

QUESTION:

How do I help my kid become a great wrestler?

Cael Sanderson:

I have several parents ask me how to make their kids dominating wrestlers and most don't listen. They are obviously just expecting me to reinforce what they already think and if I don't, they don't listen. They expect me to say the crazy stuff like "have them run sprints around the block dragging cinder blocks, or feed them raw meat, lock them in a closet with a badger, have their five year old do 100 pushups after they finish their 4 hour workout, take them to every tournament possible as soon as they can walk, have a belt ready to whip them if they lose, etc etc.

I tell them that the biggest mistake parents can make with their children in athletics (or anything for that matter) is to blur the lines between why they support and love them. It is very easy for kids to mistake why a parent is proud of them. Kids need to know that their parents love them just because they are their son or daughter.

To help kids reach their greatest potential, they need to know that their parents support their effort--not whether they win or lose. A lot of parents give their kids the impression that they are only proud of them if they win. Parents are the most important people in the world to their kids. Wrestling is already a tough sport. If a kid thinks he has to win to make his parents proud of him--that is a ton of pressure. In my opinion, that is the greatest pressure in the world, especially for a kid. A parent not being proud of you is far more frightening than the scariest opponent. Most kids won't last long in sports in that kind of environment. And the kids who do tough it out, or have no choice, are usually the ones who develop mental problems. They are the ones who usually end being labeled "head cases." The kids whose parents simply expect their best effort in training and in competition are the ones who have the better chance of reaching their potential.

My advice for parents who want to help their kids get the most out of sports is to simply support your kids, support their best effort, keep things in perspective for them (wrestling is just a game), reinforce that giving it 100% is the goal and be proud of whatever comes after that. Parents with young athletes, make the kid think it is his idea to wrestle, let him set the schedule and decide how many tournaments he wants to go to. Sure, you can manipulate (bad word) what they think they want to do-- but let it be their idea. If your child wants to go to a tournament, make sure he puts the work in to be prepared for it. Make sure he has the grades in school that you want him to have to be eligible for you to take him to tournaments and even to practice. It takes a game plan like that to help your kid go all the way with wrestling.

Nothing will teach your child how to be successful in life better than wrestling. Don't worry about wins and losses with a young wrestler. If you make it about wins and losses, your kid probably won't last long enough in the sport to get the most out of it. The

ultimate goal of sports should be to get an education and prepare for the rest of your life and of course have fun. Think long term. It's more common than not that the parents who have their kids going 100 miles an hours are going to be doing well early. Do that if your goal is to have the best 8-year-old wrestler you can. If you want to create a good high school wrestler, or even college, do what I suggested. Of course, there are exceptions to every rule. There are kids who want to compete at every youth intergalactic championship out there. My advice for them would be to take them to a few tournaments but make it a privilege. Hold them back a little so they really develop a love to compete. Tough love is also important to develop a good wrestler. That's a different subject though. My mom was not afraid to get in my face and let me know if she didn't think I gave it my best.

For young wrestlers who are reading this--it's important that you realize that your parents, no matter how much pressure you think they put on you, just want what is best for you. They want you to win because they want to see you be successful. They want to see you be happy. Even if they don't communicate that message the best--it's the deep-rooted truth. Know that it is the truth. It is. Know that your parents and family go to tournaments to support you, not to see you win. Knowing that this is the truth, and it is, should take some unrealistic pressure and let you attack your goals--for you.

Thanks!

Cael Sanderson

Olympic Gold Medalist
4x NCAA Champion
Undefeated in College
Head Wrestling Coach at Penn State