



MOTIVATION AND HEALTHY COMPETITION IN YOUNG ATHLETES

Learning to compete while protecting effort, growth and team spirit

EFFORT

GROWTH

COMPETE

Why was this guide prepared?

Motivation in young athletes is often described as simply wanting success more. Lasting motivation, however, is supported by curiosity, improvement, belonging, autonomy and a sense that the activity matters.

Competition is not automatically harmful. When structured well, it can teach effort, persistence after mistakes, respect for rules and appreciation of another athlete's success.

This guide places development at the centre, separating motivation from pressure and healthy competition from a results-only culture.

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What is motivation?

Motivation includes the processes that start and sustain participation. It is not one single feeling.

On some days an athlete trains from curiosity, on others for teammates or a personal goal. Motivation is not expected to remain equally high all the time.

A healthy approach does not force motivation upward at every moment. It tries to understand what influences it when it falls.

The motivation map



A young athlete's motivation comes from several sources. Achievement, belonging, autonomy, enjoyment, skill development and meaning interact.

At the centre is the desire to continue. Pathways extend toward learning, friendship, goals, choice, feedback and enjoyment.

When one area weakens, others may support the athlete. When every area becomes tied only to results, motivation becomes fragile.

Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation

Intrinsic motivation comes from enjoyment, curiosity and the experience of improvement.

Extrinsic motivation involves outcomes such as medals, selection, praise, points or punishment. External rewards are not always harmful, but when they become the only source, interest may disappear when the reward is absent.

External incentives should support competence and learning rather than replace them.

What is healthy competition?

Healthy competition does not treat the opponent as an enemy. It creates a setting in which athletes can test their skills.

A strong opponent can demand better attention and new solutions. The value of competition lies not only in identifying a winner, but also in creating learning.

Competition that overrides rules, safety and respect is not healthy.

Does winning matter?

Winning is a natural goal in sport and should not be dismissed. Problems arise when the young athlete's entire worth becomes tied to the result.

A match can be won with poor decisions, or lost while showing important progress. Healthy evaluation considers both process and outcome.

Alongside “Did we win?”, ask “What did we do well, what did we learn and what comes next?”

Fear of mistakes

Young athletes who are repeatedly criticised or valued only through success may begin to avoid mistakes.

They may choose overly safe play, avoid trying new skills or refuse responsibility.

Mistakes are not the opposite of development. With useful feedback, they become information, correction and another attempt.

How should praise be used?

General praise such as “You are very talented” may feel good briefly but can link worth to a fixed trait.

More useful praise makes the process visible: “You returned to defensive position earlier today” or “You tried again when it became difficult.”

Praise should be realistic, specific and connected to behaviour. Constant praise can also reduce the meaning of feedback.

Goal setting

Goals for young athletes should not be limited to results. Winning or selection is never fully under the athlete's control.

Process goals are more actionable: passing on time, protecting the role, making a safe ascent or keeping attention on one task.

A useful goal is clear, measurable, age-appropriate and concrete enough to understand.

Competition within the team

Competing for the same position can support development, but it may also make teammates feel like threats.

When roles and selection criteria are clear, competition feels fairer. Ambiguity encourages rumours, jealousy and mistrust.

Internal competition should raise everyone's standards rather than encourage sabotage.

Comparison in children and adolescents

Constant comparison may create a brief increase in effort but damage confidence and team connection.

Growth, body structure, experience and maturity differ even at the same age. An early physical advantage may not remain.

The healthiest comparison is with the athlete's own previous performance.

Coach language

Replace “You have to win” with “Follow the plan and stay engaged.”

Replace “Do not fall behind your teammate” with “What is your development goal today?”

Replace “Do not make a mistake” with “If an error happens, return to the next task.”

Replace “You are naturally talented” with “Your effort and decisions are improving.”

Coach language influences whether competition feels like a threat or a learning environment.

Parent language

When the first question after a match is about the result, children may learn that the score matters most.

Alongside “How many goals did you score?”, ask “What did you enjoy?”, “What behaviour made you proud?” and “How did you contribute to the team?”

Parental support means providing a safe and stable relationship, not managing the child's performance.

What should happen when motivation falls?

Reduced motivation should not immediately be treated as poor discipline. Fatigue, school demands, team conflict, unclear roles or fear of failure may contribute.

First identify when the change began and when it becomes stronger. A brief recovery period, a new goal or role adjustment may be enough.

Persistent loss of interest, sleep disturbance, severe anxiety or complete withdrawal from sport may require professional assessment.

A healthy-competition checklist

Are rules and selection criteria clear?

Are effort and development as visible as results?

Is humiliating language used after mistakes?

Is the opponent's success respected?

Does the child have a voice in personal goals?

Is there room for recovery and enjoyment?

When most answers are no, the competitive environment needs revision.

Seven-day motivation plan

1

Day 1: Write three things you enjoy most about the sport.

2

Day 2: Choose one development goal unrelated to results.

3

Day 3: Notice one strength in a teammate.

4

Day 4: Rewrite the sentence you use after a mistake.

5

Day 5: Identify the language from coaches or parents that supports you.

6

Day 6: Consider what an opponent has taught you.

7

Day 7: Answer in your own words: "Why do I continue this sport?"

8

This plan does not force motivation upward. It makes its true sources more visible.

Final note and references

Lasting motivation in young athletes grows from development, belonging, autonomy and meaning rather than pressure.

Healthy competition does not reject winning. It places winning alongside respect, safety, learning and team spirit. A good sport environment teaches young athletes not only how to win, but also how to lose, try again and respect another person's success.

Selected references:

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This guide is for general information and does not replace individual developmental, psychological or medical assessment.