

The Adler Institute

The Alfred Adler Institute in Israel

The Association for Guidance, counseling & treatment provision

Thesis of the course “Fundamentals of the Adlerian Theory”

Encouragement and Praise

Dedicated to player's parents

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May 2014

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Preface

Competitive sport in general & tennis in particular is composed of “a golden triangle” – player, parents & coach, each with an important role designed to help the player to persist, improve & reach as near as possible the extraction of his potential. Parents have a major & decisive role in the process of the player’s development. The coach should know the parents’ place in this triangle, understand their reality, direct them to become competitive sportsman’s parents & give them the tools that may help the player & encourage him appropriately. The study of the Adlerian theory & other topics that I was exposed to during my studies, some of which are incorporated here, helped me better understand the reality in which I work, refreshed my view of the world in other areas & strengthened approaches & contents which I teach.

The steps described here all serve the difference between encouragement & praise. Encouragement refers primarily to work, diligence & perseverance of the athlete. Praise refers to achievements & creates pressure to succeed & a fear of failure. The environment is supposed to refer to the hard work of the sportsman &

this will increase the chance to bring him the achievements without fear.

The work is written in a masculine form meant for both sexes.

Theoretical introduction

Parents as well as players are naturally focused on a goal measured by them with the results of games. “It seems that a man’s qualities, & certainly his whole personality – develop through his approach – to the environment, an approach he acquires during his early childhood. All this may actually happen only if the human soul directs the goal” (Dreicourse, 2012, P.18).

The professional development of tennis players takes about 10,000 hours & extends over a period of 8 to 10 years. Focusing on achievements only, prevents parents from seeing the stages of progress & improvement of the players as part of their professional development. Due to focus on result, these parents can create an atmosphere of over competitiveness & unrealistic expectations by their children. These expectations are a form of constant criticism which affects the functioning of the child.

“A child who knows his worth & position in human society depending on his success or failure, will not be

able to engage in a businesslike way & of hope in his given assignments, because his outmost concentration will be in his efforts to succeed. Success for such a child is measured by the results he achieves. Every obstacle intensifies & every capacity shrinks. If, by intuition, worthiness & position in life depends on success, & if every success is no less than one hundred percent – what chance does a man possess in order to function? Often it is better to refrain from doing, rather than risk failure” (Bar-Av, 2004, P.135).

After losing, we expect the children to experience some sorrow & also to be able to say: “I lost but I enjoyed myself because I felt that I was improving & I also felt good about the way I played”. These children understand reality, have fun & are aware of their professional development process.

Parents of competitive players are engaged in many conflicts.

The parent provides the child the opportunity to play sport, but may exert unreasonable pressure due to his lack of knowledge & awareness of the expected results due to these pressures. A parent of a competitive player is in a constant dilemma about choosing the road – which

will enable his son to develop a professional & personal expertise & at the same time, keep his child of sound mind & body.

It isn't easy to be a parent, & so much so a parent of a competitive athlete. Conflicts & dilemmas intensify in parenthood when one or more children at home are engaged professionally in sport. We meet young players practicing most days of the week, mornings & evenings, &, in addition, are required to participate in dozens of competitions per year: regional & national, league encounters & international competitions in their home country & abroad – this load is exerted directly on the parents & sometimes on the lives of the entire family.

We know that as parents we must provide for our family, the physical & mental wellbeing of our children & yet function under stress in a proper manner. When one adds the activity load of the competitive sportsmen with all that it entails in everyday life, we get a pressured & complex routine with challenges in various areas. Parents of competitive players have an additional job besides their regular work & their being parents, they are almost busy as &, perhaps even more than their athlete children in administrative issues such as: organization of a tight schedule of transportation for training & competitions,

training camps, training of teams, coordination of personal training, financing all these, adjustment of the family's leisure time on weekends to the children's competitions, coordinating contests on weekends & holidays, preparation of the bag, the food, combining the training & competition during the studies & examinations term.

Dr. Donald Winnicott, a pediatrician & a psychoanalyst, coined the term **“good enough parent”**: i.e. a parent does not need to be perfect, he can, & to some extent needs to make mistakes for his child to grow out of them. In the case of parents of competitive athletes, it seems that just to be **good enough** is an impossible mission.

Parents of competitive children experience various dilemmas

In light of the heavy workload, parents of tennis players experience various dilemmas. Described below are a number of dilemmas facing parents:

How to deal with competitions & stress before competition – Do we tell the children to treat competition as training, should we stress the importance

of competition, how much should we comfort a child who loses a contest, should we accompany the child to competitions & watch the games closely? In this context, it is important to emphasize that most of the messages between parents & children are transferred in a non-verbal fashion – tone of voice, body language, personal example. Therefore, a parent under pressure will find it difficult to convey a message to the child not to be stressed. When a tennis player is playing on the court, full concentration is required of him – but he will be influenced by what the parents feel & relay off the court. If the parent is pressed, the child may become stressed, distracted, irritable & more. Children often ask their parents to stay away from the court.

Separation between what happens on the court & what happens at home – In many cases, the question arises how far to bring in discussions concerning what happens in training & competitions. In most cases it is better to leave the home space “clean” of conflicts related to the game of tennis, there are enough conflicts within the family such as: stress, sibling jealousy, stress in running the home & making a living.

How far to intervene professionally – Some parents come to watch their children during a competition. Some

of these parents (who come with some knowledge of the sport following their children or had prior knowledge of that sport) do not understand “**their part in the triangle**”, make different comments & give professional advice, constructing a training programme for their children & take on the role of “assistant coach”. Some even play with their children, & during the game, change their stroke technique. There are even some parents who determine their child’s fitness training programme beyond the regular framework, take counsel from a nutritionist & tend to be over-attentive to what goes on with other coaches or other clubs. It is important for parents to know their role in the triangle – parent, coach, young player. If they have some thoughts regarding the training, it is better to consult first with the coach.

Faith in the coach – What can I as a parent learn from the coach’s experience, how much does a parent believe in a coach, trust him & in the decisions he makes both professional & personally which will indeed, accompany the child in a proper manner, will be committed to his advancement & will serve as a role model. For example, a child who was expelled from workout by the coach, or not picked to play a league match, should the parent initiate a conversation with the coach as part of his

parental responsibility, or is it preferable to let his son approach the coach on his own with the understanding that the child needs to develop independence & confidence in his conduct with the coach. One has to remember that the coach faces a dilemma whether to involve the parents in certain cases, for fear that they will not function correctly in regard to the young child & make decisions that may harm more than help. Parents are supposed to trust the coach, but are allowed to ask questions & make suggestions, knowing

Very well that the coach makes the final decision.

Parents need to encourage their child to establish direct ties with the coach & speak on his behalf only on rare occasions.

Studies & friends as opposed to participation in sports –

How far to encourage engagement in areas beyond sports, how much pressure to put on children regarding their studies? Did my child miss social contacts due to sports? What comes first: going to a friend's bar-mitzvah or going to a practice, should I go on an annual excursion & miss practices for a week, or take part in a competition. (In most cases it is recommended that the child joins the excursions rather than take part in the competition. It depends on age & seasons of the year

affected by the competitions schedule). These deliberations are also age-related, since the percentage of time that the tennis player should devote to a specific area of sport compared to other sporting activities change & increase with age. It is accepted that children aged 6 - 8 should be engaged for about 30% of the time in tennis-specific activities & 70% of the time in other activities. Time spent on a specific engagement rises & rises & by the age of 16 – 18 the specific tennis activity reaches 70% & the time for non-tennis activities decreases to 30%.

The ability to distinguish between our needs & the needs of children – Is it the parent's motivation or the child's motivation to be a professional tennis player? A parent who failed to establish himself in the world of sport or alternatively established himself as a champion – raises a “star” regardless of his talent , the wishes & needs of the child. It is important to be attentive to the children's motivation, especially in times of crises & reflections on retiring. The child should be encouraged to point out the difficulties encountered, & together with the coach, find solutions to problems. To children, retirement is usually a solution to a problem in an activity. Naturally, there are other solutions.

These dilemmas are just a part of the dilemmas facing an athlete's parents on a daily basis. Parents are part of the system that surrounds the child. In many cases one parent is the one involved who accompanies & supports while the second parent takes a step back. However, both parents form the system that surrounds the child & in many cases represent two sides of the conflict experienced by the child. From my experience with parents & players, it is very important to make the distinction between court & home as much as possible, despite the fact that when the player begins to specialize, the parents (or one of them) become a team & also live their son's dream. It is important, therefore, for the coach to aid these parents in this complex task which requires huge investment, & prepare well ahead of these stages. As **Frank Giampaolo** (2012) wrote in his book: "Young tennis champions are born from great sacrifice of parents, they are not the result of selfish parents".

It is important for parents to have realistic expectations & an understanding that their role is to support, encourage & to transmit to the child that – "I trust you can handle it". Research in the field of sports psychology shows that children who perceive their parents as

supportive & believe in their abilities, perceive themselves more positively & have higher intrinsic motive.

On the other hand, children who perceive their parents as putting on pressure & placing impossible demands will reveal a higher level of anxiety. This happens by excessive parental behavior towards one of two sides: The parents interfere & apply great pressure on the coach & even make decisions contrary to the coach, or, are almost uninvolved at all, leaving the child on his own & without any support.

Tennis is not a precise rocket science & there is no formula or one way to further players, there are many ways to achieve the same result. The parent's most important role is to teach the child to accept reality as it is & to cope with crisis & disappointments. When a player is involved in an unsatisfactory practice session, an argument with the coach or with other person of authority, loss in a competition, etc., parents can & should offer a solution & show empathy & understanding. Together with this, the coach & parents will also equip the player with appropriate skills in order to deal with these problems. Personal example for solving a problem is one of the effective ways to learn

how to deal with difficulties. A parent solving problems in a pleasant & considerable manner, passes this form of behavior on to his child too.

Action principles for parents of competitive tennis players

It is important for parents to understand the driving force behind their son since competitive players do not always know themselves what motivates them, so it is important to adopt certain communication patterns between parents & their athlete children. The ideal situation is a situation where everyone involved – parents, a psychologist, a tennis coach, trainer & athlete, see themselves as part of a team working towards a common goal. True guidance is a guidance that adapts itself to the needs & requirements of the child. Everyone is wrong!!! But if you as parents will know how to forgive yourselves on errors that you commit, your children will also learn to forgive themselves when unsuccessful, & to continue on. Let us not forget that true guidance refers to the very strengths of the player & not just to mistakes & weaknesses.

A child needs support in order to compete in competitive sport! It often happens that a parent thinks his child is

the best, not getting what he deserves & takes on the role of “critic”. For many parents victory is important in competitions & at this age it is irrelevant, for the process is long & characterized by ups & downs. The child has to develop the skills & tools for life & not just concentrate on victories. High ranking at a young age does not guarantee anything, & may even cast doubt on the athlete remaining in the same line of sport. Beyond that there are known cases where players were forced to be absent from the court due to injury for long periods, returning to practice, playing & attaining very high results. The most prominent is Thomas Muster of Austria who sustained injury to his legs in a car accident, forced to sit in a wheelchair for several months. After he returned to the court he became top of the list in the world’s ranking. Examination of the relationship between youth champions & older champions shows that not always there is a connection between the two.

Parents need to know how to support, encourage but not push – to teach the child to be the best he can without ruining him. The parents’ role is to protect the child & not to develop a child who is excellent from the motor aspect & of high athletic achievements, but with low social & emotional skills.

Parents play a central role in shaping the child's character as an athlete & as a person. Researches have shown that there is a close connection between the behavior of a young athlete on the court & his behavior within the family. Sport is an excellent communication tool between parents & children, parents can express an interest in the child's desires, offer a shoulder to lean on in losses & encourage achievements. This is a communication tool with a lot of potential.

Competitive tennis, such as the child is dedicated to & invests in, holds high added value. It teaches discipline, responsibility, ability to make decisions, excellence, patience, concentration, achievement, dealing with authority, with disappointments, with failure together with fellowship & cooperation. It is therefore important for parents to reinforce these skills & not the achievements.

When your child is busy & committed to sports, you know that he is in a safe place, such a child has limits, a way of life & a deep relationship with friends. This is the space within which our true selves find a place. In a research conducted among hundreds of graduate tennis players of the Israel Tennis Center, by **Prof. Gad Yair**, it was found that the players pointed out a number of

important skills acquired over the years: discipline, ability to cope, responsibility, persistence, competitiveness, ability & independence.

How to encourage your athlete child

Below are a number of basic guidelines relating to effective encouragement between parents & their athlete children:

- 1. Encourage your athlete children to participate in sports without pressure** – allow them to decide if they wish to join or retire.
- 2. Avoid stressing victory as of central value.** For example, when a child returns from a match or practice, it is recommended to refrain from asking him “So, did you win? “How many aces or winners did you get?” but to ask: “How was it? Did you enjoy it? Did you do your best?” Although in competitive tennis at the highest levels, the aim is to win, tennis players do not focus on winning, but rather on concentration & improvement in performance, they know that if they put their minds on results, it will keep them off the mark.
- 3. Be concrete** - When you wish to encourage, it is recommended to give a positive & accurate

feedback on performance. Instead of saying: “You played great”, you can say for example: “I enjoyed watching how you kept your concentration during the game”.

- 4. Consult with your child** – In order to reinforce your ties with your son, try to check with him: a) One thing that you do which he likes regarding his tennis, for example, that you accompany him during competitions. b) One thing he would prefer for you not to do, e.g. do not interfere during the game. c) Something that you don't do which he prefers that you do. Remember that your goal is to understand, to accept & to support!
- 5. Avoid making comparisons with other players** – The only comparison to make is in regards to improvement of conduct & performances of the player himself.
- 6. Avoid bribery** – never offer a bribe to the child in something that he likes in order for him to go to practice: “I'll give you 10\$ if you go to practice”. Bribery draws the athlete's attention to reward & lowers the value of enjoying the activity itself. Research has shown that when the giving of prizes

were stopped, sportsmen began either to retire or invest less time in practices. “The child strives to exist within this real group (his close family) by obtaining the various achievements & adopting certain behaviors, skills & capacities”. (Drycourse, 2012). A child playing competitive tennis, driven by ambition & a desire to win, is not always aware of the power that drives him forward. What can help the child to connect & understand what motivates him will be to write down why he is playing tennis. The writings will be engraved in the child’s mind & will help him continue & persist on his way, even in a crisis.

7. Avoid using sports as a means of punishment –

“You are not going to practice because you misbehaved at home”, when used to prevent enjoyment from the sport, this as a means of punishment can cause double damage because prevention of training leads to a drop in fitness & performance. The coach must also refrain from using sporting assignments as a form of punishment.

8. Do not take the role of the coach – The role of a parent during a game or practice is to encourage & not to give advice how should the child play. Young

athletes have a limited ability of concentration & attention. When parents give athletes orders from the side of the court how to conduct themselves on court, this “grabs” an important part of their attention which should be directed to prepare the point & manage the game. If, however, you find it difficult to sit & watch, you can help by filming the game or by filling a game statistics report that can help a player & coach to focus the practice & better adapt it to the particular player.

9. Don't expect rapid progress – It should be accepted that the process of progress is slow & it is important to set up short term goals & highlight any progress.

10. Avoid praising – Some say that praise is “a violent form of communication” because it is part of a language of control by which to criticize others. Praise relates to achievements. Praise is manipulative & not a reward (a kind of moral superiority, if I praise you than I am better than you). External reward will reduce intrinsic motivation.

We often come across parents (& coaches) heaping praises on children athletes during a competition in a form of vague statements such as: You are a bomb, you are a king, you are great & more...wondering why their

kids are asking to be left alone, or for them to move away from the court. Certain parents have the tendency for an exaggerated applause, what will the player feel upon hearing a lot of applause & suddenly total silence? What is he supposed to understand? that now he does no longer plays well?

Effective components of encouragement

It should be remembered that effective encouragement is random, yes, & enforced. It focuses on effort & improvement, not just on outcome. Effective encouragement is given through the use of appropriate body language. It is focused & detailed, provides examples, identifies expectations that can be used creatively.

The following table will depict some examples of phrases of encouragement unlike phrases of praise.

Examples of Praise	Examples of Encouragement
You are the best player	I enjoy accompanying you to competitions & watch you play.

You always win!	I can clearly see the effort you are putting in training & competition.
I am so proud of your game	It seems that you really enjoy playing.
You have the highest ranking	It seems that you prepared yourself for the competition very seriously.

Summary

By what that is written here, I find it important to convey the message that spoken words have force, we can all remember that even after many years a word or a phrase addressed to us helped us in some situation, these were probably words of encouragement, thus it is important that we know how to correctly use this force in words & phrases that we utter to children & also avoid harmful words which too have the same trait that leaves an indelible mark in the memory for years to come.

To end off, I shall quote from a book by Jubran Khalil Jubran: **“The Prophet”**, your children are not your children but the fruit of life’s belongings: arriving hither

through you but not from you, living with you but not belonging to you. Give your children your love but not your thoughts, for they have their own philosophies. Their bodies will dwell in your homes, but not their souls, for

their souls huddle in the home of tomorrow – you will not be able to reach there even in your dreams. It is permissible for you to wish you were like them but do not create them as yourselves, for life faces forwards not back, & they shall not cling to yesterday.

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