



The Long-Term Psychological Impact of Conflicting Expectations in Youth Sports

How words and body language can cause lifelong trauma

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INTRODUCTION

As the head coach of Marconi Tennis Academy for over twenty-five years, I've had the privilege of coaching thousands of athletes, from beginners to national titleholders and even Grand Slam finalists.

Through this experience, I've come to realise that the messages we send young athletes can have profound effects, sometimes lasting well beyond their sporting years.

One of the most harmful phrases I hear in sports is: "I don't care if you win or lose; just try your best." While this phrase sounds supportive on the surface, it often creates conflicting expectations and pressures that can damage an athlete's mental well-being.

In this reference paper, I'll explore the psychological science behind this issue, showing how consistent, positive reinforcement and clear objectives can make a difference for young athletes.



Watch Stewart Whicker's talk on Youtube

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NFo-G5qbz-4>



THE SUBTLE POWER OF BODY LANGUAGE AND SELF-FULFILLING PROPHECIES

Over the years, I've learnt that body language communicates just as powerfully as words. When I say, "I don't care if you win or lose," but feel frustration or disappointment, my body language can betray me.

Signs such as crossed arms, lack of eye contact, or a sharp tone can send a message of dissatisfaction. These cues, though subtle, are often internalised by athletes.

Studies, such as the Pygmalion Effect explored by Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968), support my experiences, showing that expectations and non-verbal cues can become self-fulfilling prophecies.

Athletes are particularly sensitive to these cues, such as a coach's or parents posture or tone of voice, and may interpret them as indicators of doubt or disappointment.

Similarly, Emotional Contagion—the unconscious mirroring of emotions—has shown me the power of non-verbal signals.

Research by Hatfield, Cacioppo, and Rapson (1994) found that emotions like disappointment can be absorbed by those close to us, particularly athletes who respect and look up to their coaches and parents.

Aligning verbal encouragement with supportive body language is essential to build athletes' confidence and mental resilience.



THE HIDDEN PRESSURE IN “JUST TRY YOUR BEST” AND SUBJECTIVE COMPARISONS

At first, I believed saying “just try your best” was supportive. However, this phrase often imposes an undefined standard—a personal best—leading athletes to feel judged against their peak performance.

Without clear criteria, they’re left with vague expectations, amplifying stress and performance anxiety.

Research in the *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology* confirms that subjective comparisons create pressure, as young athletes feel they must always replicate or exceed their best, regardless of circumstances.

Physical factors, like low glucose levels (Coyle, 1995), and emotional stress from school or family issues further complicate meeting these standards. On particularly challenging days, these expectations can feel unattainable, further compounding stress.

Acknowledging the variability in daily performance is crucial. Setting an expectation to meet a shifting “best” standard can result in frustration and self-doubt when athletes cannot consistently achieve it.



FOSTERING A GROWTH MINDSET WITH PROCESS-ORIENTED GOALS

In my coaching, I've shifted from vague directives to specific, achievable goals. Carol Dweck's research on growth mindset has greatly influenced me.

By focusing on process-oriented goals, such as improving a technical skill or increasing endurance, athletes learn to value progress over outcomes. This reduces the pressure to replicate peak performances and builds resilience.

Dweck's theory highlights that a fixed mindset—believing abilities are static—can hinder growth and breed frustration.

For example, an athlete stuck in a fixed mindset may feel that their performance is a reflection of innate ability rather than effort.

Encouraging a growth mindset fosters adaptability and a sense of accomplishment with every milestone achieved.

For instance, rewarding effort in perfecting a serve teaches athletes that success is a journey, not a single point in time.



LONG-TERM IMPACT OF CONFLICTING MESSAGES AND UNREALISTIC EXPECTATIONS

Reflecting on my years of coaching, I've seen how conflicting messages can have lasting effects.

Studies on conditional self-worth, such as those by Jayanthi et al. (2013), reveal that children valued solely for achievements face higher risks of burnout and emotional exhaustion in adulthood.

Athletes who tie their self-worth to performance outcomes may develop perfectionism, as outlined by Flett and Hewitt (2005). This perfectionism often leads to chronic self-doubt and anxiety.

Furthermore, these individuals grow to depend on external validation to feel valued. If they fail to meet expectations, they may experience significant emotional distress.

Creating environments that celebrate effort and personal growth rather than just results is crucial. Coaches and parents can focus on fostering intrinsic motivation by recognising consistent effort and improvement, regardless of outcomes.



LEARNED HELPLESSNESS AND THE EROSION OF RESILIENCE

Prolonged exposure to unrealistic expectations fosters learned helplessness, where athletes feel their efforts are futile.

Seligman's (1975) research shows that this can result in disengagement, even when opportunities to succeed arise.

For young athletes, this sense of helplessness can erode resilience, reducing their ability to face challenges constructively.

As Gustafsson, Kenttä, and Hassmén (2011) discuss in the *Journal of Clinical Sport Psychology*, athletes who are conditioned to expect their efforts will never suffice often experience burnout.

This is characterised by physical and emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, and a reduced sense of accomplishment.

Importantly, learned helplessness can persist even when circumstances improve, as athletes may believe their efforts remain meaningless.

Coaches should offer consistent positive reinforcement and provide realistic opportunities to help athletes regain a sense of agency and purpose.



POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT AND THE ROLE OF SUPPORTIVE FEEDBACK

To counteract negative effects, consistent positive reinforcement is critical.

Recognising effort, celebrating small achievements, and providing constructive feedback fosters mental toughness and long-term motivation.

Weinberg and Gould (2018) emphasise that process-based reinforcement—such as acknowledging an athlete’s focus during practice—builds self-efficacy and resilience.

Simple words like “Great job focusing on your backhand today” can be powerful, especially when aligned with clear, achievable goals.

Beyond verbal affirmations, providing athletes with achievable challenges and recognising their progress can have a transformative impact on their confidence and motivation.



CONCLUSION

The messages we send to young athletes have profound impacts on their confidence, resilience, and love for the game.

Phrases like “just try your best” and conflicting body language create hidden pressures, affecting mental health and long-term development.

By adopting a coaching philosophy grounded in scientifically-supported approaches, such as clear objectives and consistent positive reinforcement, we can nurture athletes into resilient, well-rounded individuals.

Highlighting effort over outcomes ensures they leave the court not just as skilled players but as confident, adaptable people ready for life’s challenges.

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