

How do you motivate your children or athletes to attempt difficult tasks as a parent and a coach?

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“Do you want to keep riding down the path or shall we turn around and ride back to Mum?”

“I want ride down this way, Dad.”

It was an option that I hadn't even considered. My 3-year-old daughter was pointing down a grass slope that stretched down and away from the concrete path on which we stood.

I hesitated for a moment. This would be by far the most difficult thing she had attempted on the balance bike. After receiving the bike for her third birthday some months before, progress had been intermittent, as was her interest. She had always tired quickly of any “practice” even sometimes protesting at the mere suggestion of getting the bike out. Her improvement had taken a bit of an upturn lately – she was now able to generate a little bit of speed on a flat surface – but the prospect of racing down a hill was entirely different to riding around in front of our garage.

I expected a tentative attempt from her, but once she was in position at the lip of the slope, she kicked off and rolled over the edge. I jogged after her, watching anxiously. She built up speed as she ran her feet along the ground on either side of the bike, she wobbled a little but maintained control. She was going faster than ever before when she lifted both feet off the ground and coasted . . . and coasted . . . and kicked again . . . and coasted some more. She rode faster and further than she ever had before. It was a huge improvement. A monumental leap forward. I was proud, relieved and frankly amazed.

When she finally came to a stop she looked up at me triumphantly and shouted: “Again!” She immediately wheeled her bike around and rode it back up the hill.

This scene was repeated about a dozen times with only fatigue preventing her from continuing.

Her energy, enthusiasm, and perseverance for the activity was in such contrast to previous efforts, it made me wonder what had happened. The dad in me was proud and amazed, and the coach in me was curious.

Athlete-Driven Action

What I had witnessed that day with my daughter was similar to what we should be striving to facilitate as parents and coaches: an enthusiasm and persistence that is completely child-driven. This is not always possible, but there are times where we can allow this to happen.

It got me thinking.

If we can stumble upon situations that motivate kids to attack what was previously difficult or uninteresting for them, can we subsequently learn to *intentionally* craft an environment around young children that generates such buy-in and engagement in a sporting domain?

If so, we firstly need to be alert to what factors lead to such self-driven engagement. So, what worked for my daughter?

In hindsight, I suspect that a number of things aligned on the day to provide such a positive experience for her.

Autonomy

My daughter chose to ride down that hill and completely drove the activity herself. There was no instruction or cajoling from any outside source.

Autonomy is critical to intrinsic (internal) motivation. Intrinsic motivation is a higher quality form of motivation than being motivated extrinsically (from an outside source).

A child is most likely to try something with vigour if it is their idea and driven from within.

Takeaway

Parents should be trying to help their children by guiding and nudging but not taking over the experience.

Coaches should constantly search for ways to turn a sporting experience over to the athletes. Set the scene, and then get out of their way.

Desirable Difficulty

The hill was of just the right gradient and length for my daughter's current level of confidence.

Sensible progressions of a task at a level of *desirable difficulty* will create feelings of competence and confidence, also critical to intrinsic motivation.

Tasks that are too easy are met with apathy and indifference. Those that are too hard create fear and frustration. Either way, kids will try to avoid them.

Takeaway

Parents should try to set goals and challenges with their children that are realistic.

Coaches need to keep activities within a young athlete's realistic skill set. Don't try to rush or jump ahead too quickly.

Safety

The slope that my daughter chose to tackle was a large, open grassed area.

The attraction to a novice rider now seems obvious and I shouldn't be too surprised that my daughter was drawn to it. There was nothing to collide with and the surface was reasonably forgiving in case of a fall.

Had the surface been concrete and the area full of trees would my daughter have tried coasting down the hill at speed? Probably not. It seems obvious, but creating an environment that is manageable for a learner makes them more likely to try.

Takeaway

Parents need to ensure that their children are in safe learning environments that will allow them to thrive.

Coaches need to create environments in which the athletes feel safe. Remove factors that may cause fear.

Fun and Unstructured Play

There was no sense that the ride down the slope was “practice”. There was no formality about the activity. My daughter was just playing. It was fun, unstructured, spur of the moment stuff.

The presence of fun and play will make it more likely that the kids will engage with and buy into an activity.

Takeaway

Parents need to allow as much free play as possible allowing children to make up the games/challenges, trying not to turn the back garden play time into another coaching session.

Coaches need to plan to make practice tasks feel like play. Look to “gamify” as many activities as possible.

Meaning

Despite the activity being a form of play, it had meaning and intent. The challenge of riding down a hill without falling off has far more real life application than rolling around on a flat square of concrete with no real destination in mind.

Dreariness deters. Meaning motivates.

Takeaway

Parents should try to make games/activities fun, with challenge and perhaps a little bit of competition.

Drills are often dreary. Coaches need to create activities for kids that contain a game, challenge or competition element.

Absence of Expectation

There was no expectation of success when my daughter first kicked off at the top of the slope. There was no pressure. There was nothing at stake. There was nothing to lose.

Unwanted expectation can cause kids to shy away and avoid activities, or perform well below their best due to the anxiety that can result.

Takeaway

Parents should try to ensure that their patience does not exceed expectation and have too many pre-planned thoughts about what they are expecting to see.

Coaches need to avoid placing unwanted expectation on young athletes.

Early Success

The fact that my daughter’s first attempt was successful and without incident cannot be ignored. It was critically important to her confidence and subsequent eagerness to repeat the activity over and over.

Takeaway

Parents should try to ensure that their child is experiencing some form of success. Too much failure can lead to children becoming disillusioned and unmotivated.

Early on, coaches should deliberately structure activities to make it more likely that athletes will experience success.

Encouragement, Empathy and Patience

In hindsight, as a long-term coach, I should be well aware that any type of skill or talent does not emerge in a linear fashion. It can consist of long plateaus, backwards steps and triumphant breakthroughs – pretty much what had occurred as my daughter learned to ride a bike.

I had tried to be patient all along. While disappointed when on previous occasions she wanted to stop practising, I accepted it. I gently encouraged, I didn't push. I didn't rant and yell when she gave up. Each time she got on the bike, no matter for how short a time, I saw it all as helping her. I was hopeful that even when she didn't appear to be progressing, maybe she was.

Encouragement, empathy and patience are keys to motivating kids to try something and persist with it in the long term. There is no use forcing kids to do things. We know that external motivation is a low quality form of motivation. Give kids a chance. They may not try it now but maybe will when they are good and ready. Don't burn the bridge to future attempts with impatience, pestering or berating.

Takeaway

Parents and coaches need to recognise and respect a young athlete's feelings. Engage with them and don't dismiss their emotions.

Conclusion

On reflection, it seems that the success of this experience was due to it being driven by my daughter in a supportive, safe, fun environment, devoid of expectation but full of meaning for her. I provided the means and the opportunity, then became a supportive bystander. The experience was hers. She did it.

There is so much to take away here from a parental and coaching perspective. If the factors that contribute to positive experiences for children can be identified, the challenge for parents and youth sports coaches is to deliberately attempt to replicate these factors within their family activities and coaching sessions. In this instance they occurred mostly unconsciously on my part; ideally youth sports coaches should work to craft them by design.

Recommended Action

Take a deliberate and conscious approach to including some of the discussed elements in your dealings with young athletes, as coaches and in your day to day life as parents. If you are faced with a child who is hesitant to try something or persist, reflect on what you can do to create an environment that will more likely see them engaged. I would love to hear what works for you. You can let me know by leaving a reply/comment or by using the contact details below.

Summary

Young children are more likely to try things and persist with them if:

1. They are given a level of autonomy.
2. The task is at a desirable level of difficulty.
3. They feel safe.
4. It involves fun and play.
5. It is meaningful to them.
6. There is an absence of unwanted expectation.
7. They experience early success.
8. They are supported with encouragement, empathy and patience.

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