

Helping Your Child Perform in the Clutch!

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Clutch Players

If you are a sports fan, then you know all about what it means to be a “clutch” player, and can probably immediately name a few, too (Tom Brady, Derek Jeter, and Kobe Bryant come to my mind). Watching athletes perform in the clutch (or when the pressure is on) can be a thrilling experience if they are on your team – or a real nail-biter if you are the opponent! This month, I would like to share a few thoughts on how you can help your child play well in the clutch, and who knows, maybe one day do it even better than Tom Brady, Derek Jeter, and Kobe Bryant!

While we will never know how much playing well under pressure is “nature” (the way we are biologically assembled), or “nurture” (how much we have learned through previous experiences), most experts would probably agree it is a little bit of both. Since there is not a lot we can do with how your child has developed biologically, I will instead discuss some of the things he or she can do to learn how to perform his or her best when time is running out and there is still a chance to win the game!

- First, make sure your child knows that “pressure” is often self-imposed. In reality, when time is running out in a game your child can view this situation as “pressure,” or he or she can learn to view it as a challenge, too. How we look at things makes all the difference in the world when it comes to focus, concentration, confidence – and ultimately whether we succeed or not!
- Help your child distinguish between relevant and irrelevant factors when time is running out of the game. For example, it is relevant for him or her to know what play is being called and how much time is left in the game. On the other hand, things like the crowd noise or even what just happened on the last play really should not impact what he or she needs to do next. You might want to consider talking with your child about these potential situations before they occur so he or she can be ready for the next game that goes to the wire!
- On a very basic level, you might want to help your child understand that fear (even when it is irrational like worrying about what people will think if he or she fails) impacts the body in counterproductive ways. Usually fear triggers anxiety, which in turn tenses and tightens the body, which in turn negatively impacts

focus – and ultimately performance. Help your child understand that while it is not fun to lose or fail, it is also inevitable. It is important for kids to learn that they can really minimize the amount of fear they experience by knowing that you just want them to put out their best effort – regardless of the outcome.

- Practice clutch situations! Whenever you have a chance try to help your child drill in pressure situations so it will become second-nature when it happens in a game. Soon enough, the practice experience will become automatically programmed in his or her head (muscle memory), leaving him or her well prepared for the next time the clock is running out!
- Watch clutch players and talk with your child about what you think makes them that way. Help your child increase his or her self-confidence by understanding that those types of athletes are just people like him or her, too. Belief plays a huge part in becoming a great clutch player!
- Help your child understand the difference between “playing to win,” and “playing to avoid losing.” With the first example, the focus is always on the next play and how to continue to improve; while the latter is playing too conservatively, without confidence, and usually with a lot of irrational fear.

Teaching your child how to become a clutch player doesn’t have to stop with sports! The same skills that make an athlete a clutch player are also what make a student successful in the classroom when preparing for an exam or delivering a speech! Best of luck!

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 to learn more.

