

I started teaching tennis in the mid 1950s. Not a day goes by where my mind doesn't say, "here we go again." My toughest lesson is not with my students – but with their parents.

Now, many of the tennis parents reading this article will not think that it applies to them. Please read this several times and be honest with yourself, and if the shoe fits, please loosen your laces a bit and just be a mom or dad to your kid. Let the coaches do their jobs.

The following is an excerpt from a book I wrote with Dr. Julie Anthony titled, A Winning Combination:

"The greatest error parents can make is to voice expectations for their children beyond that of having a good time. As soon as a child begins to play for a parent's approval or to maintain harmony in the family, his motivation and fun will diminish instantly, no matter how talented he is. Many young players with potential have been turned off tennis by their parents, and some great talents have been destroyed in this fashion. Unfortunately, among tournament circles one often hears that, "Susie has super talent, but her parents put too much pressure on her, and she just gets too uptight and nervous to win.

Parental pressure can take many forms. It can be a question of forcing a child to practice, take lessons, or compete in matches against his will. An insidious byproduct of parental expectations can also be over criticism of a child's efforts. A child shouldn't be made to feel that every mistake would be thrown back at him. It's hard enough to go through the agony of playing badly.

Psychologically, human beings learn just as well, if not more effectively, from positive than negative reinforcement. It is more helpful to tell a child what he did well and suggest what to try in the future than to belabor what went wrong and what not to do. Even on the most disastrous days, something positive can be said, such as, "I guess you didn't play well today, but I liked the way you kept trying," rather than "you really played badly today." A child's coach is responsible for tennis technique, but parents can help his mental well-being.

Making unflattering comparisons between a child and his peers can also be damaging to the child's motivation. Remember that every child is unique and learns at his own pace; each individual's progress is totally unrelated to that of anybody else's and should be gauged only against itself."

I have been on the court with tens of thousands of students that range in ability from beginners to the very best of the world. Keep in mind that each student is different in both mind and body and it is crucial that the coach find what each one needs.

Monica Seles and Aaron Krickstein loved hitting ball after ball, and then some. Andre Agassi and Boris Becker concentrated on specific areas of the game. At the end of each practice, Boris would hit 30 serves to each box.

Sports specialists have come forward and are stating that young boys and girls go through periods of growth spurts and during this period, serious injuries can come about by demanding too much from their bodies.

Please go one step at a time. Make sure that you remember to accept that each student will vary on his or her practice sessions. Do not compare your child to other children. Find a way to make practice most productive for your child.

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