

# 7 KEYS TO UNDERSTANDING MOTIVATION IN YOUR YOUNG ATHLETE

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“I just don’t know how to motivate her...”

It’s a common lament of parents and coaches.

The child who just seems to lack the *joie de verve* toward an activity, and yes, sometimes that activity could be gymnastics.

Before concluding that an apparent lack of motivation means you as the parent or coach is doing something wrong or that the activity no longer suits the child, let’s look at what motivation is and what it isn’t.

The definition of motivation is “the pursuit of an unmet need.” So when a person is passionately motivated to do something it is because they are trying to meet some unmet need that lives with in them.

And that is **key one: the need comes from within.**

You cannot make someone want something they do not want for themselves—at least not in the long-term. Sure, you can bribe or threaten someone to do something short term to change their behavior, but you cannot effect long term motivational change on another, they have to do that for themselves.

Which leads us to **key two: don't confuse fear with motivation.**

What some might see as a motivated child is actually a child who fears punishment or loss of affection for not doing a sport. If think you are motivating a child by yelling, you would be incorrect.

**Key three** will help with assuring you are not inadvertently stepping on your child's motivation: **do not blur your motivation with that of your child's.** Sure, as a parent you might want you child to get a scholarship or as a coach you might want your athlete to overcome a mental block and just do that series already...but is that what the child really wants?

Speaking of wants, we are all somewhat inconsistent with what we want, especially when it two competing values clash. So **key four** is understanding that **motivation is not consistent—has ebbs and flows—don't judge it on a moment by moment basis.** You'll make everyone insane. Instead, look for patterns of behavior that indicate a child's motivation. If, for instance, a child is less enthusiastic to go to practice on a Saturday morning because it interrupts watching cartoons, it might not be that the child isn't motivated to do gymnastics but rather she is more motivated (at that moment) to continue to watch T.V. and is perfectly happy once she gets to the gym.

Which brings us to **key five: it takes time to figure out what motivates us.** Don't be too worried if your child doesn't have deep motivation for something. Help her find motivation by exposing her to positive activities and allowing her to find what interests her. That means from time to time as a parent or coach we need to encourage kids to try things that are new or different, and give them an opportunity to try more than once, to give them a chance to see what they like.

Next, **key six: be careful not to de-motivate.** While motivating another is difficult, de-motivating is easy. Be careful not to reward kids for things they already enjoy doing—it sends a message that intrinsic enjoyment is not reward enough. On the other hand, make sure that you encourage their hard work and good behavior.

Finally, **key seven: talk to your kids about what they like about their activities/sports.** Helping kids articulate what aspects they enjoy is critical in helping them identify the traits that motivate them. From "I like my coach and teammates" to "I enjoy learning new things," these are all excellent ways to ascertain the cues that cause internal motivation.