

GROWING CHAMPIONS FOR LIFE

Positive Strategies for Helping Kids Win at Life and Sports

Distractions Happen - What Is Your Athlete's Plan?

By David Benzel



Have you ever described your athlete as...

- Laser-focused
- In the zone
- Tunnel-vision
- Gazelle intense

If you have, you probably remember the exact moment when you proudly recognized this level of concentration in them. More than likely, though, it is the exception and not the norm.

Thanks to a culture that embraces the art of multi-tasking, and is filled with innumerable distractions, this kind of performance seems to escape us most of the time.

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Sports psychologist, Dr. Robert Gilbert defines this type of focused effort as, ***“Totally doing what you are doing, while you are doing it.”***

Youth sports provide a perfect opportunity to work on improving the ability to concentrate because there will always be distractions to overcome.

Here are just a few specific examples of distractions that your child may be facing. They typically fall under one of two categories.

External: These are the things in their environment that they see, hear, smell, touch, or taste and these have the ability to divert their attention from the task at hand.

- A parent’s voice in the stands
- A coach calling out while the athlete is trying to execute a skill
- An ambulance that randomly goes by
- The sight of a significant other in the stands
- Any change in competitive conditions such as, a different water temp, a bouncier gym floor, or a wet field
- A child crying or a dog barking

Internal: These are the thoughts that an athlete might have when they should be focused completely on executing a skill. All of these can sabotage success.

- Am I good enough?
- I feel bad about the argument I just had with my Mom
- I don't have time for this because I have so much homework
- This team is better than I thought... I am in trouble
- Don't screw up right here

So, what’s the remedy? Here are 3 steps you can take to help your athlete.

First

Ask your child to **write out a list of typical distractions** they experience in their sport. Help them to brainstorm about all the past interruptions or things that might possibly draw their attention away.

Once they **recognize** the typical enemies to their concentration, they can take steps to lessen its impact on their performance.

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Second

Encourage them to **make a mental battle plan**. This can be used with either kind of distraction.

If your child often falls prey to the external distractions, include in the plan the specific things that their eyes, ears, and hands are supposed to be doing in a game/meet.

For example, a swimmer that hears some rowdy fans might remember: eyes down and hands long and strong, rather than getting caught up in trying to hear what is being said.

Athletes that struggle with mental or internal distractions, need to have a choreographed dialog that helps them to be more positive.

This might include some recovery statements, like:

- Correct and continue
- Flush it
- Move on
- Recover and redeem

Third

Invite them to rehearse and improve upon their mental battle plan. It needs to be viewed as a valuable tool that is at their disposal.

Be sure that they utilize it during each practice so that it comes naturally during competition.

Work to fine-tune it so that every phase of competition has been thought through.

For example, there should be a routine that works for warm-up, one that puts your athlete in the right mindset for games, and finally a practiced response in the face of an error.

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Be Prepared

Although it is impossible to get rid of all the potential distractions, you can help your kids to be prepared for when they do happen.

Kids that develop the ability to focus, in spite of distractions, take a valuable tool with them into all of life.

David Benzel is the Founder and Executive Director of [Growing Champions for Life, Inc.](http://www.growingchampionsforlife.com), which provides parents and coaches with practical tools & positive strategies for helping athletes reach their full potential while enjoying the youth sport experience. David is also the author of *"From Chump to Champ - How Individuals Go From Good to Great"* www.growingchampionsforlife.com