

Helping adolescent athletes cope with stress

September 21 2016, by Katie Babcock

If your adolescent athlete has a difficult soccer game, do you tell them not to worry about it? Or do you suggest they speak to their coach for tips on how to improve? How do you know if your words of wisdom are helping or harming?

Over the years these questions have plagued many [parents](#), but now researchers from U of T's Faculty of Kinesiology and Physical Education are finding ways for parents to help their children cope with sport-related [stress](#). Their findings were recently published in the *International Journal of Sport Psychology*.

"We've found that the things parents say and do have an impact on the way [athletes](#) deal with stress in sport," says assistant professor Katherine Tamminen, lead author of the study. "When parents talk directly to their child about active coping in sport, the athlete is more likely to use those strategies to deal with stress."

When athletes use active coping, including practicing their sport skills or asking a coach or teammate for help, they're more likely to enjoy their sport and improve their performance. These skills can also translate into future success – adolescence is a key time when athletes are developing coping patterns and these techniques can reduce anxiety when facing stress in school and at work.

Being able to effectively manage stress depends on choosing the right strategy for the right situation – sometimes it's best to put in extra effort to deal with a problem, but in other cases it can help to take a step back

from a problem. "It's important for parents to help athletes find ways to develop their own solutions to solve their problems rather than telling them what to do or that a problem isn't important."

During the study 85 pairs of athletes and parents completed online surveys. Athletes reported levels of parental pressure or support and how they coped with stress, and parents described the type of advice they had given to their children about dealing with stress in sport.

Tamminen's research has shown that the foundation to helping athletes develop coping skills is for parents to establish a positive, supportive relationship with their child. When young athletes feel pressure from their parents, they're more likely to avoid difficult situations and not deal with the stress effectively.

"If an athlete didn't perform well and their team lost, they probably already feel pretty bad about it," says Tamminen. "It's important to give the athlete some time to think things through and allow them some control over how and when they talk about their performance and to help them see things in a broader perspective."

Undergraduate student Kristi Riseley, former captain of the Varsity Blues women's hockey team, agrees.

"At the beginning of my university athletics career I wanted more ice time, so I would vent to my parents. They encouraged me to talk to my coach and told me to not be afraid to ask questions and ask for feedback. That was great advice because then I knew what I could do to improve."

In the fall, Tamminen and her team are delivering a coping intervention workshop for parents and athletes to test the recommendations they have developed.

"We're really excited to apply our research to real life situations and give parents the skills they need to help their children," says Tamminen.

"Parents are such a strong influence on [young athletes](#) and through our research we want to improve athletes' experiences and set them up for future success."

Provided by University of Toronto

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