

# Release Your Child to the Game!

## Changing the Game Project

*[Release Your Child to the Game! - Changing the Game Project](#)*

“I don’t know where to turn,” an exasperated dad recently told me after a speaking event. “My son is fast, and he is skilled. We do lots of extra practice, we go to a private skills coach, we are doing everything it takes to get to the next level, but something is not right. He is not doing as well as he should. He seems to have lost his motivation. What should we do?”

“We?” I asked the dad. “You keep using the word ‘we.’ Whose experience is this; his, or yours?”

The dad paused for a second, looked at me, and said with a defeated look, “Wow, I never thought of it like that. It’s not we; it’s he. Oh man.”

Thankfully, that dad had a revelation that evening, realizing for the first time that he had claimed his son’s youth sports experience for himself. He loved his son. He wanted only the best, and saw in him great potential. Sadly, he was not loving his son in a helpful way.

He had made his son’s experience his own. In the process, he was stealing one thing his young son could never get back: ownership of a positive youth sports experience. At least this dad realized it was never too late to change.

Many parents come to us at the Changing the Game Project because they are frustrated. They see great potential in their son or daughter, but they don’t see a passion to compete, to practice, or to take advantage of the opportunities to improve. One of the most frustrating feelings in the world is to have a front row seat as your young athletes seemingly throw away a promising sports career because they don’t seem to care.

These parents, like the dad above, just want to help. They want to know what to do. Yet they never consider that they might be living vicariously through their child. They might be living out their own unfulfilled sporting dreams and ambitions by stealing the experience from their kids. [As this groundbreaking Dutch study has found](#), parents who see their child as a part of themselves, and not a separate entity, can often desire their children to redeem their unfulfilled sporting dreams.

When I tell these moms and dads that they will actually do more by doing less, many disagree. They say that makes no sense. They dismiss the idea, and double down on the extra training, the private coaches, and the pressure to succeed.

Sadly, many of their kids end up quitting.

Their child’s will to play is gone because they have stolen it, usually without even realizing it.

As I have written about on these pages many times, [there are three critical ingredients to a positive youth sports experience: ownership, enjoyment and intrinsic motivation](#). Without these, it matters

little how fast, how strong, and how skilled your child is. He or she will never play long enough or hard enough to be successful.

Once you are confident that your child is in a safe and developmentally appropriate environment, one of the greatest gifts you can give the young athletes in your house is to let them go and let their sports experience belong to them. The phrase I love I learned from [Proactive Coaching founder Bruce Brown](#), a longtime coach and advocate for responsible parenting. **He calls it “releasing your child to the game.”**

Parents need to accept that the sports your child plays are his and his alone, not yours. We did not win the game, he did. We did not strike out ten batters, she did. Once you release your children to the game, once you let the sport belong to them, then their accomplishments belong to them.

**Believe it or not, by taking a step back, you give your child the room to step forward and claim the sport for herself. It creates an environment where she is likely to compete harder, train more often, and improve faster.**

It also benefits you as a parent! How?

It allows you to accept your role as spectator at games and give your athletes control of the outcome. It allows you to rise above the emotional frustration and anger that many parents feel when their child or his team is unsuccessful in a match, or the referee is having a nightmare of a game. It creates an environment where your child can play without fear, and is safe to fail, which will ultimately help him play better.

**Perhaps most importantly, by releasing your child you remove any chance that your child believes he is responsible for your happiness.** This may sound like a silly thought, but look around at your child’s next athletic event. Look for the angry and disappointed parent faces on the losing side. Despite what they say, their actions are telling their children that the outcome of the game determines their happiness. This is an incredible burden to place upon a child, whether it is intended or not. It certainly won’t help them compete!

If you find yourself saying “we” instead of “he” or “she,” you have not released your child. If you find yourself constantly frustrated at your child’s athletic performance, you have not let him go. If you care more about your child’s wins and losses than she does, before you start asking “what is wrong with my kid?” perhaps take a look in the mirror.

You see, in sports there is a big difference between goals and expectations. According to Dr. Jim Taylor, psychologist and author of [Positive Pushing: How to Raise a Successful and Happy Child](#), **goals** are possible accomplishments that may or may not be achieved, yet can provide satisfaction to children just by going through the process of setting them and trying to attain them. **Expectations**, on the other hand, are all or nothing; they are assumptions of achievement.

We should place certain expectations upon our children, but these must be things *within their control*. We can expect them to be courteous, committed, honest, caring, responsible, hard working, and a host of other things we would agree are important. These are expectations based upon effort and values. They must be clearly communicated, and the consequences for failing to meet them should be equivalent with each expectation and consistently applied. Your child has the

ability to be all of these things, and if he is not then he should expect that there will be consequences. It is okay for us to be disappointed in him for not meeting our clear expectations, and we should hold our children to high standards that reflect our values and beliefs.

All too often, though, parental expectations become *ability* (you will win because you are the best) and *outcome* (I know you will win) oriented, and become confused with our goals for our children. When we expect them to win a game, we are expecting them to accomplish something that is not completely within their control. They may give their best effort and still lose. If a child believes that a parent's love is tied to the expectation of winning, and he does not win, he may believe that he is less loved or valued. This creates anxiety and inhibits performance. It saps motivation. And it eventually leads a young athlete to quit.

Take a moment and ask yourself "Have I released my child to the game?" Have you allowed this experience to be his and his alone? Have you created a sporting environment where it's safe to fail, and your child understands that your love is not tied to athletic outcomes?

Can you sit quietly and watch a game, or do you feel the constant need to coach, correct, and instruct? If you see your athlete's motivation, determination, or passion for sport fading, sometimes the best thing you can do is not do more, but take a step back, and let your child go.

Sometimes, when it comes to helping your young athlete (as I say in my TED talk below) the best way of doing more is by doing less, by letting him go, by simply saying "I love watching you play," and by releasing them to the game!