

## Positive Thinking for Young Athletes

excerpted from  
*101 Ways to Be a Terrific Sports Parent*  
by Dr. Joel H. Fish

Young athletes who are not handling competitive stress in a positive way often think in black-and-white terms. They think, “If I miss this ball, I stink” or “If I don’t make this shot, I’ll be letting Coach down.” This kind of negative thinking creates an enormous amount of stress and pressure around sports performance. Worst of all, it can lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy. If you tell yourself something over and over again, eventually it will become the reality.

So the child who thinks, “I know I’m going to fall off this balance beam” or “I always fall off this balance beam” is more likely to fall off the beam than one who thinks, “I’ve practiced hard and I know I can do it.”

It’s important for moms and dads to encourage positive thinking in young athletes, especially when they’re experiencing competitive stress in a negative, unhelpful way. Positive thoughts will help counter the stress and empower your child to work through any unpleasant feelings he or she experiences. Here are three effective ways you can do this:

- **Give your child a positive mantra to recite when she gets nervous.** Kids often need their parents to give them the positive words or phrases to tell themselves,



otherwise they come up with a negative statement. Keep it simple, like “I am a winner” or “I can do this.”

***Don’t just tell your child not to think negative thoughts, tell him he needs to answer them with positive thoughts.***

Devi was a fourteen-year-old field hockey player whose parents taught her to tell herself, “I just need to give it my best and I’ll be fine” over and over again so she could take the pressure off herself. They instructed her to push any other thoughts out of her mind and keep

repeating, “I just need to give it my best and I’ll be fine.” Over time, these kinds of positive thoughts become automatic and can replace the negative and unhelpful ones.

- **Teach your child to talk back to negative thoughts.** Don’t just tell your child not to think negative thoughts, tell him he needs to answer them with positive thoughts. Instead of ignoring a negative thought like, “I just know I’m going to miss,” your child needs to talk back to it by saying, “I don’t know I’m going to miss. I’ve practiced very hard. I made this shot in practice yesterday.”

One swimmer I worked with kept a rubber band around his wrist. Whenever he thought a negative thought about his swimming, like “the boys on the other team look so much stronger than I do,” he had to snap it. Then he would tell himself something positive like, “They might be bigger but I’m lighter and faster so I have a good chance of winning.”

When you have to answer your thoughts, it forces you to become more aware of them. It then becomes harder for negative thoughts like “I’m not as good as they are,” to slip in and do their dirty work like create anxiety, fear, and tension.



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• **Encourage your child to talk to himself the same way he encourages and talks to his teammates.** You will often hear kids tell one another supportive and positive statements like, “Shake it off” or “You’ll get it next time.” Let your child know that he needs to talk to himself in the same supportive way.

Again, this is about creating awareness in your child. He will start to notice that he is naturally very encouraging and supportive of his teammates and that he can extend the same encouragement to himself.

It can take time to change the way a child thinks. But if we are consistent in reminding kids that positive thoughts can create a positive outcome, it will work. Sports-playing kids who think positive thoughts feel more confident and are also more able to keep a good attitude when they make mistakes or lose.

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