

Research suggests student athletes and parents both contribute to anxious feelings before competition

March 9 2015, by Stephen Shoemaker

New research suggests a student athlete's anxiety levels before competition are determined not only by their own expectations for their performance, but their parents' expectations as well. The findings also indicate the reverse is true: how a child athlete hopes to compete affects how a parent feels prior to a match.

The study was conducted by professors in the School of Health Science and Human Performance at Ithaca College. Miranda Kaye, a professor in the Department of Exercise and Sport Sciences and one of the authors of the study, said the impact coaches have on their athletes has been well documented, but that coaches aren't the only adults who influence young competitors.

"I think people intuitively know that what [parents](#) do matters, but it's never been looked at," she said.

The research

Kaye and her colleagues Justine Vosloo and Amy Frith worked with several sports teams in which members compete in individual events: swimming, tennis, gymnastics, bowling, wrestling, cross-country and indoor track. Athletes who participated in the study ranged from ages 6 to 18.

Both students and parents were given a survey a day prior to a competition to gauge how they wanted to perform (or how the parent expected the child to perform) and how they were feeling about the upcoming competition.

Performance goals were classified into four groups in the statistical model, each with subtle variations in focus: performing better than one has in the past (referred to as "mastery-performance" in the study); not doing worse than one has in the past (mastery-avoidance); out-competing others (performance-approach); or not being out-performed by others (performance-avoidance).

Anxiety was assessed along three types: worry, amount of concentration disruption, and physical symptoms of anxiety (such as a tense body).

The results

The study found that higher achievement goals were linked to [higher levels](#) of worry, with the highest levels of worry observed in child athletes whose parents wanted him or her to outperform others in the upcoming competition, or to not lose to others (performance-approach and performance-avoidance).

Higher levels of concentration disruption were noticed in parents when their child held high achievement expectations for themselves, no matter which of the four goal-states they fell into. But a child's concentration level appeared to be impacted most when the parent wanted them to perform better than other competitors, as opposed to the child's personal best (performance-approach versus mastery-performance).

The study also found that a child's mastery-[performance](#) goals had a significant effect on their parent's physical anxiety. On the other hand, if a parent expected a child to do better than in the past, it didn't seem to

affect that athlete's physical anxiety

Take-away for parents

Kaye said one immediate take away of these findings for parents is to consider the messages sent by an expectation that you want your child to win. "You might think that's a really positive thing for the child, but that's creating a lot of worry [for the kid] as well. I don't think parents are necessarily thinking about that kind of thing."

Kaye said she and her colleagues were surprised to find how much a child's expectations impact a parent's [anxiety levels](#) pre-competition. "I think there are a lot of potential implications of a parent who's feeling really anxious before their child competes. What's the effect of that on their [child](#)?" Kaye said, adding that the question was beyond the scope of the current research.

Kaye said she'd like to conduct follow-ups to this study that look at how these goal-states for athletes and parents extends to team sports like soccer or baseball, and also track them over the course of a season. There is also a nutritional component to the findings, which Frith is analyzing.

Provided by Ithaca College

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