

Navigating Competition Time

Sport competitions are emotionally charged environments, filled with excitement and uncertainty. You will see your child succeed and you will see them fall short. Either way, it can be an emotional ride for all involved.

As parents and guardians of elite athletes, you can positively impact your child's/young persons' experience of competitions through your choice of words, body language and behaviour. This guide offers ways to support your child before, during and after competition. Remember, the best approach is to take their lead, ask what they prefer and adapt accordingly.

BEFORE THE COMPETITION: Setting them up for Success

The lead-up to a competition is important for your child's focus and confidence. Depending on the age and maturity of your child, here are 4 ways to be supportive:



ASK what they need

Every athlete is different. Before competition, some want quiet solitude, while others prefer parental or family interaction.

Ask them what they prefer:

- "What can I do or not do, to support you?"
- "Would you prefer some *quiet* time, or prefer to chat before competition?"



Focus on **PROCESS**, not outcome

Don't get caught up on things outside your child's control. For example, focusing on opponents is not going to make them faster or stronger.

In fact, focusing on things outside their control (such as opponents, medals, scores, team selection) can make them feel more nervous and less confident.



Wish them **WELL**

Offer words of encouragement:

- "You've put in the work, now enjoy the experience."
- "You have already won in my eyes, so go out there and give it your best."



AVOID last-minute advice

It's natural to want to help your child. But technical advice from a parent can add pressure. At this point, your child needs to know that you care, rather than care what you know.

DURING THE COMPETITION: Supporting from the sidelines

Watching your child compete can be exciting and stressful. No matter their age or competition level, it can be easy to get caught up in the tension and excitement. Here are 4 ways to stay supportive during competition:



Be the **ANCHOR** in the Storm

- **Breathe:** this is the most under-rated strategy for humans when stressed. Take a deep breath, hold for 4 seconds, then slowly exhale. This simple act calms your nervous system and helps you parent more clearly.
- **Be mindful of body language:** it speaks volumes and athletes pick up on visible tension. By keeping composed you convey confidence and joy in watching them perform.
- **Avoid excessive shouting:** simple gestures – a supportive smile, nod, or clap – offers encouragement without embarrassing or adding pressure to your child.



LEAVE the coaching to the Coach

Trust in your child's preparation and leave technical guidance to the coach. Coaches typically invest time in providing the right technical feedback, and extra advice from a parent can feel like criticism. By stepping back, you show confidence in both your child and their coach.



RESPECT their Space

Competition timeframes vary, so be mindful of your child's need for space during this time. If they're staying with their team, give them space to wind down with teammates and enjoy this unique opportunity. If they're staying with you, ask if they would prefer company or some quiet time.



SHOW respect to Spectators, Opponents, and Officials

Stay positive and avoid expressing frustration towards referees, competitors, or the event setup. Modelling respectful behaviour teaches your child how to handle challenging situations with grace. This is a life skill that will benefit them in and out of sport.

AFTER THE COMPETITION: The car ride home and beyond

The car ride home is a unique opportunity for parents to show unconditional support for their child. It's natural to want to talk, analyse the game, or offer encouragement, especially after a tough performance. However, knowing how to approach these moments thoughtfully can have a lasting impact on your child's confidence and resilience. Here are 4 ways to stay supportive on the ride home and beyond:



Just **BE THERE**

After competition, emotions can run high for both you and your child. Take a moment to ground yourself, offer a compassionate smile, and give your child a hug if they lean in. Then, let them have some space to process. Sometimes, the best support you can offer is a quiet, comforting presence.



No **MATTER** what

Once in the car, make it clear that you're proud of them – no matter what. Whether they won, lost, excelled or struggled, remind them you are proud of their courage, effort, and commitment. You might say:

- *“Appreciate that was a tough game, and I'm really proud of you for hanging in there.”*
- *“Not sure what to say, but want you to know I love you, no matter what.”*



Let **THEM** take the **LEAD**

When your child starts talking, let them guide the conversation. Instead of analysing or giving advice, just listen. Acknowledge their feelings without jumping in to solve or fix. Sometimes all they need is to feel heard and understood.



ASK what they need from you?

Ask them what they need. Do they want a hug, some food, some time alone, or simply a comforting presence? By encouraging them to voice their needs, you're giving them a sense of control and helping them determine what they need right now.