

# The Car Ride Home: Leave it on the Field

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The silence was deafening. Driving home after a loss has never been a pleasant trip with either of my hockey-playing sons, but this particular defeat was brutal. Nicholas's team had made it to the division semi-finals and the next game had looked to be an easy victory. It was not—final score: 4-0—and my brooding son was proof of it.



He slammed his hockey bag into the trunk of the car, stomped around to the passenger side, and got in the back seat. All I could see in the rear-view mirror was his 13-year-old furrowed brow.

“So that was a tough game,” I offered.

Nothing from Nick. I tried another approach.

“Well, you skated well.”

Still nothing. My brain raced to find the exact right thing to say to snap my son out of his post-loss funk. It was achingly clear that my repertoire of comforting Mom words was falling short. What should I have done on that car ride home? Insist that he talk to me, or simply endure the silence?

Nearly every parent has been in the same situation after a son or daughter has suffered a loss on the field (or rink, court, or in the pool.) What you say (or do) in the moments afterwards can go a long way in helping your budding athlete learn how to handle these inevitable defeats—both in sports and in life.

Dr. Larry Lauer, director of coaching, education, and development at the Institute for the Study of Youth Sports at Michigan State University, says the first thing parents need to remember is timing. “A sporting event is intense for a student-athlete and there are a lot of emotions running through them in the moments afterwards,” he says. “Kids are being evaluated on their talent in a very public forum and the fact that parents are watching only increases the pressure. You can easily make things worse by not thinking before you speak.”

To navigate that future car ride home in (relative) peace, here are a few tips from Dr. Lauer:

- Don't do a postmortem on the game or your child's performance. Whether you think your son dogged that last period, or your daughter shouldn't have been benched in the fourth quarter, doesn't really matter. That's the coach's job—not yours. Your role is to be a positive source of encouragement and support, win or lose.
- Avoid criticizing the refs or coaching staff. If your child complains about an unfair penalty call or a coach's bad decision, it's okay to listen, but don't jump in, advises Lauer. Instead ask them to imagine how tough a job it must be to stay on top of all that fast-moving action. Helping them see the game (or life) from a different perspective encourages empathy for others.
- Accept that silence is OK. When your athlete doesn't want to talk after you've asked a few (gentle) questions, don't push. “Some kids need to talk and get it out,” explains Lauer, “but others just need that quite reflective time to calm down. Follow your child's lead.”
- Stick to your normal routine. If you usually grab lunch after a game, do so regardless of a win or loss. You don't want your child thinking your love is contingent on his or her performance.

I know this last tip works with my son, Nick. Just the offer of a trip to Subway after that awful loss put the smile right back on his face.