

## How to Increase Your Kids' Performance Anxiety (Not That You'd Want to)

### Description

We've all heard stories about those super intense sports parents who get more invested in games than their kids do.<sup>1</sup>

So the question of whether or not parents ought to attend all of their children's games or practices is an interesting one – with no clear one-size-fits-all answer (check out [6 Reasons Parents Should NOT Watch Practice](#) – which also is an interesting blog with some [pretty cool contributors](#)).

I've struggled a bit myself in trying to figure out where to draw the line in my kids' activities, and have witnessed some pretty nuts animated parental behavior too. But, I wonder if it's less about a parent's mere presence and more about other subtler factors – like a parent's *expectations*.

What does that mean, exactly?

### Performance climate

Previous studies have looked at the impact parents can have on creating a “performance environment.” Those who overemphasized winning (and were overbearing, demanding, and critical) were rated by coaches as having contributed negatively to their children's sporting experience.<sup>2</sup> After all, fear of not living up to a parent's expectations can be a real source of stress for some youngsters.<sup>3</sup>

Studies have also looked at different factors which contribute to these motivational climates that parents can create. For instance, some parents tend to define success in terms how well their child does compared with others (a “performance” orientation), while others define success in terms of how well their child does, relative to their own previous performances (a “mastery” orientation).

There's also the way in which we approach these goals – with some being more inclined to pursue success and competence (“approach” goals), while others focus on avoiding failure (“avoidance” goals).

### Like parent, like child

A [recent study](#) combined these two factors, and took a closer look at 73 competitive young athletes and their parents, to see how the parents' goals for their child might influence their child's performance anxiety.

The athletes were given an assessment to learn more about their athletic goals, which included questions in the four categories, such as:

- **Mastery-Approach:** “It is important for me to perform as well as I can”

- **Mastery-Avoidance:** “I worry that I may not perform as well as I can”
- **Performance-Approach:** “It is important for me to do well compared to others”
- **Performance-Avoidance:** “I just want to avoid doing worse than others”

Parents were also asked about their goals for their child:

- **Mastery-Approach:** “It is important for me that my child perform as well as he/she can”
- **Master-Avoidance:** “I worry that my child may not perform as well as he/she can”
- **Performance-Approach:** “It is important for me that my child do well compared to others”
- **Performance-Avoidance:** “I just want my child to avoid doing worse than others”

Athletes were also asked to reflect on how they felt about an upcoming competition, and given a competitive anxiety assessment designed to measure several components of anxiety. One of them was the concept of **worry** – which would translate into thoughts like “I worry that I won’t swim well.”

## Parents’ goals matter

As you might expect, parents who had more *performance* goals for their kids (wanting their kids to do better than others, or avoid doing worse than their peers), tended to have kids who worried more.

On the other hand, parents who expressed more *mastery* goals (simply wanting their kids to do their best and perform up to their abilities) did *not* seem to contribute to increased worrying by their kids.

The researchers suggested that when children perceive that success is dependent on how they stack up relative to others, they worry about not being able to live up to these expectations. After all, they have no control over how others will perform, so this just adds to the uncertainty and stress of the situation. Performing up to their own abilities may not be a sure thing either, but at least it is more in their control.

## Take action

This study is just a small glimpse into what is ultimately a much larger and complex issue, but it does suggest that we may want to have a conversation with parents about their goals for their children. As important as it may be for us to help *students* create effective mastery goals (as opposed to performance goals), it seems that *parents’* adoption of mastery goals is a key factor in creating a more effective motivational climate for their child as well.

Along these lines, I recently heard a story about a young musician who commuted across several states to take lessons with her teacher. The young musician's mother videotaped all of her lessons – and the student was expected to review the video and take notes on the drive back home. However, the mother wasn't pushy or invested in her daughter becoming a superstar, but rather, for her to become good enough for her to really enjoy making music, and so they had a good working relationship. The student continues to do very well, and recently received a rare comprehensive scholarship package from a respected graduate program.

Maybe that's an example of an effective balance? Having and setting clear expectations for *effort* – but stepping back and providing space, support, and demonstrating trust when it comes to the details of how the work itself will be done?

What do you think the right balance looks like? Do any specific examples come to mind from your own experience of parents and children?

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