

# Psychology and Sport Weekly

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Daniel Rodriguez, Ph.D. PsychoAdaptation Consulting

Daniel\_Rodriguez@psychoadaptation.com

## Special Points of Interest:

- *Learning to speak to your children is as easy as actively listening*
- *Active listening helps to establish trust, and opens communication about sensitive issues*
- *Rituals have a place in sport*
- *Avoid good luck charms if possible*
- *Autogenic training, my secret weapon against severe stress*

## TALK TO YOUR KIDS, IT'S GOOD FOR THEIR HEALTH!

Talking to your kids is perhaps the best strategy to protect your children from many of the ills experienced in childhood and adolescence. The modern world is complicated, and youth are bombarded with excessive stimuli from multiple sources, including television, social media, and of course social interactions in and out side of school. As such, parental monitoring is hard; we simply cannot monitor all of their interactions all of the time.

One way to counter this deficit is by establishing good parent-child communication. Unfortunately, not all parents are experts when it comes to speaking to their children, particularly when it

relates to sensitive content such as dating, bullying, grades, or athletic performance. The situation is complicated further when one considers individual differences in children; not all children respond equally well to criticism or enjoy speaking about sensitive topics. Some children are even defensive, reducing parents' willingness to approach sensitive topics; we can only take so much! Thus, to parent well, we must match our parenting styles to our children's personality dispositions; one size most definitely does not fit all!

Despite personality differences, good communication is possible, and the same basic principles apply to all

children, regardless of personality differences. It's just that the outcome style will differ from one parent child dyad to the next.

The first step in good communication is empathy. Indeed, in counseling programs students learn what is known as *basic accurate empathy*. Empathy is a deep understanding of what another person feels, metaphorically *walking in the other person's shoes*. We all have this capacity. However, like all capacities, we differ in their fulfillment and for various reasons including genetics and brain morphology.

To begin, practice listening intently to a peer, perhaps at work, or a friend. (Continued on page 2)

## Tip of the Week

We try to avoid ritualistic behaviors, and being intelligent individuals we eschew superstition. Indeed, feeling compelled to act in a ritualistic fashion to avoid catastrophe is characteristic of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, not mental health. Yet, sport is different and it is actually not a bad idea to have certain rituals, so long as one stays within the rules of the game. For instance, in serving a tennis ball, one should establish a routine and perform the routine every time one is about to serve. One variation is bouncing the ball three times before tossing the ball. Another possibility is adjusting the strings between each point played. These rituals help to reset the mind before initiating performance. Having a good luck charm, by contrast, can be problematic. For instance, if a swimmer has a lucky pair of goggles and her goggles break before a race, performance could deteriorate. As such, I suggest avoiding lucky charms and sticking with controllable rituals. If one does have a lucky object, such as goggles, have a spare charm. This way, if one is lost, then it's duplicate is at hand.

## AUTOGENIC TRAINING FOR DEEP RELAXATION

Life can be stressful. Whether it's someone cutting us off in traffic, or a disagreement with a coworker or family member, we experience at least some stress on a daily basis. Generally, we handle these stressors well. Indeed, nature has selected various biologic mechanisms that permit us to deal effectively with stress, including the production of stress hormones that increase arousal in the face of stress, and receptors that provide negative feedback and reduce the release of stress hormones when

we've had enough. Yet at times, stress is so profound that the system is overwhelmed. The situation is worse for individuals programmed to over respond to stress. If you are one of those unfortunate individuals, you know exactly what I mean!

Fortunately, we are intelligent creatures and are capable of overcoming stress through behaviors and mental practices. In the first two issues, I introduced two stress reduction techniques that can help one deal with

stress, diaphragmatic breathing (issue 1) and imagery (issue 2). However, when stress overwhelms the system, and these are not enough, try autogenic training.

Autogenic training is a self-hypnosis technique developed by German psychiatrist *Johannes Heinrich Schultz* in the early 20th century. Autogenic training involves purposefully manipulating one's sensory experience the way a hypnotist controls the (continued on page 2)

## TALK TO YOUR KIDS (CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1)

However, instead of dividing your attention between anticipating your next statement and listening, try to capture the emotion behind the speaker's message, not just the content. This is known as *active listening*. Then, when the individual completes the statement, paraphrase what was said. **Here's an example:**

**Speaker:** "This has been an extremely hard week at work. I really messed up on one of my assignments and now I think my boss is mad. She didn't respond to my emails yesterday, and she always responds right away."

**Listener:** "You really seem concerned. You feel that your boss is angry at you and is purposefully not responding to your emails".

**Speaker:** "Wow, I guess you are right, I am afraid. I don't want to lose my job"

In this example, although not saying so specifically, the listener captures the speaker's fear and expresses it back to the speaker. This is critical for at least two reasons. First, it shows that the listener is really listening and intently. Second, the speaker may not have real-

ized that s/he is visibly fearful and the listener is pointing this out. As odd as it may seem, we are often unaware of what we are feeling or thinking, and it takes an outsider to help us see it.

Helping another to more accurately judge reality is a clear benefit of active listening, and that is important for counselors and clinical psychologists. However, our purpose is to open communication. Once it is clear that you care enough to empathize with the speaker, a high level of trust is established, and communication opens. Thus, active listening is a precursor to the establishment of essential trust. Although your children already trust you, it is critical that they trust you when communicating about sensitive issues, and that's the real challenge.

In sport, children experience many highs and lows in the course of competition. However, objective success is hard to attain. Individual sports like tennis, golf, or swimming allow for only one winner. If 16 individuals enter a tennis tournament, there is only a 6% chance of winning, and that's only if everyone is equal in terms of talent, training, and mental toughness. Thus, losing is inevitable. As we don't want our children to drop out of sport, we need to help them

learn to deal with loss. The best way to do so is to establish good communication. **Here's an example:**

Mom: "I know you lost but I'm still proud of you. Remember, it's not whether you win or lose, it's how you play the game!"

Athlete: "I don't want to talk about it. Besides, that something losers say."

Mom: "This loss really hurts you."

Athlete: "I tried hard but nothing I did worked. I really suck and I think I want to quit."

Mom: "It's like there was nothing you could do and now you want to quit."

Athlete: "Well, I don't really want to quit but I want to be better. I want to win one day too!"

In this example, the mother's active listening created an open environment in which the child felt free to express her feelings. From this point on, the two can work together to find a solution. Had mom not responded empathically, perhaps the child would have quit or allowed this loss to affect her motivation to participate in other sports and her self-esteem.

Practice active listening with your kids, teammates, and peers, and watch how it affects trust and strengthens relationships!

## AUTOGENIC TRAINING (CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1)

volunteer, except that in the case of autogenic training, there is no hypnotist; the purpose of the technique is profound relaxation. The manipulation involves making one feel as if the limbs are as heavy as rocks and as limp as cooked spaghetti. In advanced stages, practitioners also make their limbs feel warm.

To begin, find a quiet and safe place. One can practice autogenic training seated or lying down. If seated, I prefer a comfortable chair with cushiony arm rests. Also, as with all other relaxation techniques, it's best to practice them wearing comfortable clothes that in no way hinder breathing, and not right after eating. Give yourself some time for your food to digest.

After finding your safe and comfortable place, begin by closing your eyes and taking several slow and deep breaths (see *issue 1* for breathing tips). This will help move your physiology from a "fight or flight" to a restorative state. Next, repeat the following script. We will begin with arms. *Repeat each statement three times and slowly.*

1. My arms are feeling limp and heavy.
2. My arms are feeling heavier and heavier.
3. My arms are feeling completely limp and heavy.
4. I am supremely relaxed.

Next, move to your legs and repeat the following script, *repeating each statement three times.*

1. My legs are feeling limp and heavy.
2. My legs are feeling heavier and heavier.
3. My legs are feeling completely limp and heavy.
4. I am supremely relaxed.

Finally, do your arms and legs to-

gether. Repeat the following script, *repeating each statement three times.*

1. My arms and legs are feeling limp and heavy.
2. My arms and legs are feeling heavier and heavier.
3. My arms and legs are feeling completely limp and heavy.
4. I am supremely relaxed.

Feel free to alter the script to fit your personal style. You can add imagery as you repeat each statement. For instance, I like to see my arms and legs sinking into the ground as they get heavier and heavier.

Like all skills, autogenic training takes time to master. Speaking from my personal experience, it's the most beneficial stress reduction technique I've ever learned, and I've even taught my 11 year old son to do it, so kids can learn it too!