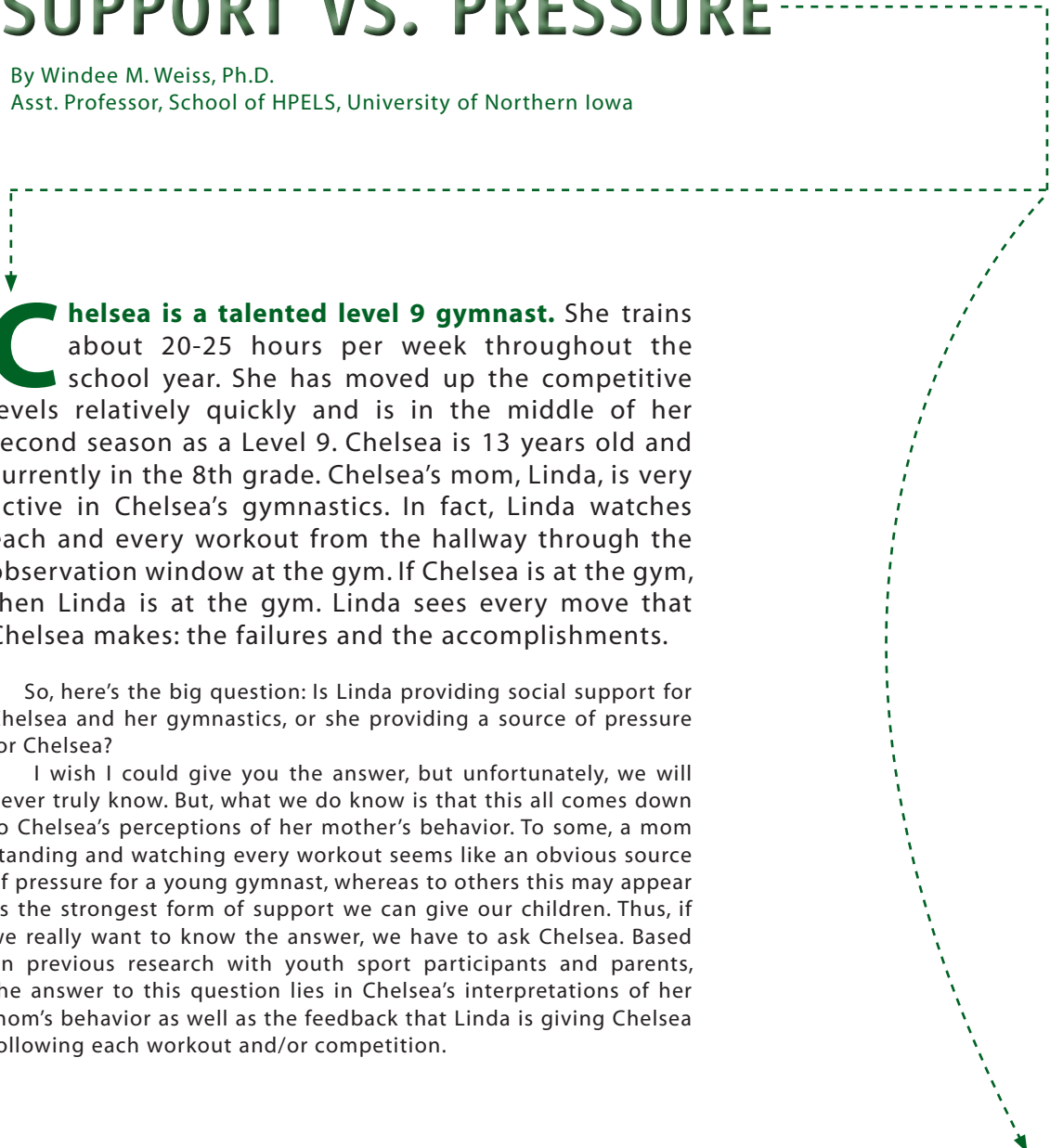


COACHING YOUR PARENTS: SUPPORT VS. PRESSURE

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Chelsea is a talented level 9 gymnast. She trains about 20-25 hours per week throughout the school year. She has moved up the competitive levels relatively quickly and is in the middle of her second season as a Level 9. Chelsea is 13 years old and currently in the 8th grade. Chelsea's mom, Linda, is very active in Chelsea's gymnastics. In fact, Linda watches each and every workout from the hallway through the observation window at the gym. If Chelsea is at the gym, then Linda is at the gym. Linda sees every move that Chelsea makes: the failures and the accomplishments.

So, here's the big question: Is Linda providing social support for Chelsea and her gymnastics, or she providing a source of pressure for Chelsea?

I wish I could give you the answer, but unfortunately, we will never truly know. But, what we do know is that this all comes down to Chelsea's perceptions of her mother's behavior. To some, a mom standing and watching every workout seems like an obvious source of pressure for a young gymnast, whereas to others this may appear as the strongest form of support we can give our children. Thus, if we really want to know the answer, we have to ask Chelsea. Based on previous research with youth sport participants and parents, the answer to this question lies in Chelsea's interpretations of her mom's behavior as well as the feedback that Linda is giving Chelsea following each workout and/or competition.

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What does the research say?

Parents play a variety of roles in the sport experiences of their children: chauffeur, cheerleader, spectator, financier, and of course, parent (Fredericks & Eccles, 2004). For the most part, parents provide their children with sport experiences (e.g., signing them up for gymnastics), role model behaviors for their child with regard to sport (e.g., displaying appropriate behaviors following a loss), and help their children interpret their sport experiences (e.g., "I am so proud of all your hard work" may help children to develop the value of effort). Thus, parents are a constant and dynamic entity in any child's sport career.

With regards to perceptions of pressure from parents by young athletes, research has consistently shown that more negatives result from this pressure than positives (e.g., Babkes & Weiss, 1999; Brustad, 1988, 1996; Borman & Kurdak, 1997; Gould et al., 1996; Scanlan & Lewthwaite, 1984). For example, higher perceptions of parental pressure was related to (a) higher competitive anxiety with youth wrestlers, (b) lower motivation to play with a sample of youth soccer players, and (c) higher rates of burnout due to chronic stress. In contrast, lower perceptions of pressure from parents have been related to higher enjoyment, motivation, and perceptions of competence.

Parental encouragement of and interest in their child's sport participation characterizes "social support" in youth sport research (Brustad, 1993, 1996). For example, greater encouragement by parents for participating in physical activity was related to children's higher perceived physical competence and attraction to sport. Babkes and Weiss showed that children who perceived their parents had higher positive beliefs about their soccer competency, gave positive responses for success, and served as positive role models reported higher intrinsic motivation, perceived competence, and sport enjoyment. Additionally, parents' reported support for their child's participation in physical activity positively related to the child's enthusiasm for physical activity (Power & Woolger, 1994). Thus, these studies suggest that not only do parent support and encouragement enhance the sport experience of children and adolescents, but they also influence motivation to continue in sport and physical activity.

In my own personal research, I have conducted a series of studies with competitive female gymnasts that, in part, explored the influence of parents on young gymnasts' commitment to the sport (W. M. Weiss & Weiss, 2003, 2006, 2007). In the first two studies, we compared gymnasts who varied with regards to their type of commitment: "want to" vs. "have to." Those gymnasts who felt that they "have to continue" gymnastics reported higher perceptions of parental pressure and lower perceptions of parental support than did those gymnasts who were still attracted to their

sport. In our most recent study (W. M. Weiss & Weiss, 2007) higher perceptions of parental pressure was related to lower sport commitment for gymnasts ages 8-18 years of age, competing in levels 5-10.

Therefore, the bottom line is that support from parents enhances the sport experience for youth: increased motivation, perceptions of ability, enjoyment, and commitment. Perceived pressure from parents to either continue or to perform at a particular level seems to have the exact opposite effect: decreased motivation, and enjoyment, and increased anxiety and burnout. Of course, this is all easier said than done. The majority of parents do not intentionally place pressure on their child. The "intent" is to be supportive, but the reality in the eye of the young athletes is pressure.

So, what can we do to promote supportive vs. pressuring behaviors by our parents?

1. Teaching your parents the difference between support and pressure: It's all in the approach

Many times parents think they are offering support, but for one reason or another, the gymnast "hears it" as pressure. For example, a gymnast is having a difficult time in the gym mastering a new skill because she is scared. Her parent is obviously concerned about this for several reasons: they do not like seeing their daughter upset or worrying, they want their daughter to be successful, and they are worrying that maybe this "hiccup" will slow down her progression or success in the upcoming competitive season. Thus, in response, the parent may begin to ask on a daily basis after each workout: "Did you do it? Why didn't you go? What did your coach say?"

Now, the parent is trying to get some information about what is going on in the gym and trying to demonstrate interest and concern. However, this behavior by the parent could potentially be perceived by the gymnast as pressure: "Mom and dad are really pushing for information... they are really worried about this... I don't want to disappoint them... I wish they would relax, this is my issue, not theirs...." So, how can a parent show support and concern without it being misconstrued as pressure?

Here are some good questions to ask:

- "How did your workout go today?"
- "What was the best part about your workout?"
- "Did you get a chance to work on that skill? How did it go?"

This gives the athlete the option of pursuing discussion about the problem skill. Sometimes not talking about the problem outside of the gym is the best medicine- we do not want gymnasts reliving scary or bad experiences, this will only increase their anxiety about a skill.

Another way parents' comments can be misconstrued or misinterpreted by young athletes is when parents try to give advice about how to get over being scared or to deal with a particular problem skill. For example, "If you just work harder, you'll get it" or "You just need to get tough and deal with it." Personally, I remember my parent saying this to me once, and I immediately thought, "You don't know what you're talking about. I am working hard, back off!" Again, the intent of my parents was a good one, I am sure it was coming from the heart, but as a frustrated, anxious gymnast this was probably one of the last things I wanted or needed to hear.

Here are some good ways to respond to discussion about problems in the gym:

- "Are you okay? I am sorry this is so difficult for you."
- "Is there anything I can do to help?"
- "You know what, I love you just as much regardless of what skills you can do or can not do."
- "No matter what, you are still my sensational, talented, unique daughter. This gym stuff will work itself out, it always does!"

Statements like these help the gymnast realize that the parent truly is their strongest, most reliable cheerleader. This provides a way for the parent to communicate to their gymnast that they are concerned, but no matter what she does in the gym, "she the person" rather than "she the gymnast" is the most important thing to that parent. The last thing we want is for young athletes to worry that their worthiness for love and attention from their parents is tied to their athletic performance.

2. Using rewards to help support the gymnast: Walking the fine line

One common method of demonstrating support for the gymnasts' endeavors is for the parent to reward the gymnast with some type of tangible gift, such as clothes, CD's, money, etc. So, for example, a gymnast finally gets her two backhandsprings on high beam, so her dad takes her shopping to celebrate and rewards her for her achievement. For the most part, there is nothing wrong with this, Dad is merely trying to communicate to his daughter how proud of her he is and they should celebrate her achievement.

However, rewards can become a negative influence or source of pressure if used incorrectly. Without meaning to, parents end up using these potential rewards and gifts as a way of controlling their gymnasts' behaviors. For example, an incorrect way to use rewards would be if a parent said, "If you get your two backhandsprings on high beam this week, I will take you shopping." The intent is to help motivate the gymnast, but the result could end up being additional pressure on the gymnast. Not only does the gymnast have potential concerns about the skill, but also now she may worry or stress about being able to go shopping. Rewards can be used to control and manipulate behavior, thus increasing the amount of perceived pressure on an athlete.

The other issue with rewards is that tangible rewards could reduce the gymnast's intrinsic motivation to learn the new skill and increase her extrinsic motivation. That is, learning the skill becomes a "means to an end" (e.g., getting to go shopping). The gymnast begins to learn skills or do things in order to obtain some extrinsic reward. That will work for a while, until the rewards are removed. Once the rewards are removed, then usually there is a decline in motivation. Thus, if parents want to use rewards appropriately to demonstrate support and encouragement, they should:

- Avoid “If-then” statements- “if you do this, then I will get you this”
- The tangible gift/reward should be a surprise, after the fact, that represents how proud the parent is of their daughter
- When in doubt, tangible gifts/rewards should be given for perseverance, hard work, etc., rather than for some level of performance
- Sometimes a hug, a comment, and/or time spent one-on-one with the parent is the best reward (Examples: a lunch date, sneaking off to the movies, “I am proud of all you do,” “Thank you for being such a great kid”)

Bottom line: Being a gym parent is a difficult job. Every parent wants what is best for their child, but sometimes all the money, time, effort, and sacrifices that parents put into their child’s sport participation can get in the way of the parent communicating what they really mean to say. Hopefully, some of these tips can facilitate supportive behaviors that will enhance the parent-athlete relationship. ✕

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