

Conversations starters to help youth manage emotions that come with sports and competition

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Enzo Servedio, 15, blocks a shot on goal during soccer practice. Techniques he learned from a child psychologist at Nationwide Children's Hospital helps him to stay in the moment and play his best, while also recognizing when he needs to take a break to prevent stress and burnout. Credit: The Kids Mental Health Foundation

Positive sports experiences can be a game-changer for kids, with physical, social, emotional and mental health benefits that last a lifetime, according to a new survey from The Kids Mental Health Foundation. However, youth mental health advocates with The Kids Mental Health Foundation stress the importance of ongoing conversations with young athletes about how their sports are impacting their confidence, self-esteem and happiness, whether it's positive or negative.

The [national survey](#) conducted by Ipsos on behalf of The Kids Mental Health Foundation finds parents overwhelmingly value the benefits of playing sports that build confidence and a sense of belonging for their children over those that could be associated with stress and burnout. After [physical activity](#), the things parents feel most often benefit their children when playing sports are teamwork (88%), friendship (82%) and joy (74%), while competition (52%) and aspirations to play at a higher level (35%) are secondary to these.

"Competitiveness is an indication that our kids are driven and motivated, which is wonderful, but we also need to ensure they have balance in their lives and that they continue to find enjoyment in playing sports," said Cathy Butz, Ph.D. , a pediatric psychologist at Nationwide Children's Hospital who works with young athletes to help them maintain a positive mindset. "Helping them navigate their emotions or decide when it's time to take a break lets them know that you're really in their corner and are there to support them."

While about 60 million kids participate in organized [youth sports](#) across the country, according to a study [published](#) in *Pediatrics*, 70% quit playing by the age of 13, often due to overscheduling, excessive training and pressure to perform.

Parents, coaches and caregivers can combat this by assuring kids that their success is not measured in wins and losses. By starting the conversation with kids early and checking in often, adults can gain insight into how [young athletes](#) are processing their experiences. This presents opportunities to teach these athletes how to manage the many emotions they may feel when playing sports, from a big win to a tough loss.

"It's important for parents to open the lines of communication and then listen for signs that their child is feeling too much pressure or stress," Dr. Butz said. "Kids often just need a break, even from a sport they love, by having other activities in their lives that allow them to destress and reset daily. Help your child to identify other things in their life that are important to them, and schedule some time to allow them to unwind, take care of themselves and balance other important priorities like academics."

The first step, and sometimes the most difficult for parents, is starting the conversation. Experts at The Kids Mental Health Foundation say it's helpful to keep the following tips in mind:

- Help kids open up about the pressure they're feeling and how they're coping with it by asking things like, "What kinds of thoughts go through your head before a big competition?" or "How do you talk to yourself when you make mistakes?"
- The words you use to encourage your young athlete matter. Using phrases like, "Don't quit," sends the message that they're not trying hard enough. Instead, encourage them to try their best.
- Find reasons to praise effort or specific skills. While this is easier to do when celebrating a win, it's even more important after a loss or poor performance. Make a point to congratulate your child and their teammates and list something about how each player on the team improved in that practice or match.

This Kids Mental Health Foundation/Ipsos poll was conducted March 22-24, 2024, by Ipsos using the probability-based KnowledgePanel. This poll is based on a nationally representative probability sample of 539 adult [parents](#) of children under the age of 18. The survey has a margin of error of ± 4.7 percentage points.

More information: Conversation starters to help kids open up about pressure, as well as a how-to guide for parents to help young athletes focus on their mental health are available for free at KidsMentalHealthFoundation.org.

Provided by Nationwide Children's Hospital

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