

Tips for sports parents who are prone to stress

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In a moment sure to be a nail-biter for any watching parent, Gresham's Hunter Hemenway tries to score on a wild pitch in a consolation game at the 2012 Little League World Series but is tagged out by Uganda's Daniel Alio.

By [Amy Wang | The Oregonian/OregonLive](#)

A Southwest Portland mom last week finished her first

[Little League](#)

postseason tournament and found it a stressful experience, especially when she saw umpires calling strikes and everyone keeping score at her 8-year-old son's games.

She didn't grow up playing sports and was unsettled by how anxious she became at the team's final tournament game.

"I needed a Xanax!" she wrote to the Omamas after the game, in which the lead went back and forth before finally settling with the other team.

She doesn't want to pull her child out of sports, so she asked for advice on how to cope with the stress of watching her child and his team compete, and how to not convey that stress to the kids.

Here are tips from Donnie Thompson, president of

[Gresham Barlow Little League](#)

; Glenn Fritts, president of

[Cedar Mill Little League](#)

; and Brian Baxter, director and owner of

[Sport Psychology Institute Northwest](#)

in Portland.

Rest assured that you're not alone.

"Welcome to the crowd," said Fritts, who has coached T-ball,

[majors Little League](#)

and tournament teams. "This is all very natural and I've been through this too, and it's taken a lot of games for me to temper that extreme response."

Be self-aware.

Thompson said of our frazzled mom, "She's already done the first step in recognizing her propensity to be that kind of person." That will be good for her son and his teammates, as "kids may not be able to articulate what they're feeling ... but they sense very easily what you are feeling," he said.

And being visibly anxious about a child's performance "only compounds the problem," Thompson said. "The kid's already struggling and then when their parent's stressed about it, struggles more."

Fritts agreed, saying that when he as a manager projected a "we gotta win" attitude, "the kids always performed worse the more intense I became."

Adjust your measure of success.

Thompson's league is home to the Gresham Nationals, who won the state championship last year and

[went to the Little League World Series](#)

in Williamsport, Pa. But at the start of this season, he said, he told the league to forget about last season. "I told them that our measure of success this year is a little more simple: Are the kids learning something and are they having fun?"

Keep things in perspective.

"Even the very best baseball players strike out or don't get on base seven or eight times out of 10," Thompson said. That's something coaches repeatedly tell kids -- and something parents should repeatedly tell themselves, Thompson and Baxter said.

Fritts said it's important to take a long view. When a child first starts playing sports, every at-bat and every shot is a big deal, he said, but as time goes by, "the world doesn't hinge on one play anymore."

Also, "look and see why did you get your child into sports in the first place," said Baxter, whose own son, 10, does soccer, basketball and track. "Very few people say 'to win' or 'to play professionally.'" Instead, he said, most sports parents want their children to get exercise, learn team-building and perseverance, make new friends and become resilient -- and those are the values parents should stay focused on.

Back off -- literally.

"Stand back away from the field," Fritts said. "Stay out of their line of sight if you're really emotional about it and if you think that's counterproductive."

Back off -- emotionally.

During a game or meet, "allow them to make their mistakes," Baxter said. Immediately afterward, "allow them to be sad about a loss or a poor performance. Be there to support and put it in the proper context at the proper time -- which is not immediately after the game."

Instead, he said, let everyone process what happened during the drive home "and then when you get home, talk about it."

Focus on the controllables.

When Baxter works with athletes, he said, he has them work on what they can control: attitude, effort, preparation and the present moment. Similarly, with parents, "I ask them to focus on the things within the game," he said. "Not necessarily praising the result, but the effort that went into it -- praising the attitude that is shown." (Sports Psychology Institute Northwest has on its website a series of posts featuring the

[most frequently asked questions from and about sports parents](#)

.)

Praise the playing, not the play.

Thompson said kids crave their parents' approval, but that shouldn't be about how many strikes they threw or how many fly balls they caught.

Instead, he suggested this line: "I just loved watching you be out there and trying. It's a lot of fun when that ball is caught or that ball is hit and I'm going to be the most excited person out there."

Baxter struck a similar note, suggesting these lines: "Hey, I saw you trying hard out there. ... I saw you being a good teammate. I saw you never give up."

He cited an informal, three-decade-long

[survey of college athletes who were asked, among other things, what their parents said that they enjoyed most](#)

. The most popular answer: "I love to watch you play." (The blogger

[Hands Free Mama wrote a lovely post, "Six Words You Should Say Today,"](#)

on this very topic.)

Make good memories.

Thompson said it's crucial for parents to not take the sports experience so seriously even if a child is among the lucky few who will keep playing past high school. "When we do that, the kid will actually have much better memories of the sports experience than they would have had otherwise," he said.

"Enjoy the ride," Fritts said.

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