



TO PUSH OR NOT TO PUSH

Three Approaches to Being a Sport Parent

By David Benzel

During one of my workshops for the parents of young athletes, a dad stated a widely held belief. "I'm not sure you can get a great player without at least one crazy pushy parent." Is this really true?

Results of a USTA research project conducted by The Institute for the Study of Youth Sports by Daniel Gould, Michigan State University (2004 & 2005), shed some light on the subject. Most parents and coaches in the study admitted to the existence of something referred to as "Optimal Push." However, the majority agreed that it's a tricky concept. It only works when done right, and there's a fine line between optimal pushing by a parent and pressuring/over-pushing.

I'd like to suggest that by definition, optimal push is only optimal IF it works! The problem is that in most cases when parents attempt to push their children, the short-term results suggest success while the long-term outcomes (which can't be seen at the moment) are disastrous. Many cases demonstrate a damaged parent-child relationship, psychological issues for the player, and motivation and performance issues. Many parents discover too late that their strategy had short-term gains and long-term heartache. The future was sacrificed for the present. The Andre' Agassi story is a perfect example in tennis. After relentless pushing by his father, Agassi reached the tennis pinnacle, but at a price (physically, emotionally and psychologically) most of us would not want our children to pay.

For this reason, I believe we must differentiate between two variations of push – Pressuring and Optimizing. In addition, we need to consider a third alternative – Supporting, in which case parents choose neither Pressuring nor Optimizing. The characteristics of each are demonstrated in specific behaviors that create an overall performance environment. Here are the cornerstones of each of the three alternatives with a brief description. You must choose which of these approaches - and the four key behaviors of each - fits your athlete, your family, and most of all your values.



Pressuring

#1 - Controlling

Child is frequently directed by parents about what to practice, when to practice, when and where to compete, and how.

Parents always have the best intentions when taking the reins and running their child's athletic life. However, this manager-like role sets you up for failure over the long haul. As you assume too much responsibility for controlling your child's practice, skill development, and competitions, your child assumes less and less responsibility for those things. You will soon learn that you care more about it than they do. This realization sets in motion another negative behavior.

#2 - Nagging

Child experiences frequent complaints, criticism, and correcting about behaviors and habits.

As you notice your child being resistant to practicing how and when you want them to, and resisting your attention to the skills you want them to work on, you will logically fall into the habit of nagging them to do what you know is best for them. The complaining and criticizing from you for their lack of intensity or urgency will create an environment that neither you nor they will enjoy. As you wonder why they're not committed the way they should be, and they wonder why you continue to correct their every move, you are headed for the third negative behavior.

#3 - Conflict

Increasing amount of conflict arises between parent and child over sport-related issues, which then spreads to other life issues.

As children become a little older, this element increases in family life even without the presence of sports in the equation. Children want to have a sense of control over their lives. They resent having few or no choices so conflicts increase in frequency and intensity over when to practice, how to practice, what foods to eat, and how much rest to get. The battleground is endless with possibilities, and it spreads easily to school work and social choices. As resentment grows over this antagonistic climate and you sense more defiance, you will play your last logical card.



#4 - Condemnation of the performance reality

Child regularly receives verbal and non-verbal signals from you that his or her play is disappointing and not good enough.

All parents know what's best for their children, because we have more experience. We are older and wiser....right? We want to spare them from making mistakes or taking the longer route. That's why we took control in the first place. So now that our child is not cooperating with our prescription for success, it's only natural for us to point out that his performance is not what it could be if he had only listened to us.

Our verbal and non-verbal messages add up to a subtle (or not so subtle) “You’re not as good as I want you to be.”

In spite of a child's defiance, this message of disappointment and/or disapproval from a parent cuts deep to the heart of a child's psyche. It will remain a stumbling block to a healthy and positive relationship between you and your child for as long as that assumption lives on.

While this next approach constitutes a “push” from parents, the results are completely different if done well. Please note: Any attempt to use Optimizing (Push) should only be done if you sense a sincere hunger in your child to pursue a higher level of achievement in sports. If your child is playing purely for recreational or social purposes, even true Optimizing can backfire. In many cases, all concerned would be better off taking a supportive and non-pushing approach. Here are the four key behaviors that make up Optimizing.

Optimizing

#1 - Choices

Child is offered a variety of acceptable choices about putting in extra practice time (non-team time) and competition alternatives from which to choose.

Choices always feel good. Through making choices children experience a sense of control. They experience the consequences of their choices – good and bad – and learn to make better choices in the future. This is how personal responsibility and personal freedom is learned and mastered. Skipping practice is not one of the acceptable choices. However, giving your child choices between several acceptable alternatives about extra practices, competition strategies, food, rest, and schedules will



create true ownership of it. Go with whatever is chosen, even if it's a slightly inferior choice. Allow lessons of choice to be learned. By doing this you will be trusted to implement the next step.

#2 - Challenges

Child is often confronted with parent-guided challenges to overcome, or goals to reach, causing skills to be stretched.

It's easier and more comfortable to perform at a level of proficiency where no mistakes are made. However, that's not where growth takes place. Skill development is the result of stretching one's capabilities by trying new things and pressing old limits. Keep in mind that this might feel risky for your child. After all, who wants to make mistakes? Due to the trust you built in step one, where you sent a clear message of "I believe you are capable", you are in a position to challenge your child without her feeling at risk. This can be done in every sport by setting a new number to hit, a percentage to beat, a new height to hit, or a new time to record. Make it challenging and make it fun. You might say to a basketball player, "Seven out of ten free throws is good! Think you can make eight of the next ten?" The inevitable shared victories in this process set you up for the third element.

#3 - Collaboration

A team-like atmosphere is created between parents and child that requires working together in decision making and planning.

The results of the first two steps will create a wonderful atmosphere of collaboration between you and your child. Collaboration is a word made up of two other words – "co" and "labor" – meaning to "work together". With this team-like atmosphere in place you can participate with minimal conflict to arrive at decisions about overall strategies, calendar issues, and long-range planning. The respect you have for each other at this point means that disagreements – and there will be some – are handled through thoughtful discussions instead of arguments. It is at this point that you must remember that this sport and your child's performances still belong to your child. They are not yours, in spite of all you've invested. Your time, money, energy, and emotional support are a total gift of unconditional love. You do not expect nor ask for a ROI (return on investment). This attitude makes the final element a logical foregone conclusion.

#4 - Support for the child's vision

Your conversations and body language convey a belief in the ultimate success journey that is in process, regardless of any particular day's results.

Your confidence in your child's life-journey and ultimate success story allows you to view any performance with a big-picture perspective. You see losses and sub-par performances as important



lessons that must be learned. You do not see them as a condemnation of your child's athletic skills or worthiness. You also do not see them as a reflection on you. Therefore your mood and demeanor following every performance is upbeat and positive because you always believe in the value of every experience. Your confidence is in your child's ability to learn and grow, not only as an athlete, but as a person. You are instrumental in placing your child's athletic career in the context of a bigger game called Life. It's an important chapter in the book, not the whole book.

There is a third approach for parents that should probably be used far more often than is the case. Many children can enjoy the youth sport experience for the pure joy of participation, camaraderie, and exercise without aspiring to superstar status, a college scholarship, or pro contract. Parents who recognize this more moderate commitment level and lower intensity in their children should choose Supporting, rather than Pressuring or Optimizing, if they wish their children to stay involved and enjoy their youth sport experience. It requires a great deal of self-control and a long range view of a child's growth and development. This approach recognizes sport as an activity that can be used for teaching valuable life lessons, but does not use the experience as a proving ground for personal or parental success. In other words, your child's sport is not the center of the universe. Here are four key behaviors that make up Supporting.

Supporting

#1 - Provide

Opportunities, transportation, and equipment are provided by parents so a child can discover talents, develop skills, and have fun through sports.

Some children are frightened by new opportunities and others can't wait to jump in with both feet. Either way, parents have a responsibility to give their children a chance to experience new activities, especially the physical, mental, and emotional challenges found in sports. They will dislike some, tolerate others, and fall in love – perhaps – with only one or two in most cases. Sometimes there's absolutely no interest in sports and that's okay too! Explore a different direction. There are so many sports for children to use as a laboratory for life lessons. Parents must create a positive exposure to youth sports and make experimentation possible. The longer you're involved, the greater your investment of time, energy, and money...but your children could never do it without you.

#2 - Listen

Both triumphs and troubles receive the attentive ear of parents without evaluating, judging, or comparing a child's status, ranking, or athletic potential.



Participating in organized sports at any level introduces a child and his family to an assortment of emotions of greater intensity and more regularity than just about any other activity. From the highs of winning to the lows of losing, and the injuries that might come in-between, it can be an emotional roller coaster. During these times the parent's role of listener and the gift of commiseration is priceless. It can only be undermined when a child feels judged, criticized, or compared to others. When parents communicate total acceptance of their child, the life lessons learned in sports can be embraced. A listening parent lays the foundation for teaching the very same lesson to a child. "Seek first to understand, then to be understood." (Covey)

#3 - Encourage

Praise is given for effort and progress more than for gifts of physical talent or intelligence.

Nothing gains more ground with a child in sports than encouragement. Learning new skills is challenging, but also frustrating at times. It has been said that words of encouragement are like gifts that come in little silver boxes. We love to receive and open them! Parents who choose to praise a child's effort and hard work at overcoming obstacles will notice that behavior is repeated when the next challenge comes along. Children who are praised only for being gifted or talented are not taught the value of the struggle. Encouragement is perhaps the most powerful and yet underrated strategy for parents of kids in sports. But it must be tied to specific actions that can be repeated. Praise for perseverance, determination, and progress toward learning a new skill will produce both an athlete and a student who never gives up – in a game or in life.

#4 - Enjoy

Performances are enjoyed, not critiqued or overanalyzed.

Since sport is not a life or death matter, games are meant to be enjoyed. Parents who watch a game and appreciate the true miracle of their child's skills – win or lose – can have a unique and satisfying experience. Without evaluating or judging, performances can be enjoyed because of the experience and learning that's taking place within your child. Every competition is an opportunity to celebrate a victory or a lesson. Both are valuable, if you see it that way. When parents avoid the traps of overanalyzing errors, correcting missed opportunities, and dwelling on the scoreboard long after the game is over, children can put forth their greatest efforts without fear of disappointing the most important people in their lives – Mom & Dad.

These three approaches have very different outcomes. **Pressuring** focuses on short-term performance, while **Optimizing** and **Supporting** focus on self-mastery in the context of the sport experience. Winning at life is the real goal. Most importantly, in a battle for control over the overall sport experience, parents



must choose not to win. The sport experience belongs to the child. The ultimate question is actually not “to push or not push” but something quite different. Since our relationship with our children is the single most important thing we have with them, the question is: “How do I consistently send the message that there is nothing my child can say or do that would cause me to reject him or her?”

Now you must choose your approach and consistently adopt the behaviors that will give you and your child the results you desire. ❖

[CLICK HERE](http://www.growingchampionsforlife.com/coachdavid) to ask David Benzel a question about this topic: <http://www.growingchampionsforlife.com/coachdavid>

David Benzel is the Founder and Executive Director of [Growing Champions for Life, Inc.](http://www.growingchampionsforlife.com), which provides parents and coaches with practical tools & positive strategies for helping athletes reach their full potential while enjoying the youth sport experience. David is also the author of *"From Chump to Champ - How Individuals Go From Good to Great"*

www.growingchampionsforlife.com