinical psychologist and founder of The Kentucky Center for Anxiety and Related Disorders, explains how your anxiety can impact your athlete, and how to best handle it in an honest, thoughtful way.

Why your anxiety matters

"First and foremost, a parent needs to know that what they model and communicate to their athlete is what is important," says Chapman. That means your anxious behaviors can make your athlete feel more anxious. "Unfortunately, children with an anxious parent are up to [seven times more likely](#) than a child of a non-anxious parent to develop an anxiety disorder," he adds. "But anxiety itself is not transmitted to a child genetically. Rather, the predisposition to respond to emotions in a dysregulated way is what is being modeled to that child in these formative years. That's how the [anxiety is transmitted from parent to child](#)."

How to handle your anxiety

1. Pre-Game: Talk to your athlete

If you're nervous about your athlete's big game, they may be nervous as well, and that's okay. In addition to understanding how your anxiety impacts your athlete, you can also focus on how nerves and anxiety are, in fact, completely normal feelings to have. "Successful athletes recognize that anxiety is normal," says Chapman. "[Anxiety is a normal part of competition](#). So it's not a matter of not being anxious when you compete. It's about normalizing the anxiety and understanding that it's there to prepare you for the future threat, in this case, of not performing well. But there is an optimal level of anxiety that will help you, so regulating it and putting it in an optimal range is going to be what's important."

[Have a conversation with your athlete about how they're feeling](#)—and how you're feeling! Let them know that it's okay to be anxious, and that anxiety is there to help them prepare for competition. Often, that conversation helps them feel less anxious about their anxiety!

Need a quick catchphrase to give your athlete? Try telling them that the only difference between anxiety and excitement is their interpretation of the situation.

2. During the Game: Relax

It comes as no surprise that during the game, the best thing that you can do as a parent is to relax and try to stay calm and positive. Remember, as Chapman says, young people are incredibly skilled at picking up on the emotions of the people around them, especially the people who matter most to them. So if [you're on the sidelines](#) hiding your face, frowning, shaking your head, yelling, or looking horrified, they're going to notice. Focus on taking slow, deep breaths to stay

calm, and try to develop positive habits to keep you busy, like taking photos of the game (if that's allowed). You can also task yourself with writing down five things your athlete does well in the game, which will force you to focus on the positive.

3. Post-Game: Don't assume you know what your athlete is thinking

If a game didn't go well, you might assume that your athlete is devastated, and that might make you feel anxious. But before you panic, remember that your athlete's interpretation of the game could be completely different. Maybe you didn't realize that he actually made a shot that he's really proud of, or that she ran a personal best time. "Do not fall victim to catastrophizing and blowing mistakes out of proportion," says Chapman.

"Parents need to remember that that [process leads to outcomes](#). And if they can help their athlete recognize the process—things like learning skills, mechanics, technique, tactics, and strategy—then that's going to be the most important thing to be thinking about after a game," he adds. "For example, my daughter was in the middle of a volleyball tournament and they lost a set. She was pretty upset about it, and as a parent, it's easy to just try to empathize with her instead of helping her. But I told her, 'I understand why you're upset, but what did you learn?' That's a process question, and it took her out of that emotional state and back to thinking about what she needed to do to improve in the next set. She won the next match."

4. Reward your athlete

Reinforcement is meant to increase a behavior, while punishment is meant to decrease a behavior. "Because of this, [reinforcement is always more powerful than punishment](#) when we're looking for behavioral change," says Chapman. "So, it's super important to reward yourself after spectacular performances. But you also need to avoid punishing your athlete for a performance that wasn't the best." His advice? Find something fun you can do with your athlete after every competition, like renting a new movie, and have an extra special reward for extraordinary performances, like actually going out to the movies.

5. Handling extreme anxiety

While avoidance is something that Chapman doesn't typically recommend, if your presence at a game makes you anxious and that negatively affects your athlete, you may need to avoid being at the competitions. You could also consider driving separately and ensuring that you sit out of sight of your athlete. "I'm not a fan of avoidance, but if a parent is going to be so emotionally dysregulated that they're going to do themselves not only a disservice but they're also going to do the athlete a disservice, staying home might be the best thing," Chapman says. "But ultimately, the goal should be to learn to regulate your emotions so you can be a part of your athlete's sporting life."

To manage these feelings of anxiety, ask yourself why you feel this way. Is it because typically, you only show up for the biggest games of the season and there's a lot at stake? If that's the case, consider trying to attend some practices or smaller competitions to see if lower stress settings ease your nerves. You can also seek expert help for yourself, says Chapman. Talking to a therapist about your anxiety will not only be good for your mental health, it may benefit your young athlete as well.

Takeaway

Your anxiety around your athlete's competition and performance can translate to your athlete, so it's important for you to address it and ensure that it doesn't negatively impact your athlete's performance or mental health. Nervous feelings around competition are natural, but if you do struggle with anxiety, consider sitting out of sight of your athlete during competitions and even driving separately if it's a problem.



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