

Undue parental pressures can make for bad sports

By DR. HOWARD E. WOLIN

Editor's note: This is the final column of a four-part series on athletes coping with injuries, stress and related problems.

It's that time of year again when the unfulfilled ambitions of many parents are imposed upon their sons and daughters playing youth league baseball.

Parental pressure is not limited to baseball; no matter what the sport, there are parents who push their children toward unrealistic goals and an impossible state of perfection.

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Parents, particularly fathers, but increasingly mothers who also played competitive sports, are focusing their children into athletic activities which may be both psychologically

and physically injurious to them.

Many of us have chuckled at "Little League fathers," those men who seem to live vicariously through their sons' or daughters' exploits on the diamond. They've taken winning or losing far more seriously than their offspring, regarding victories as somehow emblematic of their good genes and considering losses affronts to their own self-esteem.

For a lot of them, of course, baseball remains simply a game that allows their children to compete and to learn how to be gracious victors and good losers.

Good enough

For such parents, "good enough" becomes the watchword. As parents, they may not be the best or the worst, but they're certainly "good enough." So can their child's best effort in sports be just that. They have learned to enjoy their children's success, without unrealistic expectations.

In such cases, the parent-as-cheerleader and child-as-athlete relationship can be positive and healthy. The child develops, the parent shares in that development through encouragement and support and the child derives pleasure through competition, through his mastery of the sport and through any success he may enjoy.

Key to this kind of "good enough" outcome is a child's aspirations are strong, nurtured by his own wish to develop and his capacity to see his parents as supportive. If the parents respond in kind, expecting the best possible effort from the child but nothing more, then there's a nice mesh, one that often results in successful athletes.

How we feel about ourselves as we grow up has much to do with what might be called the gleam in the parents' eyes. Defined more precisely, this sense of self really grows out of an attitude communicated by our parents — if they admire and appreciate us for who we are and what we achieve, then we can feel the same way about ourselves and get the most out of our abilities.

In parenting situations where there are realistic expectations followed by appropriate appreciation, there is the basis for growth and development that can lead to the child's realistic non-driven striving for approval.

Unfortunately, a child too often will become aware that he will be appreciated by his parents only if he lives up to their expectations. Failing that, he may be subtly or not so subtly criticized, his worth as an individual depreciated or himself attacked for not living up to the parents' ideal.

In this situation, there is often a negative outcome: the child may suffer repeated injury to his sense of self-esteem, either because his need for gratification has been frustrated or because living up to his parents' hopes has led to yet another promise of future satisfaction for even greater effort — the ever-receding ideal.

The child learns he is not valued for himself but for his performance which, even then, will never really be good enough; in effect, he can never catch up. The child often develops an addiction to overly-driven performance and may later be highly vulnerable to severe disappointment even when he has in fact performed well and is objectively successful.

In athletic terms, these opposing scenarios may

result in healthy or unhealthy responses. The healthy response means that a competitive person will strive to do the best he can in his sport; if his parents' attitudes have been supportive and he is not driven constantly toward some parental ideal of perfection, then he'll be able to cope with failure as well as success because his best effort will have been good enough for himself and his parents.

Perfection

In an unhealthy response situation, the child-athlete will often take on the perfection-seeking parent's role as critic and berate himself, agonizing over every failure, however small, and belittling any success, however great, as not good enough.

This very often becomes a deadly contest in which both the parents and child can only lose. The prize for the parents is the feeding of their own expectations through the success of the child while the prize for the child is a distant hope that the parents will love him if he can only achieve perfection.

There may also be a time when the child will become disillusioned. This can lead to a festering anger within the child and resentment toward the parents and perhaps even withdrawal from the sport.

This can also effect such perfection-seeking people later in life, because everything becomes competitive and there is an endless striving for ever-elusive perfection.

And then, in turn, they too may inflict the same pain on their sons and daughters.