

Mind and Body Connection



Preamble

The following resource for parents has been developed by Fiona McCarthy on behalf of the NSW Office of Sport, as a key initiative of the NSW Government's Future Champions strategy.

For more information on Future Champions, please visit www.sport.nsw.gov.au/pathways-and-development/parents-guardians-and-carers

Getting to know the author

Fiona McCarthy is a psychologist who owns and operates Mind and Body Balance, a business she set up 25 years ago. Fiona is a registered psychologist, specialising in the area of sport and performance psychology. She is a member of the Australian Psychological Society and the Australian College of Sport and Exercise Psychologists.

Fiona lives in Newcastle NSW and is the Hunter Academy of Sport, Sport Psychology Consultant and a New South Wales Institute of Sport, Sport Psychology Service

Provider. Over the last twenty-five years, Fiona has assisted many local, state and national teams, athletes, coaches and parents in the areas of confidence, concentration, handling pressure, motivation, goal setting, time management, performance preparation and general well-being. She has worked with numerous sports assisting recreational level athletes to professional, international, Olympic and Paralympic level athletes.

Fiona recognises the valuable contribution parents make to their child's sporting pursuits. She

believes that parents want the best for their child and hopes that these resources provide parents with the skills needed to be the best sporting parent they can be so that they can best guide and support their child at all ages and stages of their sports journey.

These resources aim to provide parents with the support, encouragement and skills/tools required to assist their child(ren) in reaching their sporting potential in an environment that promotes fun, connection, success and positive well-being.



Introduction

Parents play a vital role in sport and provide valuable contributions to the sporting community. As parents, we all want to support our children as best we can and see them enjoying their sport.

The following resource aims to empower parents and guide them in playing the best role they can in their child(ren)'s sporting pursuits. Parents are role models to their children and sport is a valuable vehicle to teach life lessons.

As a parent, have you ever wondered how to best help your child deal with success and disappointment? Or what to say to them when their nerves take over and they feel pressure to perform.

Do you find yourself rushing from sport to sport, child to child and not having much time to enjoy watching them play?

Have you ever wondered whether your child is doing too much sport?

How do you help your child believe in themselves and be confident with their sporting pursuits, rather than worried about other competitors or results?

This resource will help parents find the answers to these very common questions and much more.

They will provide parents with information and practical tools and tips to ensure they play their role as a parent to the best of their ability in order to allow their child to enjoy their sport and assist them in reaching their full potential in sport and life.



Mind-Body Connection

Our mind and body work best when they work together in a positive direction.

Do you sometimes struggle to understand your child's behaviour and actions on and off the sporting field?

This resource will outline how to better understand the connection between your child's mind and body and how that can impact on their sporting performance.

Understanding the connection between the mind and body and how such a relationship plays an important role in your child's thoughts and behaviours, is a valuable tool to have as a parent.

Anxiety often plays a significant role in performance. Too much anxiety and quality performance can be hard to come by, too little and performance can suffer. So how do we get the balance?

First, we need to understand our mind and body's innate mechanism to deal with threat. We often hear of the fight or flight response, which is how the mind and body react to a perceived or real fear or danger.

In sport when a player/athlete is anxious, their thoughts are often future, or outcome based. For example, "I hope I don't stuff up today." or "What if I don't score." This way of thinking can lead to players 'feeding' fear. They fixate or dwell on the 'what ifs' rather than the 'what is'.

For example, instead of your child thinking about the possibility of making a mistake, it would be more beneficial for them to think about the 'what is', that is what can they control, what are the things they need to focus on in order to play and perform well.

Feelings of anxiousness generally arise when expectations are high, when the player/athlete believes their skill level does not meet the demands of the task ahead or that they fear failure. This negative

thinking generally affects the body as well. The body's symptoms of anxiety may include sweaty palms, increased heart rate, swirling tummy. Couple this with mental or cognitive anxiety and you may have a decrease in focus, irritability, poor self-confidence, and poor body language.

This heightened anxiety state is at times overwhelming and exhausting, leaving the player/athlete with a confused mind and tension in their body. Which, when transferred to the sports arena can look like a player/athlete who is lethargic, less skilled and poor in their decision making.

It is common when this happens that the observation is made that a player/athlete trains better than they compete.

This is one reason why it is paramount that anxiety is addressed so that a player/athlete can perform with freedom, enjoyment, a clear mind, and a calm body in order to optimise their performance.





As parents we can encourage our children to develop some of the following skills in order for them to obtain an optimal performance state:



1. Development of **routines**, e.g., packing their kit bag the night before. This often allows for less stress the morning of a game, especially if playing shirts, socks etc. are hard to find!



2. Some players/athletes find that listening to **music** before games aids in calming their mind and body and putting them 'in the game' come game time.

You do not want the music to over or under stimulant them, so make sure their playlist is music that makes them feel good rather than charging them up too much or making them feel like they are ready to fall asleep. It should make them feel confident and ready to 'perform'.



3. **Self-talk** plays a vital role in the connection between our mind and body. It needs to be simple, specific to the player/athlete and their position, and positive in nature.

When self-talk is action oriented it allows for the player/athlete to maintain focus on the tasks at hand, the things they can

control. This simplicity in self talk can keep anxiety levels down, concentration levels high and expectations under control.

Common key words adopted by player/athletes may include, *dominate, attack, smooth, flow, strong, rhythm.*



4. Reinforce and **relive positive past performances**. This allows for confidence to be strengthened.

It is a good idea for players/athletes to redirect their anxious feelings and thoughts to focusing on remembering a time they performed well.

For example, rather than a player/athlete becoming stressed about performing well, they should relive in their head a time they made a great play. This allows them to gain control and focus on the things needed to play well rather than just focusing on the expectations to play well.



5. Make sure when **setting goals** for a game/event that they are **realistic** and **within their control**.

Outcomes like scoring goals and winning are not entirely within their control.

What is within their control is doing things like a good pass or tackle.

Focus on the process.



6. It is paramount that for players/athletes to perform at their best, they must have good **mind-body connection**. Understanding that what they feel, think, do and say are all linked.

So as parents we need to assist our children to prepare well for games/events. Help them arrive to the competition and training with a clear mind and a calm body in order to execute positive consistent performance on the sports arena.

The key take home points for understanding and facilitating **mind-body connection** are:

1. Feelings of anxiety are normal. It is how we deal with it that determines how we perform.
2. Encourage your child to recognise the signs of anxiety and teach them how to focus on the task at hand which is within their control.
3. Help your child set realistic goals, develop the use of positive simple, specific self-talk and encourage them to reflect and relive positive past performances.

By doing the above strategies, anxiety, pressure and poor decision making can decrease, while allowing confidence, enjoyment and focus to increase.





We hope you enjoyed our tips!

You might like to check out our animated video, ABCs for Parenting on the NSW Office of Sport website.

Go to <https://www.sport.nsw.gov.au/pathways-and-development/parents-guardians-and-carers> to access this video and other parenting resources on offer by the NSW Office of Sport.



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