



EXPECTATIONS OR ASPIRATIONS

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE?

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In sport we are often told to have high expectations and high aspirations to succeed. But the meaning of these often becomes confused. There is a subtle, but important distinction between aspirations and expectation – and if parents know the difference it can make a huge impact. So, what are the differences and how can we help nudge our children in the right direction?

Aspirations are about wanting to perform to the best standard, whereas expectations convey the belief about the likelihood of succeeding. It is great for your children to have aspirations, after all that's why we all play sport. However, just wanting to be the best does not always lead to that. Raising expectations can be good as it allows athletes of all ages to have a clear picture of what they should be doing but, if expectations are too low then motivation can be reduced and yet if they are too high then it can hinder confidence whilst increasing both fear of failure and nerves.

Two quite cool psychological effects show why expectations can be so powerful. The first is called the Pygmalion Effect. This is where people raise their achievements due to someone else's high expectations of them. On the other hand, there is the Golem Effect. This describes how having low expectations of someone can lead to them performing worse. Essentially, no-one rises to low expectations.

So how can you use the power of expectations better?

Your voice is important

By reinforcing the expectations of your child's coach, you show your support for what they are trying to teach. Easy ways to improve your communication is to be approachable, ask lots of open-ended questions and listen more than you talk. An example would be asking, 'What would you do differently next week'?

More isn't always better

However, a word of caution is needed when it comes to expectations. More is not always better. If your expectations far exceed your child's ability, this can lead to a downturn in their performance and become a source of stress. When it comes to expectations, it seems that the 'goldilocks rule' applies – too little or too much and it is no good. Challenging but realistic seems to be a good guiding principle here.

Final thought

It's hard to flourish if no one believes in you. Equally, it's hard to perform when people demand too much from you. If expectations are pitched at the right level it will help your children perform at their best. If in doubt, just remind them that you are their biggest fan, you will love them no matter what the outcome, and that seeing them try their best is ultimately what will make you proud of them.

Encourage high expectations

Encouraging high-self expectations helps athletes develop accountability. To this end, if athletes have their own high self-expectations, they are more likely to ask for feedback, ask for help and train and play with high motivation (without others around them having to motivate them). A quick way to help younger athletes develop high self-expectations is to ask them to think about what expectations their favourite athletes/ role models would have before thinking of their own.

Use simple objectives

There is a time and a place for conveying your expectations. At InnerDrive, we suggest to all of our clients (and their parents) to focus on what they need to do to play well. There seems to be a middle ground with this. Think too much about expectations and performance can be worse. Think too little about expectations and athletes may not know what to do.

To get themselves into this middle ground I ask my athletes to consider the following question, 'What three things do I need to do to perform at my best?'. This ensures they only think about what they can control but also providing them with simple steps to do what they need to do to perform at their best.

