

The Ride Home: Not a Teachable Moment

by [John O'Sullivan](#), August 12th, 2013 7:03PM

Numerous researchers have asked athletes of all ages and abilities what was their least favorite sports moment, and their answer was nearly unanimous: after the game and the conversation on the ride home.

Emotions are high, disappointment, frustration, and exhaustion are heightened for both player and parent, yet many parents choose this moment to confront their child about a play, criticize them for having a poor game, and chastise their child, their teammates, their coach, and their opponents. There could not be a less teachable moment in your child's sporting life than the ride home.

One of the biggest problems on the ride home is that a simple question from you, often meant to encourage your own child, can be construed as an attack on a teammate or coach by your child. Our kids do not need us to question their actions or those of their teammates or coaches in the emotional moments after games.

A simple comment such as "Why does Jenny get all the shots?" may be meant to imply that you think she is a good shooter who should also take shots, but it is interpreted by your daughter as meaning "Jenny is a ball hog!" Questions such as "Why does Billy always play goalie?" or "Why does your team always play zone?" can just as easily undermine the coach's authority and again cause confusion and uncertainty for your child.

Many children have indicated that parental actions and conversations after games made them feel as though their value and worth was tied to their athletic performance and the wins and losses of their team. Ask yourself whether you are quieter after a hard loss, or happier and more buoyant after a big win. Do you tend to criticize and dissect your child's performance after a loss but overlook many of the same mistakes because she won? If you see that you are doing this, even though your intentions may be well-meaning, your child's perceptions of your words and actions can be quite detrimental to her performance and to your relationship.

Parents need to be a source of confidence and comfort in all situations, such as when your child has played well in a loss, when your child has played poorly, and especially when your child has played very little or not at all. Even then, it is critically important that you do not bring the game up for them, as uninvited conversations may cause resentment.

Give kids the time and space to digest the game and recover physically and emotionally from a match. When your child is ready to bring the game up and talk about it, be a quiet and reflective listener, and make sure she can see the big picture and not just the outcome of a single event. Help her work through the game, and facilitate her growth and education by guiding her toward her own answers. Kids learn a lot when they realize things such as "we had a bad week of practice and coach told us this was coming." If you need to say something, tell them how much you enjoy watching them play.

The only exception to the above “ride home” rule is when your child engages in behavior that you would not accept at home, such as spitting, cursing, assaulting an opponent, or disrespecting a coach or authority figure. In these cases you should initiate the conversation, not as a parent to an athlete, but as a parent to a child. Even then you must be careful and considerate of the emotions of the match and choose your words wisely. Deal with the issue and then put it to bed; do not use it as a segue to a discussion of the entire game.

*([John O'Sullivan](#) is the author of “*Changing the Game: The Parents Guide to Raising Happy, High-Performing Athletes and Giving Youth Sports Back to our Kids*,” from which this was excerpted. His book is available on [Kindle](#) and [paperback](#). John O'Sullivan's blogs at changingthegameproject.com/)*