

# USA WRESTLING

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## AVOIDING CAR RIDE COACHING

By Matt Krumrie | April 25, 2019, 8:28 a.m. (ET)

A wrestler can't win or lose a match on the car ride to an event. And they can't win or lose the next match on the car ride home.

But they can lose motivation and passion for the sport when parents decide to turn the car ride into a lecture on what their child should do, didn't do, or needs to do in order to succeed. This is a recipe for disaster and defeat.

"It's on the car ride home that parents can't seem to contain themselves," says Dr. Alan Goldberg, a sports psychologist and director of [Competitive Advantage](#), an Amherst, Massachusetts-based performance consulting firm that works with high school, college and professional athletes and teams. "They feel compelled to speak up, to be helpful, to seize this 'teachable moment' whether their child asks for it or not. It's on the car ride home that kids end up feeling really badly about themselves. When mom and dad express their own disappointment in the child's failure, when they point out everything that the child did wrong, why they did it wrong and what they need to work on to improve, then your son or daughter will feel that much worse."

Even subtle comments on the way to a match that are intended to be motivational, such as "let's get a pin today," can be detrimental. When this happens, a child is suddenly burdened with thoughts that if they don't deliver a pin their mom or dad is going to think less of them, says Greg Bach, senior director, communications and content for the [National Alliance of Youth Sports](#), a nonprofit organization that educates, equips and empowers youth sports leaders, volunteers and parents so all children can enjoy the lifelong benefits of sports.

"What often happens is the child may turn in her best performance of the season, but because he or she didn't get a pin he or she will leave saddled with disappointment and feelings of failure," Bach says.

Here's how to make sure your car-ride language is positive and providing your athlete with the support they need to maintain their love of the sport.

## Three Key Messages

After practice or competition, a child needs to hear three things from their parents, says Conor Fitzgerald, head coach at Olathe South High School in Olathe, Kansas, and a bronze-level coach with USA Wrestling who runs a practice center for wrestlers trying to make the Kansas national team:

1. I love you.
2. I'm proud of you.
3. I love watching you compete.

“No instruction, no coaching, no criticizing their performance or the performance of their teammates and coaches,” Fitzgerald says.

But that doesn't always happen. And in some cases, a well-intentioned parent may not even realize they are making the car ride miserable for their young athlete, who may hold on to every word of a conversation, even if a parent thinks it's simply casual.

“I believe that these parents are unaware of the damage they cause,” Fitzgerald says. “I honestly believe their actions are a sign of intense love for their child, but they've simply lost perspective. The result is always the same—a loss of love for the sport and an unhealthy parent-child relationship.”

Kristi Stolarski of Avon, Ohio, has a fifth grade son who plays football and basketball. She and her husband quickly realized their son didn't want any coaching tips or advice (especially from dad) on the car ride home. Because of this, they have learned to focus the ride home on attitude, hard work, being a good and supportive teammate, and telling their son they are proud of him and that they love watching him play.

“We've tried to stop the car ride coaching and leave that to his actual coach,” Stolarski says. “Our role as parents is to be sure he knows we support him—win or lose. We need to be his cheerleaders, not coaches. And my husband and I remind each other of our roles when someone starts to jump into the 'coach' role.”

It's not just words that can crush a child. A car ride where a parent instructs a child or everyone in the car to be silent, to “think about what you need to do better” along with negative body language or facial expressions can also be damaging.

“Silence from an adult can have devastating effects on their child, often sending a message much louder than any words ever could,” says legendary Pennsylvania high school wrestling coach Dave Crowell, who has served as head coach for the Easton, Wilson and Nazareth High School wrestling programs during the last 35 years. “The child—regardless of age—innately wants more than anything to please his or her parent.”

Crowell continued: “It is almost impossible to misinterpret one’s body language. An adult parent can be intimidating enough for their child. When parents display anger, frustration, or disappointment through their body language, the child frames it as an indictment on who they are as a person. Parents have the potential to communicate powerfully to their children without ever saying a word.”

## **Love and Support**

What most kids need on the car ride home is to feel the safety of your love, which has nothing to do with their performance, Goldberg says.

“They need to know that you are still there emotionally for them and they can exquisitely tell this by how you act, and not just by what you say,” Goldberg says. “They need to feel your empathy and loving support. And sometimes all this amounts to is a smile and something really profound that you say to them, like, “so how about pizza for supper?”

This doesn’t mean a child who is upset, disappointed, or has questions or concerns should be ignored. But emotions are often high in the car ride home, and a cooling down period is recommended. If a child brings these concerns up in the car ride, it’s best for a parent to acknowledge the child wants to discuss some things, then try and set up a time to talk about it. For example, a parent could say, “Sure, I’d be happy to talk about it—how about we have breakfast tomorrow and go over some things?”

Keep it positive and upbeat, especially if the child is feeling down. If they know that the parent is also interested or excited to have that conversation, they will likely be more open and encouraged to share their thoughts. Being negative or unsupportive in response can cause a child to simply shut down.

Fitzgerald is a coach, and a parent of a two-year-old girl. If his daughter plays sports, he’s already looking forward to one aspect of the car ride to and from practice and games: Being dad.

“Our time with our children is limited and it goes far too quickly,” Fitzgerald says. “If my daughter plays sports in the future, I’ll be her biggest fan and number-one supporter. She will need caring coaches, and she will need loving parents, but I promise to never attempt to fill both of those roles. The day will come when I no longer get a few minutes alone with my daughter, driving her to practice or home from games. I plan on cherishing those moments, just being her dad.”