# WHAT TO SAY AFTER A GAME




## CONNECTING WITH YOUR ATHLETE AFTER A GAME

One of the trickiest moments to navigate as a sports parent or caregiver is connecting with your athlete right after a game. Whether you want to celebrate a win, help process a tough loss, or share an observation, most adults are ready to debrief long before their athlete is.

Sports psychology research [1,2] shows that immediate post-game conversations heavily impact an athlete's long-term motivation and self-esteem. Handling these moments with care helps reduce performance pressure, protect your athlete's well-being, and keep sports fun.

## KEY STRATEGIES FOR THE POST-GAME MOMENT

### GIVE THEM A COOL-DOWN PERIOD

Immediately after the final whistle, emotions are running high and physical energy is drained. Jumping directly into game analysis can feel overwhelming. Most athletes simply need time to decompress, regulate their emotions, and process the game quietly on their own terms.

### LET YOUR ATHLETE LEAD

Wait for your athlete to bring up the game. If and when they are ready, actively listen to their perspective instead of jumping in with your own analysis. If they prefer quiet, offer space or regular, non-sports conversation.

### SEPARATE THE PERSON FROM THE PERFORMANCE

Remind them that their value as a person is never tied to a score, a missed shot, playing time, or a stat line. Make sure they know your love and pride are unconditional - regardless of a win, a loss, their performance, or amount of time on the field.

### FOCUS ON PROCESS, NOT TACTICS

Praise their effort, attitude, hustle, integrity, or other factors that are within their control. Avoid second-guessing coaching strategies or critiquing play calls - this puts athletes in an uncomfortable position, forcing them to choose between trusting their parent or their coach.

### EXPRESS APPRECIATION FIRST

Start by showing gratitude with a simple, powerful phrase: "I love watching you play" or "I love supporting you, no matter your role." These phrases require no evaluation of performance, playing time, score, or stats. They communicate unconditional support and remove the pressure of performing for adult approval.

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POSITIVE COACHING ALLIANCE

## PHRASES THAT BUILD TRUST AND KEEP SPORTS FUN

When your athlete is ready to talk, these phrases keep the conversation supportive and athlete-centered:

- "Did you have fun out there today?"
- "I saw how hard you hustled in the second half."
- "I'm here if you want to talk about the game, or we can talk about something else."
- "Great effort today. How are you feeling?"
- "I loved seeing how you supported your team when things got tough."
- "I'm proud of who you are, win or lose."

## COMMON POST-GAME PITFALLS TO AVOID

- **Tactical Critiques:** "Why didn't you pass to Mari?"
- **Dismissing Effort:** "If you worked harder, you would have won."
- **Blaming Officials:** "It's okay, the referee ruined that game."
- **Minimizing Their Feelings:** "It's just a game, don't get so upset."
- **Comparing to Teammates:** "Why does Mohammed get more playing time than you?"
- **Undermining the Coach:** "The coach should have set up the offense differently."




SOURCES

1. Knight, C. J., Boden, C. M., & Holt, N. L. (2010). Junior tennis players' preferences for parental behaviors. Journal of Applied Sport Psychology, 22(4), 377–391.
2. Harwood, C. G., & Knight, C. J. (2015). Parenting in youth sport: A position paper on parenting expertise. Psychology of Sport and Exercise, 16, 24–35.