

Does Your Support Have Strings Attached?

By David Benzel



Dad had that look on his face after the game. It wouldn't be long before his feelings became the words his son already knew. "I have to tell you, I'm pretty disappointed in how you played today." There was more. "We didn't spend all this time and money to watch you deliver this kind of performance." It was a double whammy for Josh. He was already bummed about his effort, and now he had the extra burden of knowing he had let down his parents. Many parents would admit to having these same feelings even if they didn't verbalize them this bluntly.

Is it justifiable for us to expect a ROI (return on investment) from our support of our child's athletic endeavors? Is it fair for us to treat a child's sport performance in the same way we treat a stock on the New York Stock Exchange? Something about that doesn't seem right, in spite of the fact that our investment can be significant.

The parent mentioned above has likely spent thousands of dollars on private lessons, hundreds of hours driving all over the region, and millions of brain cells in emotional support and drama. However there's another point of view. To see it we'll have to go back to the early days when our child was in T-Ball, Guppy swim class, Mighty Mites football, or 10 and Under Tennis. In those days we gave our parental support with no strings attached. It was an unconditional gift given for the sake of an experience we wanted our child to have. They were not expected nor required to do anything but have an enjoyable time playing the sport they loved.

Then things changed. As we invested more time and money we expected them to learn and improve. And when the dollar figure got high enough or the miles reached triple digits, we expected maximum effort and peak performances. Unfortunately for our children, what starts out as a gift suddenly appears to have strings attached and comes in a message that sounds like, "You must perform well for me to feel good about the money and time I'm spending." We get our kids hooked on a sport to have fun, and when the cost goes up we demand a level of performance that pleases US!

At times like this, let's remind ourselves of several things. The game and the experience belong to them and all we should ask is to be included in the journey. Our support should remain an unconditional gift with no strings attached. After a game we have the right to ask two questions: "What did you enjoy about today's competition?" and "What did you learn from today's experience?" If our children know that our intentions are pure and without an agenda of our own, they'll gladly share the answers with us without fear. In fact they'll probably be more inclined to ask for our help!

The irony of this low pressure approach is that kids will make a greater effort, perform better, and stay involved in sports longer. Isn't that what we wanted for them all along?

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