

Learning Guide #9 For Watching the Olympic Games/ Sporting Events with Children

Learning to Focus

Watching the Olympic Games or a sports event can be a valuable learning experience for young people. The Association for Applied Sport Psychology (AASP) has developed a series of learning guides for adults and children to use while watching sports on television or in person to promote healthy dialogue. This guide suggests certain observations and presents several questions to discuss together. The learning guide concludes with a brief summary of important facts regarding the topic.

Observation and discussion questions: Learning to Focus

While you watch the Olympic Games or a sports event:

- While watching a specific event, describe what you think an athlete is focusing on (paying attention to) at the start of the event and during the event.
- Some people think that they can tell if an athlete is focused by looking at his or her face. Do you think you can tell? If so, what part of the face would you observe?
- How about you? What are some things you focus on best? Have you noticed that the more you work at something and the better you get at it, the better you can focus?
- Have you noticed that it is easier to focus on things you like to do? What happens to your focus when you get tired or things go wrong?
- Even the greatest athletes lose focus sometimes. As you watch the Games, see if you notice when athletes lose focus. Try to figure out why.
- Does feeling a lot of pressure to perform well cause some athletes to lose focus? How about worrying? What kinds of things might an athlete worry about? What are the kinds of things you worry about?
- Can you explain the difference between worrying and trying to figure out what to do if things don't go well?
- There is also refocusing. This means getting your mind back on track after you get distracted. Watch for athletes who seem to lose their focus but then successfully refocus and perform well (e.g., a gymnast who falls off the balance beam, but gets back on and finishes the routine successfully.) Can you think of a time this has happened to you?

Lesson Conclusion

Successful athletes are very focused. During competition they pay attention at all times. They also can refocus quickly if they get distracted. All athletes can learn to do this with practice. The more you do it, the better you do it. Also, the more you believe in yourself, the easier it is to focus. Worry is the most common enemy of focus. It usually starts out as an attempt to solve a problem, but worry can quickly become a problem in itself. It is like thinking in a circle. Worrying is having the same negative thoughts again and again. Everybody worries to some degree. When it happens — tell yourself STOP! Then, take a deep breath and think about your sport. Think about what you do well. Think about how much fun it can be.

As a competitive athlete, you may feel pressure to perform well. Sometimes we want to do well for our teammates, coaches, and parents. Try not to think about that. STOP! Instead, think about what you do well. This will help you stay excited about competing and will help you focus on the task at hand. Sometimes it helps to make a list of things that can cause you to lose focus. Then make a second list of ways to avoid being distracted or that can help you refocus. For example, if a basketball player gets distracted by people in the stands, she can remind herself to look at the ball. By having a list of ways to refocus, you will be ready to use those strategies when you need them during a competition. Elite athletes have very specific plans for coping with distractions, which allow them to stay focused and perform well. Always remember, the more fun you have, the better you focus - the better you focus, the more fun you have!

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AASP encourages adults to do their part to create a supportive youth sport environment so children will develop a lifelong interest in physical activity and sports. By teaching fundamental sporting principles, you can help children develop winning attitudes, both in sports and throughout life.

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The Association for Applied Sport Psychology (AASP) promotes the ethical practice, science and advocacy of sport and exercise psychology. Founded in 1986, AASP is an international, multidisciplinary, professional organization that offers certification to qualified professionals who practice sport and exercise psychology. With more than 1,200 members in 28 countries, AASP is a worldwide leader, sharing research and resources with the public via its Web site, www.appliedsportpsych.org.

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