



An Interview with Michael Zito, PhD

Licensed Psychologist who practices Clinical, Sport, and Performance Psychology

Interviewed by Lynn Schiller, PhD

How does stress manifest itself in children's sports?

Stress can come from trying to figure out if your child should play on the select team and/or elite level leagues and the corresponding travel demands. To reduce stress, it is important to keep sports in perspective. According to the NCAA, 95% of high school athletes end their competitive sport careers in high school. This means that for the vast majority of children, sports is not about playing in college and beyond. For most children it is about fun, sense of belonging, source of identity, enjoyment of physical activity, socialization, and self-esteem development by improving skills. Parent-child and coach-athlete interactions can create stress. There are some parents and coaches that put too much pressure on kids or provide harsh feedback that is counterproductive.

How important is winning in sports endeavors?

While kids enjoy winning, it is not the main reason why they play sports. Winning can sometimes become more about the coach and the parents and less about the child. The field of sport psychology has studied why children play sports. The research clearly indicates that the number one reason why kids play sports is to have FUN- not to win. When a sport stops being FUN, children stop playing the sport.

What is sports psychology?

The field of sport psychology is a lesser-known sub-specialty within psychology. In order to be a sport psychologist, a practitioner needs to be a licensed psychologist and have advanced training/certification in sport psychology. As a sport psychologist, I have had the opportunity to speak with many parents, coaches and athletes. What I have tried to emphasize is how individual and team sports can teach valuable life skills. Sport psychology interventions reflect the art and

science of maximizing athletic performance, but do not lose sight of the person within the athlete or performer. This means that an athlete needs a balanced perspective about sport performance that accounts for their personal needs as well. Sport psychology techniques reflect the interplay of mental and physical aspects of sport and the subsequent effect on performance. The techniques are also applicable to non-sport performers (i.e., actors, dancers, musicians, business personnel, military and special operation forces).

What can our children gain from being active in sports?

Sports can teach the value of teamwork, dealing with adversity, managing emotions, self-discipline, deferring individual needs to the needs of a team, and dealing with performance anxiety. The most common reason why clients seek my sport psychology services is to deal with performance anxiety.

What is performance anxiety?

Performance anxiety comes about when athletes focus their thoughts on past or future performance, engage in negative self-talk and worry about the possibility of negative outcomes. This way of thinking usually results in tentativeness and underperformance. The way I teach athletes to deal with performance anxiety is to stay focused in the present, engage in positive self-talk and focus on the process to execute their athletic skill. For example, a pitcher would be best served by focusing on the next pitch to be thrown (present focus), being confident about his/her ability to throw the pitch (positive self-talk) and focusing on the pitching technique to throw an effective pitch (process). Once a pitcher learns this psychological approach, pitching performance anxiety can be significantly reduced.

Our current e-newsletter is about the mind body connection? How do you see the mind being affected by sports or other physical activities?

I see the mind body connection as a reciprocal process. Meaning what you think about affects what you do and what you do (sport or exercise) affects your mind. As mentioned above, an athlete can think in a way that creates performance anxiety that usually results in poor performance. The physical activity of sport can produce positive effects on mood and cognition. Exercise and sport participation can improve mental alertness and a sense of well-being. Extended exercise activities can produce endorphins thereby enhancing mood and focus. Physical activity can also reduce stress.

Can you give some tips to our readers who have children in sport activities?

Recommendations for youth sports:

- Keep the focus on fun and enjoyment
- Recognize that most athletes will not play at the collegiate level
- Keep parental pressure at a minimum because it can have a negative effect on enjoyment of sport and can lead to premature dropping out of a sport
- Make sure an athlete is playing a sport to meet his/her own needs not the needs of a parent
- View sport as a way to teach valuable life skills and engage children in healthy physical activity
- Keep sport as part of their identity but not their entire identity