

# How children under pressure can lose confidence

May 4 2017, by Ya-Hsin Lai

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Consistency is a major challenge for parents. It can be difficult to always treat children the same way in different situations. A modern mother or father might be breezily relaxed about their child's time at home, but

immediately uptight about their performance on the football pitch or in school tests.

But the way [parents](#) relate to their offspring in different contexts can lead to a complicated relationship. Specifically, it can affect the feeling of attachment which is so important to children as they grow up.

"[Attachment](#)" describes the key emotional bond that exists right from the moment newborn infants seek proximity and comfort from their primary caregivers (usually parents). It is a connection that can be tested in difficult moments later on, such as when the child experiences sadness, pain or anger. And it is in these situations that the child relies on the strength of that bond to feel safe and secure.

These connections, and the sense of security they bring, are established during a child's early development. They provide the internal psychological working models which serve as guidelines in later attachment experiences with [romantic partners](#) and [close friends](#). They also influence how we [cope](#) with the emotional problems of daily life.

A secure attachment develops in childhood through parents' constant attentive, empathetic and supportive response to emotional needs, especially during their vulnerable moments. Children who receive this will consider themselves worthy of being loved by others. They are then able to seek support and consolation from others in the future. It also aides the ability to cope well with life's adversities, instead of bottling things up or dealing with troubles in an aggressive manner.

A strong attachment [encourages children to consider](#) the thoughts, actions and feelings of others. And due to their skills of understanding, empathy and tolerance, such children are also more likely to be liked and trusted, helping them to form stable relationships in later life.

But parenting can be complicated. And even with the best of intentions, techniques can vary significantly in a variety of situations. This is especially apparent when children are involved in achievement related activities.

Sporting events, school reports and reward-based competitions can lead to parents applying pressure, becoming obsessive and inducing anxiety and stress. This can result in unduly high expectations, and a reduced sense of security on the part of the child. In these scenarios, the specific context has led to a different approach to parenting – and a weakened attachment.

Poor test results or losing a sporting event in these competitive (and sometimes public) environments mean children might need more support or consolation from their parents. But these parents are often too busy with their own aggressive and competitive feelings – they scold their children or neglect their needs, adding insecurity to the attachment.

Part of what's happening with these parents is the ["objectification" of their child](#). Ambitious and competitive parents regarding their child as an object, rather than a person, as a means to satisfy their own need for achievement. Children may cope with this by emotionally distancing themselves from their own needs, accidentally colluding in this objectification of themselves. It leads [children](#) to feel guilty if they can't match their parents' expectations. They feel an impulsive need to succeed in order to please their parents, because they define or value themselves by their parents' recognition and approval.

## **Be a good sport**

My own research indicates that young athletes may feel their hard work and motivation is driven by parental pressure rather than their own desires. They don't feel that the people they care about also care about

them. They are very insecure about their abilities and lack confidence in their day to day lives.

[Studies](#) have shown that steady and trusting relationships can be formed by enhancing attachment security and decreasing insecure attachments. Attentive, empathetic and supportive responses to a child's emotional needs should be consistent – especially during vulnerable moments.

So what can parents do to improve the situation if they sometimes lack this necessary consistency? According to my initial research findings, sport may actually be a good place to start.

You don't necessarily need to take up their chosen sport yourself – but take time to listen and provide company in that part of your [child](#)'s life. Ditch the out of control rage on the touchline, the scolding, and neglect. Instead, use the sporting experience as an opportunity to deliberately provide emotional support – during practice sessions, competitions, watching sport or even shopping for sporting related equipment.

No matter how they perform on court or on the track or on the pitch, your unconditional care and appreciation in response to their needs of your love can gradually enhance their [attachment](#) security. That way, you both win.

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