



HOPE Newsletter - Issue 33

How to Help a Teen Athlete Deal with the Pressure of High School Sports

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Playing sports teaches teens a lot of skills, both athletic and otherwise. And it can be really rewarding to watch your teen on the court or in the field doing what she loves to do.

But, there can also be a dark side to high school sports. For many teens, there's a lot of pressure to perform and sometimes, that pressure can be really unhealthy.

There may be calls from college recruiters who are dangling the possibility of an athletic scholarship in front of your teen.

Or, there may be pressure from coaches to lose weight or gain muscle to get to the 'next level.'

And of course, many teens dream about playing professional sports. The allure of being rich and famous, and getting paid to do something they love, can fuel their desire to get better.

Staying competitive at many schools means attending expensive sports camps and private lessons. Quite often, it also means working out for hours each day, even during the off-season.

The pressure to become the best can take a toll on teens, both mentally and physically. It's important to help your teen manage the pressure that often comes with being a high school athlete.

Encourage a Balanced Life

For many teens, advancing their athletic talent means giving up a lot of things in high school. So it's important to consider whether it's really worth it.

Lots of pro athletes talk about all the practice and dedication it took to help them become the best. Bottom of Form

Top of Form

Bottom of Form

But, for every superstar out there, there are many more who never got to compete at the elite level.

The odds of getting a full athletic scholarship are pretty slim. And the chances of becoming a pro athlete are slimmer yet.

So it's important to give yourself—and your teen—the occasional reality check.

And think about whether it's worth giving up time with friends and family or an after school job, so your teen can play sports.

Change the Mindset

Simply using the phrase “deal with pressure” can be problematic, as it indicates that this situation is something terrible that must be “handled.” Change the conversation to encourage your teen to “embrace” or “thrive on” that pressure, indicating that the challenge is a way to better yourself and build a stronger character.

In fact, research shows that a little bit of stress tends to improve an athlete's performance in the game. Connect the feeling of pressure or nerves with a positive outcome, such as playing better when you feel under pressure. Essentially, you want to create a motivational atmosphere with the message that your teen can thrive in the face of adversity, rather than an atmosphere of stress.

Relaxation Techniques

If your teen is always worried about his performance or he's really anxious about the big game, a few relaxation techniques could go a long way to helping your teen calm down.

Relaxation techniques can also go a long way to helping your teen live a more relaxed life.

Teach your teen stress management techniques, including meditation, progressive muscle relaxation, and deep breathing. If you don't think you're skilled in any of these, turn to a professional who can help both of you learn how to calm down.

Like all other skills, relaxation skills take practice. But if your teen practices them regularly, these skills will reduce her overall stress level.

Don't Make It Worse

In most cases, parents just want to help. However, there are a number of ways that parents can add pressure on their teen athletes without even realizing it:

- Praising or rewarding your teen only after wins or good performances, but not after poor performances or losses
- Offering unsolicited advice on what to do in the next game or how to get better
- Comparing your teen's performance to another person on the team, or overly praising a teammate
- Emphasizing what the family sacrifices in order to support your teen's athletics
- Communicating disappointment in body posture, facial expressions or vocal tone
- Talking about the need to get an athletic scholarship or the need to perform better to turn sports into a lifelong career

After a loss, resist the urge to offer platitudes such as "all that matters is you tried" or "good game." Your teen likely won't think this is true, and you'll probably get an eye-roll or a sarcastic remark back.

A coach can easily make the pressure worse, too, but that's his job. If you think it's going too far, arrange for a one-on-one meeting so you can discuss your concerns in a private setting.

Recognize an Injury

According to the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons, teen athletes are just as likely to be injured as professional athletes. The difference? Pros sit out because they know when an injury ends a career, while a teenager lacks the maturity and understanding to do so.

Your teen might feel pressured to play, even in pain, thinking that leaving a game is a sign of weakness. If you believe your teen is injured, do what you can to make her take a step back and give her body some rest.

Don't Allow Sports to Become Your Teen's Identity

Some teens will gravitate toward excelling in one activity; however, it's smart to encourage your teen to be a well-rounded person. Run track, yes, but also try out for the school play or hold down a part-time job during the off-season. The more the sport becomes the teenager's whole identity, the more pressure he'll feel to be the best in the school, region, or state.

Watch Out for Substance Abuse

Just like the lure of alcohol and marijuana, teens are susceptible to trying performance-enhancing substances to improve their performance or physique. Although most parents assume their teen would never use drugs, many teens are looking for shortcuts to improve their performance.

Look out for warning signs of drug use such as:

- sudden increase in muscle mass
- severe acne
- needle marks on arms or legs,
- extreme mood swings or bursts of rage
- increased breast tissue in males or decreased breast size in females

Even legal supplements can be harmful when taken in high doses. Be on the lookout for a teen who is ingesting large amounts of vitamins, powders, or other supplements to build muscle.

Other Ways to Help

A teen athlete needs the support of her parents and an open line of communication to ask for help when it's needed. Additional ways you can help your teen handle the pressure include:

- Staying calm during games or practices
- Avoiding discussion of winning or losing
- Letting the teen decide if she wants additional training such as camps or private instructors
- Keeping traditions in place, such as going to lunch after a game, whether the team wins or loses

Remind your teen that, whether she wins or loses, you'll always support and show that you're proud of what they've accomplished. Every once in a while, allow or encourage your teen to take a day off to rest, catch up on sleep or studies and give their body a break—they've earned it!

Sources:

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