

THE PARENTING PLAYBOOK

CONVERSATION STARTERS

Knowing the right things to say to your child after he/she practices or competes can be difficult. Sometimes, you may experience the “righting reflex” - wanting to fix any challenges or performance issues for your child. However, this can frustrate your child and send an unintended message that winning/performance is what matters most.

The next time you are having a conversation with your child about sports, give some of these questions/statements a try instead!



Do you want to talk about the game/practice?

Message this sends:

If emotions are high after a game, your child may not want to immediately talk about it. Asking this question fosters respect and gives your child the space to approach you when he/she is ready to talk. Even if there is a bit of silence for a while, asking for permission before talking about your child's performance or behavior can create an open and inviting space for when he/she is ready.

What do you think you did well today?

Message this sends:

Focusing on what went well can be just as beneficial for learning and growth as paying attention to needs to get better. Adding this question to your conversation with your child can help balance feelings of being criticized or judged.

Youth athletes are often their own biggest critics – this is your chance to help them boost their confidence by reminding them of what they do well!

What did you enjoy about your game today?

Message this sends:

Fun is a high priority for their sport experience! Even if not every practice or game is the most exciting, throughout there are hopefully moments of joy. By asking about fun first, you show that this is what you really care about.

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I loved getting to watch you play!

Message this sends:

You also are there to have fun and enjoy being a supporter. Even if your child did not win or play his/her best, this statement can make him/her feel supported and loved no matter what. This often feels obvious, yet explicitly saying it to your child is important.

I am so proud of how you _____ today.

Message this sends:

Everyone loves positive reinforcement! This tells your child that you saw him/her perform important behaviors. You can fill in the blank with an action focused on how your child performed or how he/she showed good sportsmanship and respect. Ideally, you are highlighting and reinforcing great effort, social interactions, and improvements in performance beyond winning.

Did you learn anything new today?

Message this sends:

Growth and improvement are the goals of your child's efforts instead of winning or being perfect. Asking this question can help your child develop a mastery orientation – meaning he/she focuses on the process of learning. Staying focused on the process of getting better, instead of the outcomes of competition, is helpful for keeping your child motivated and supporting his/her learning.

How can I help you accomplish your goals?

Message this sends:

By giving voice to your child on the role he/she wants you to play, you are empowering him/her to create his/her own plans and solutions. The key with this question is listening to your child's answer and then modeling how to follow through on the role he/she has given you. This question also gives your child an opportunity to ask for your help in a way that he/she desires.

We hope you can use these conversation starters the next time you are driving home from a competition, practice, or tryout!