

## ***Help Your Child Overcome Choking!***

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“Choking” is when you know how to do something and have successfully have done it before, yet in pressure situations you fail because of a lack of focus and execution. In youth sports choking is a common occurrence, especially since kids are just beginning to learn and master skills as well as play against unfamiliar competition. This month I would like to share with you *why* choking occurs, and what *you* can do to help your child minimize choking the next time you take to the field!

Choking always begins with fear. Interestingly, for human beings fear can be real (i.e. a dog chasing you down the street), or irrational (worrying about what somebody might think if you miss this next shot). Regardless of the source (real or irrational), our bodies respond with anxiety in the *same exact way*. In other words, your body doesn’t care if it hears a dog barking or is afraid of people watching – the physical anxiety (i.e. increased heart rate; tense, tight muscles; and shallow breathing are examples) will be experienced the same exact way!

Once fear kicks into *negative anxiety*, your child’s mind will begin to exclusively focus on the physical symptoms of nerves (the shallow breathing, increased heart rate, etc) instead of thinking about the next play. From there, most young athletes will start talking to themselves and say things like “don’t screw up,” or “don’t miss this next shot.” Guess what happens next? You got it – the shot is missed! Once self-talk becomes negative and conservative, your child will begin to focus only on irrelevant, potentially negative thoughts (Don’t believe me? Try NOT thinking of as pink elephant and see what happens).

Once a shot is missed, young athletes usually experiences even more negative energy, more fear, more anxiety, and in some cases the day may end up being lost completely. It’s amazing all this starts from fear – and *irrational fear* at that! Think about it – there is no *real* fear when playing sports, yet how many thousands and thousands of young athletes allow their minds and bodies to experience fear as though they were in fear for their life?!

If you want to help your child minimize choking, try the following tips:

- When your child starts getting nervous while playing, ask him or her where the fear is coming from? Is your child worried what somebody will think if he or she misses? Is your child concerned who is watching him or her play? If your child is feeling any of these kinds of things have him or her STOP immediately, stand up, take a few deep breaths and remind him-herself that it is *irrational* fear!
- Breathing through your stomach is the best way to immediately calm your body down. Teach your child to take 2-3 deep belly breaths and watch how quickly the body responds.
- Self-talk (what you say to yourself) is also a great way to refocus and remain calm in tough situations. Teach your child to use words like “focus” or “stay cool” so his or her mind and body will respond accordingly.
- Once your child conquers fear, confidence will take over – leading your child to synchrony between his/her mind and body, experiencing “the zone” more frequently, and increasingly more positive self-talk (and more wins, too!).

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Dr. Chris Stankovich, known as “The Sports Doc” for his segment on Ohio News Network and featured column in Columbus Parent magazine, is a national expert in the field of sport psychology and offers an entire line of peak performance educational training products for student athletes, coaches, and parents. Please visit [www.drstankovich.com](http://www.drstankovich.com) to learn more.

