

# Making goals manageable ones

Young athletes who play with the burden of unrealistic expectations – either self-imposed or from coaches or parents – can see their confidence crushed when they fail to perform to that level.

## High expectations from parents and others can sink young athletes' confidence.

Let's begin by taking a look at Jon, a 12-year-old basketball player who often begins games telling himself that he has to break all his personal records and score at least 25 or 30 points, in addition to getting eight assists and four rebounds. His coach often holds similarly high expectations for Jon, which he quickly adopts as his own.

If Jon begins a game by losing a few balls or missing a few shots, he starts playing more tentatively, worried that he's going to make even more mistakes.

He gets frustrated, then begins to try too hard. He keeps trying to make "perfect" shots. But he feels wooden and tight. He feels like a failure because of his overly high expectations. He needs to play in the moment more and rely more on his natural ability.

Not only does Jon have to cope with the expectations he imposes on himself, but he must deal with his coach's expectations. Once his coach starts pointing out mistakes or pressuring Jon to score, he freezes up even more. He starts focusing on avoiding mistakes – avoiding shooting air balls, for example.

Not matching his expectations, Jon gets frustrated and doubts his abilities. He begins to wonder how he's ever going to block his opponent's shots. He starts punishing himself for not being in better shape.

## Focusing on the positive

Instead of indulging in such negative thinking, Jon needs to think about his positive qualities: his strength, his coach's belief in him, his hours of practice and his ability to get the ball in the basket in the past.

Remember: if your young athlete has strict expectations, fails to meet her expectations and begins focusing on her errors, she crushes her self-confidence.

Jon's confidence would not sink so quickly if he entered the game with no expectations about the quality of his performance or scoring. Jon's coach and parents could help him by telling him to forget about scores and focus on executing the plays. They should help him play "in the moment."

Jon should look at the basket and throw the ball without attempting to make a perfect shot or without trying to avoid an air ball. He should react to the target and trust himself.


He should also focus on what's happening right now – not on the score or the win. Jon could concentrate on nabbing rebounds or ensuring his passes are well executed. His coach could also remind him to focus on these small objectives or mini-goals rather than on the score.



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As parents and coaches, you can keep an eye out for kids with high expectations. They often:

- Set unreasonably high goals for themselves
- Beat themselves up mentally when they don't perform to their expectations
- Call themselves names, such as "loser," "choker" and "wimp" when they make mistakes
- Feel pressured to perform well for parents, coaches and peers
- Play it safe and don't take risks when they get ahead of their opponents because they want to protect their lead.

Again, parents and coaches need to help these young athletes set small, manageable goals and reward them when they achieve them. 

Award winning parenting writer Lisa Cohn and Youth Sports Psychology expert Dr. Patrick Cohn are co-founders of *The Ultimate Sports Parent*. Pick up their free e-book, "Ten Tips to Improve Confidence and Success in Young Athletes" by visiting <http://www.youthsportspsychology.com>.