

## **Tips for parents of under 10s**

### **Ten tips for parents of under 10 players**

- **Get a good coach with a proven track record early on.**

Players learn so much when they are young that it is worth paying a bit more to get quality. Many parents look for 'value' coaching early on with a plan to pay more if and when the child progresses – in our experience this plan doesn't work. Find out which coaches are coaching the most and the best under10 players in your county – you could find this out through your LTA County Office.

- **Look for opportunities and make the effort to get your child competing as soon as possible.**

The thinking of many parents is: 'Once my child starts to progress I'll get them competing.' It is not until they start to compete that they will really progress and show any promise that they have. Every county will have competitive opportunities for players aged six years and upwards. Every club should have competitive opportunities for all players. If they don't then maybe you're at the wrong club?

- **Don't underestimate physical conditioning.**

Physical conditioning is often viewed as something that can be 'done later' – we often associate it with older juniors and adults. When children are under 10 years of age they are incredibly receptive to developing the crucial physical skills of co-ordination, speed, agility and balance. Look for tennis programmes where the children play lots of tennis and are taught well, but that also work them regularly on those crucial physical skills.

- **Develop your coaching skills!**

Use phrases after matches and practice sessions that encourage your child to think about how they played, how hard they worked, how well their opponent played and what tactics they used. Try to talk more about the future than dwell on the past – 'what are you going to try and do well today?' is a much healthier question than 'can you remember what you did wrong last time?'

- **Get a rating.**

An LTA rating is not the most important thing in the world. But your child will need one if they are going to compete. Generally speaking it is good to apply for one as soon as possible so that their results in events will count towards their rating. All children can apply for a rating at the start of the year in which they turn 10 – although if your child competes regularly they can apply in the June of the year they turn nine.

- **Be really clear about what you view as 'success' – and understand that the way you go about achieving short-term success is not necessarily the best way to achieve long-term success.**

Success is: carrying on playing tennis on into adult life; winning at under 18 and senior level rather than under 12; making new friends while participating in a healthy lifestyle; playing a sport that requires and develops independence, decision making and courage. Don't risk sacrificing this longer term and more important success by pushing and pressurising your child and their coach for short-term gains.

- **Guide your child but encourage them to be independent.**

Don't do everything for your child – even if you know that they will make some mistakes if you don't. Let them pack their bags and check their kit; at tournaments they should sign in, check match times, give in results and thank the referee; they should keep a tennis diary with dates of upcoming tournaments, a list of recent results and their current training goals.

- **Never allow your opinions or thoughts about how your child has performed on the tennis court cross over into your relationship with them away from tennis.**

Consistency in your behaviour is so important. Do you stop for an ice cream on the way home after a win but not after a loss? Is your child allowed out later at the weekend if they've trained well - but not if they've been a little sloppy? Clearly you need to give your point of view about how your child has done, but you must then leave that issue and get back to your regular parent-child relationship.

- **Don't pay too much attention to things that you get told by other parents.**

Make decisions for your child based on your instinct, your knowledge and good advice. Have confidence in those decisions – don't panic when another parent tries to tell you what you should be doing. Obviously listen to what they have to say, but remember that a lot of people try to justify their decisions by forcing them on other people.

- **Keep things in perspective!**

Remember the fact that your child is taking part in a sport, developing their skills, making new friends and learning how to cope with a variety of situations is a fantastic thing to have achieved. Always be grateful for that and don't let it bother you too much if occasionally they don't give 100 per cent or if they lose a match that they could have won – there are far worse problems to have!

Hopefully these tips will be enough to get you started on the right track. This site contains pretty much all the information that you will need to know as the parent of a young player. Don't feel you need to read it all straight away, but remember that it is here when you need it. Armed with the right information you will be in a much better position to make decisions that will benefit your child and their tennis. Good luck.

## Tennis is a great option for your child

### **Physically**

It is a sport that develops all the most important motor and coordinative skills from an early age. It requires and develops agility, speed and endurance.

All of these skills will benefit your child's long-term health and performance in all sports.

### **Mentally**

Tennis is a technically demanding sport. To improve a child has to be able to concentrate well and apply themselves to the many challenges that the game brings. As an individual sport, tennis requires and develops confidence and the ability to cope with and perform under pressure. You have to be able to bounce back from disappointments, cope with success and, occasionally, failure.

The fantastic news for parents is that research has shown that children who develop these skills through sport can transfer them into other areas of their lives.



### **Socially**

Tennis clubs will provide your child with a place where they can go and be independent, meet friends and play sport. They will also give you peace of mind in that clubs are safe, well managed and well maintained.

Tennis truly is a sport for life. Tennis players compete right through their lives into a thriving veterans' tennis circuit. Many sportsmen and women experience a 'health backlash' when they are forced to give up their chosen sport in their late 20s or early 30s.

Tennis will provide your child with a way of meeting new friends whenever they move to a new area. Whether it is moving to university or to a new job, the local tennis club will always provide great social opportunities.

# The importance of competition

There are many children that participate in tennis activities but who are not really tennis players.

Competition is a crucial part of a child's weekly tennis programme. It is not just something that the good players do. It's hopefully exciting and enjoyable. It is one of the most effective ways for a player to improve. Competition allows a player to get an accurate picture of where his or her mastery of the sport really is.

It is not until a child has experienced competition that they become really committed to the sport and motivated to improve. Quality competition occurs when a player is uncertain of the outcome of the match for at least 80 per cent of its duration. For example, 6-1, 6-1 or 1-6, 1-6 is not usually an example of good quality competition.

# Getting started

## Help! What are LTA ratings and rankings?

LTA ratings and rankings are systems utilised by the LTA (Lawn Tennis Association) to allow players to easily assess their playing level and progress. They are also used to administer tournament entries and acceptance lists.

An LTA player rating is a way of measuring tennis ability, so you can see how you are improving. It is a reflection of a player's average playing performance over the previous season. It also means players can make sure they are entering the right standard of competitions.

Your rating means other players will know what playing standard you are irrespective of your age. LTA rankings have recently been introduced to work alongside ratings as another measure of a player's standard. An LTA ranking is a measure of where you stand in your age group nationally and within your county and focuses on your best tournament performances.

Ratings and rankings are regularly talked about by players, parents and coaches! Both systems have their faults, however, it is important to remember that there is no perfect system. The secret is to play the tournaments that will be most beneficial to your child and, to a certain extent, let their rating and ranking take care of themselves.

Many parents and players let ratings and rankings determine the tournaments they play, which does not always create the best opportunities for your child.

To help you find the right competition for your child, tournaments in Great Britain are now graded according to their level. This means it is easier to find the right tournament for your child's playing standard and organise their playing schedule to target the most suitable competitions for them.

## Competition

### When and how to start

When you're ready to start playing in tournaments run or overseen by the LTA you will need to apply for an LTA player rating and membership number. You can apply for a rating at any time from the beginning of the year in which your child turns 10.

Application forms are available from the LTA Membership Department by phoning 020 7381 7037. These ratings will only be available by post.

Any player can apply for a rating in the year they turn 10 - there is no set standard that you need to have reached before you can apply. We would advise you to get a player rating as soon as possible and it only costs £3 for a junior.

You can get help when applying for your child's rating from:

- **a club coach**
- **LTA county office**
- **The LTA website by visiting [www.LTA.org.uk/membership](http://www.LTA.org.uk/membership) (join online or download an application form)**



You will be asked to fill in a simple questionnaire which will be used to decide your initial rating. If you are new to competition and are getting a rating for the first time you will be issued with a beginner rating of 10.2.

This is the first rung on the ratings ladder which goes from 10.2 up to the very best players in the UK at 1.1 (for example, Tim Henman and Andy Murray have ratings of 1.1).

Your child is now ready to enjoy the fun and challenge that competition brings. When filling in a tournament entry form you will be asked to provide various information, including your LTA membership number, rating and the age group event you wish to enter. If players of different ratings enter a tournament, the organiser will use ratings and rankings to organise the draw in the best way.

After each tournament the referee will submit all results to the Competition Services Department at the LTA. These results are entered onto a computer system which calculates player ratings and rankings. A player's rating is assessed twice a year, in March and September.

A player's new rating depends on results in matches during the previous six months. If your child is consistently beating players who have the same rating or better, and not losing to too many players rated the same or lower, it is likely their rating will improve.

Player ratings are displayed on the LTA website at [www.lta.org.uk/Search/PlayerSearch](http://www.lta.org.uk/Search/PlayerSearch).

The only exception will be when a player is rated 10.2 and 10.1 when they will only need to win four competitive matches to improve their rating. As soon as your child has won four matches, you need to complete a 10.2/10.1 scorecard known as the 'blue card' (available from the [LTA website](http://www.lta.org.uk) or your LTA county office) and return it to the LTA.

This document is also available by clicking [here](#). Your child's rating will then increase and a new membership card will be issued. Let the others worry about ratings and rankings. You and your child should focus on practising, improving, competing and, above all, enjoying their tennis!

## Where to start competing

There are masses of competitive opportunities out there for players of all ages and levels. The difficulty is knowing what to enter and where to get the information. The following guide is designed to help you find the right tournament opportunities for your child as they are getting involved in the sport.

### **Ariel Mini Tennis Red: 5-7 year olds**

Children should start to compete during sessions. They should be taught how to score and how to act during matches. Understanding fair play is an important concept that coaches should be emphasising.

At this age the large majority of competition should be team-based.

A good Ariel Mini Tennis venue should be organising internal competitions for the youngest, least experienced children to take part in. As a parent you may be asked to help out with organisation and simple scoring. Ideally, children of this age should be attending a coaching session and one of these organised matchplay sessions.

### **Ariel Mini Tennis Orange: 7-9 year olds**

Children should be competing during sessions. They should be learning to score in a tie-break and a tennis scoring game.

At this age the majority of competition still needs to be team-based although players may start to play some friendly internal competition such as tennis ladders and box leagues.

A good Ariel Mini Tennis venue will enter a team in the County Ariel Mini Tennis League. This is a team-based competition where clubs play against each other. The format varies a little from county to county, but typically a team of four boys and four girls will compete against another.

### **Ariel Mini Tennis Green: 8-10 year olds**

Children should be competing during sessions. They should be learning to score 'abbreviated scoring' matches. This is a full match where sets are won by the first player to reach four games. A tie-break replaces a deciding set.

At this age team competition will still play a significant part in the tournament schedule although individual events will probably become more and more important.

Your county LTA should run a series of Ariel Mini Tennis Green tournaments. These are for players that are under 10 years old at the start of the year. These are great events to get started in, run over a round robin format so you can be sure that you will get a good day's tennis. Find out the contact details of your county LTA by visiting [www.lta.org.uk](http://www.lta.org.uk).

A good Ariel Mini Tennis venue should be organising regular competitive sessions for all the players in the coaching programme. There should also be club events that players can enter. For example, an Ariel Mini Tennis Green ladder or Ariel Mini Tennis Green club championships.



# Common problems with ratings

We compiled a list of the most common complaints players and parents have with ratings and rankings. This is the response from the LTA's Events and Tournaments Department.

### **I think my child's rating should have gone up, but it hasn't**

The LTA Competition Services department has an appeal procedure. For up to four weeks after the ratings go live you can appeal against the computer-allocated rating. The form asks you for grounds for appeal; appropriate reasons could be missing results or extensive illness/injury early in the season where a player has achieved results of a high quality but not sufficient in number.

### **My child is better than their rating. What can I do?**

If you believe a player is better than their rating it may be for a number of reasons. Someone may be telling you this having watched them play or their results may be better than their rating suggests.

You may also be comparing their standard to another player you know. This is usually the least accurate method as quite often players go through peaks and troughs and you may be comparing one player's peak with another's trough. If a player's results are consistently better than their rating suggests consider the following.

First, be realistic. If a player is occasionally beating players rated above them but is also still losing to some players of their own rating they are probably not ready to move up. A player should be consistently winning at the levels above and never losing at their own rating to be considered for a review of their rating. If you believe this to be the case and it is outside the appeal period (see above) you can **email:** [competition.services@LTA.org.uk](mailto:competition.services@LTA.org.uk) to ask one of the team to review your child's rating. When you do this make sure you have all the details of recent wins as any non-ranking events may not forward their results until the end of the season.

### **We keep entering events but they always seem to get cancelled**

Tournaments are usually arranged on dates and at locations where the organiser knows there is a demand. However, there are always one or two events each season that will be cancelled due to bad weather, problems with the facilities or a lack of entries. This is not usually a large number of events so if it is continually happening to you it's a good idea to find out why. The best thing to do is to call your local county LTA office and discuss with them which other events in your area are appropriate for you.

### **My child never gets into the events they enter**

Most tournaments in this country are open to all players of the appropriate age. However, many have a limited number of places in the draw(s) so may have to operate an acceptance procedure. This is nearly always decided by ratings and rankings. The organiser will put the players into a list in order of their ratings. Any players with the same rating are then split by their ranking in the appropriate age group.

Some tournaments, especially those at a higher level, will save spaces for qualifiers and wild cards. Details of this should be on the entry form or tournament information sheet. Wild cards are usually handed out for one of several reasons, usually because a player has been out injured or ill for a while or because the LTA's National Training Department would like to give an opportunity to a very young player to gain experience. They may be allocated because a player cannot attend qualifying because they are already playing at a higher level or because they have had a recent run of very good results.

Go to <http://www.lta.org.uk/Search/FindATournament> for details of events.

# How much should my child compete?

The first and seemingly obvious question is: How much does he or she want to compete? There is no point dragging your unwilling child to tournaments on a regular basis if they do not want to do it.

Assuming, though, that motivation to compete is not an issue, then planning the correct amount of competition into your child's programme is vital. Both too much and too little competition can have severely detrimental effects.



### Problems arising from too little competition

- Player does not develop tactical awareness and problem-solving skills.
- Player can lack challenge and something 'to strive for' so motivation can drop.
- Player is not able to put things from the practice court into action and complete the learning process.
- Player does not develop mental toughness to cope with the demands of the game.
- Player does not hit the number of tennis balls necessary to reach the required level (matchplay is also useful hitting time).
- Player's ranking does not improve, so misses out on further higher-level competitive opportunities.

### Problems arising from too much competition

- Player lacks training time during which they can make improvements necessary for long-term success.
- Player develops a game style that is effective in junior events, rather than a game style that will be effective in the future.
- Player ends up making quick fixes to issues with their game to be ready by the weekend. The issues never really get addressed and the player's improvement eventually reaches a plateau.
- The player can get stale in competition and can end up cruising through matches.
- The player doesn't get enough time off and can get bored of tennis.
- The player starts to see tennis as a chore that keeps them away from their friends.
- The player and their family do not get enough quality family time.
- The player only has friends that are in tennis.
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## Competition

### So how much then..?

Age	Practice Matches and Training Events	Matches in Main Events (per yr)
Under 10	2 full sets or 2 abbreviated scoring matches per week	Up to 40 matches
Under 12	4 sets or 2 full matches per week	40-60 matches
Under 14	4 sets or 2 full matches per week	50-80 matches
Under 16	6 sets or 3 full matches per week	60-80 matches
Under 18	6 sets or 3 full matches per week	60-80 matches

Clearly, this is just a guide, because there are a lot of other factors that come into play. It should, however, at least give you a starting point from which to plan a tournament schedule.

#### How do I know which are the best events to enter?

All individual tournaments sanctioned by the LTA have a grade. Grades run from 1 to 7 with 1 and 2 indicating National level events, 3 and 4 indicating Area and County events and 5 indicating club standard and lower level events. Grade 6 indicates events that do not count towards rankings, only ratings.

These may be a high level depending on the individual event but are usually postal, internet, box league or matchplay events. Grade 7 are assessment-free competitions and include all doubles events and many fun club events.



# Preparing for tournament play

### Confidence comes from being prepared

One of the greatest sources of confidence is feeling that you are prepared for your match. Players can develop this belief by training with purpose, by setting short-term goals leading up to the event, and by conditioning the body and mind for the test ahead.



The physical part of the routine should include adequate sleep the night before the match, an appropriate intake of food and fluid at the correct times, specific plans for transportation to the match venue, stretching exercises and a specific pre-match warm-up. Most tennis players will learn over time to pack the items that will help them to be ready but in the early years, mums and dads will be required to lend a hand to ensure that rackets, shoes, extra kit, extra strings, towel, water bottle, hair accessories, sweatbands, grips, cap, sunscreen, first aid kit, shower bag, snacks, tennis diary and pen, wallet, registration card etc are all in place.

### Take responsibility

It is essential that players are encouraged to take responsibility for their performance from a young age and this can start with making them pack their own bags the night before a match or training session. Parents can draw up a checklist to help players pack the correct things. This could be written into the player's tennis diary or notebook and added to by the player whenever they think of something else they might require like a sports drink in case the venue does not sell them.

### Arrive early and relaxed

On match day players should arrive in plenty of time for their tie and as well as working through their pre-match physical warm-up, they should set aside a bit of time to think through their game plan in order to focus their mind on the upcoming task. Players should be neither over-anxious nor over-relaxed before they go on court.

It can take time to establish routines to help players to get into the correct state of mind before a match but simple breathing and relaxation techniques can help to calm those who become over-stimulated, while psych-up strategies will help those who are a bit lethargic.

Players should be encouraged to use the five-minute warm-up period to assess the strengths and weaknesses of previously unknown opponents and to gather information about the conditions. They should be aware of the court surface: is it fast, medium, slow, high bouncing, low bouncing, slippy? Does it take spin? What is the weather like? Where is the sun, which way is the wind blowing, are there shaded areas? How close is the court surround to the baseline or tramlines? Where are the spectators seated? Five minutes is not long, but if used smartly it can help to establish the opponent's game style.

Players should try to feed a variety of shots to the opponents in order to see which ones they have difficulty with, eg, a high loopy ball to the backhand, a low slice short to the forehand.

Always try to return serve in the warm-up to get a feel for the pace, spin and direction of the opponent's serve. If a player has difficulty in either feeding or assessing opponents in the warm-up, the coach should be encouraged to create dummy five-minute warm ups within coaching sessions prior to matches, so that players can practice their feeding and analysis skills, and then feed back on what they have learnt and what game plan they would adopt.

### **Have a back-up plan**

Even the best-laid plans may not work out so it is always best to have a back-up plan. Thinking about potential problems and writing down solutions can be helpful. For example, what will you do if your opponent gives you a bad call? What will you do if your opponent is rude to you? What will you do if your opponent distracts you by talking to you at changeovers? What will you do if you break a string during a rally?

The list is endless but by creating your own set of questions and asking your child to provide answers, you may just help to avoid a potentially difficult scenario during an event. Being able to deal with as many circumstances as possible will help your child perform to their optimum. Dealing effectively with difficult situations can help players remain focused on the areas they can control like effort, attitude and commitment.

## Why parents play such a crucial role and why it's easy to get it wrong

One of the most influential sources of a child's psychological and sociological development is their parents.

A coach may interact with a young player from between one to, say, five hours a week, but this pales into insignificance when compared with the time a parent spends with their child.

It is primarily in the home that a child's beliefs, values, perceptions, attitudes and goals are shaped. Research has shown that the interest and support of parents is vital to a young player's continued participation in sport. It has, however, also shown that much of the pressure and anxiety young players feel in sport can come from their parents.

Parents have an extremely influential role to play in their child's tennis experience, whatever the level of their involvement, but this can be of both a positive and constructive, or negative and destructive nature.

So why do parents become so animated and involved in their child's sport? Parents often have a very strong desire to make things right, this 'righting reflex' has a tendency to make parents over-zealous in their attitude towards their child.

This often well intentioned desire can lead to confrontation rather than collaboration, telling the child what they should or should not have done as opposed to respecting the child and believing that their child has the answer and encouragingly drawing it out of them.

Some parents may perceive that their child's competence is their competence. They may wish to live or re-live their sporting experience through their child and assume their child has to do as they did. A child's participation in tennis can offer parents the opportunity to rewind their own sporting experience and make up for their own perceived 'failures' and missed opportunities.

## Player responsibility

Even young children need to start taking responsibility for their tennis. Children that are more independent will be more motivated in the long term, better competitors and less work for you as a parent!



To develop an independent tennis player you need to:

- Get them to pack their own tennis bags, prepare drinks bottles and check equipment
- Get them into the habit of keeping a logbook. The logbook should record the amount they have played, their goals to focus on, results and a record of opponent's strengths and weaknesses
- Players should fill out (or at least help with) tournament entry forms

At tournaments players should be responsible for signing in and giving in results. They should also be the ones that go to the referee's office to ask questions – even if prompted by you.

## It's a long term process

Always remember that it is where your child ends up that is the most important thing. Every parent knows this and believes fully in this, but it is easy to lose sight of that fact in the day-to-day stresses of being a tennis parent.

There are many life skills and personal qualities that you want your child to develop as they grow up but, for now, remember to focus on the following long-term objectives:

- That they carry on playing tennis for their whole lives
- That they enjoy the challenge of competition
- That they learn the discipline of working hard and improving over the long term
- That they maximise their potential as a tennis player

The last point has several important implications – winning now is great, but it is winning in the future as a senior player that really counts. Your child must develop a game that is geared towards that. You must support your child and their coach when they are trying to do that – even if it means they lose a few matches in the short term that could have been won had you taken a more shortsighted approach.

Do not over-compete and under-train. It is possible to get good success in the short term by entering as many competitions as possible. But this will eventually backfire on you and your child. The excessive competition will mean they miss time on the training court where they could have been developing the skills needed for long-term success. It's going to be a long journey and your child will need to be pushed at times. More importantly, though, they will need you to be their number one supporter.

## What do I do when watching matches?

### Where should I watch matches from?

Educate your child from early on in their tournament career that you will watch their matches and you will watch from the most convenient place (wherever that may be). They should also be aware that you might not always watch and you may disappear halfway through a match and return later on. Do not fall into the trap of always doing the same thing as this will become difficult to change later on.

Do not allow them to dictate to you exactly what you can and can't do. If you are going to spend hours, days and often weeks at tennis tournaments, do not end up watching from behind trees or not being allowed to move for the duration of the match – this is madness.

### Body language

Remember your body language is a very effective method of communication when your child is on court. Your child will pick up on your body language while they are playing their match.

Avoid showing stress, worry or anger during matches. Make sure your body language is calm, relaxed but interested: even if you are feeling something totally different!

"[You should] never expect your child to cope with losing points, maintain composure, keep perspective, and take personal responsibility...if you can't watching from the sidelines." Dr. C. Harwood, Loughborough University

### Applauding

Applauding can be used as a means of showing social support. Clapping can also be used as feedback – a visual and auditory way of recognising and reinforcing desired behaviour. Children will associate what you applaud with desired behaviour.



Perhaps take some time to consider the qualities and skills that you would like your child to show on the match court, then simply applaud them when they occur. If you want your child to relish the head-to-head competitive nature of tennis, showing a desire to strive to improve as well as being competitive to meet the challenge of the opponent and win the match, we suggest you applaud opponents too when they perform well.

If you've already discussed this with your child, as opposed to applauding your child's opponent spontaneously during a match, this will help your offspring understand what you really view as important. Consider the message you are conveying as you applaud your child's opponent for good play. Your child will quickly realise that the quality of performance is more important than the outcome of the points. It will also help your child acknowledge an opponent's good play, which develops in them a healthy attitude for the reasons behind the winning and losing of points.

He or she will realise that you value and enjoy seeing good play and not necessarily your child winning points. In our experience, this will overcome the fear in your child and release their courage to be truly competitive. Courage is an important quality in life not only in tennis so encourage him or her to demonstrate this quality.

## What do I say before a match?

### Building confidence

Confidence is everything in tennis. Try to build your child's confidence levels before they play.



#### Do's

- **Recall positive past experiences. Remind them of similar situations in which they have played well, eg, at the same venue, same court surface, same opponent etc. Be careful about saying, 'You've beaten this player before so you should do it again,' as this can raise expectation levels and with it increase pressure.**
- **Remind them how well they've prepared and how hard they've been practising. When a player knows they have prepared well and are in good shape this is a great confidence builder, so reinforce this to your child.**
- **Shift your focus to what your child does well.**
- **Have 'tunnel vision' about what he or she wants to happen or do, rather than on what he or she doesn't want to happen or do.**
- **Promoting 'positive self talk' is another confidence builder. One of the best ways of doing this is to ask them questions that require a positive response. Get your child to tell you about their good shots, what they're going to do and how they're going to be on court today.**

#### Don'ts

- **Don't say: 'You've beaten this player before so you should do it again.' This can raise expectation levels and with it pressure.**

Try to give your child confidence by using the potential positive outcome of the match. For example, consider the effect on a child after these very well intentioned pre-match words from the following parent:

***"Just go out there darling and do your best."***

How is our parent doing so far? Pretty good, we think, providing support and focusing on something that the child has a degree of control over (effort).

What about these words?

***"You know you're better than her so just go and show it."***

Oops! You've just crashed and burned! In trying to boost the child's confidence the parent has made a comparison with another player, their opponent, and implied that being 'better' means 'beating' her opponent. So, imagine what the do I say before a match cont.

## **Self Fulfilling Prophecies**

This is an important phrase to remember. Basically, if you say something often enough then it will probably happen.

This has implications on pre-match talk. Make sure all the talk is about what you want to happen rather than what you're worried might happen.

It's an easy habit to get into, but there are endless examples of players being told that they "keep on getting into winning positions and then losing". Not surprisingly, the next time that player is in a winning position the same happens.

Another common example is a player who is a slow starter. Again, this situation often brings about pre-match talk from the parent along the lines of, "You've made slow starts in all your recent matches and let them get ahead early on..." If you find yourself thinking and saying these things the trick is to look to the future and what you and your child want to happen, making sure you talk about things that are in their control, eg, "Just focus on moving your feet quickly and hitting the ball positively in the first few games."

### **The mind never hears 'don't'**

This is another important rule to understand in achieving better tennis. If somebody says, "Don't think of a pink elephant," what's the first thing that pops into your mind? A pink elephant!

The same applies to pre-match chats. "Whatever you do, don't double fault when you're game point up." It seems like a helpful comment, but as soon as your child goes game point up, the words that will come to mind will be 'double fault'. Remember the previous section on self-fulfilling prophecies? A double fault is now more likely.

### **Keep them focused on the processes**

Top players try to focus on the 'process'. This means concentrating on what you have to do well to play good shots. The theory being that if you execute good process, the outcome will take care of itself. Help your child stay focused on the process by getting their coach to give them some key process goals to focus on and think about before and during a match. You can then reaffirm these goals to them and get your child to reaffirm them back to you.

Examples of good process goals are:

- **See the ball out in front of you on contact for every groundstroke**
- **Accelerate up and through the ball on the forehand**
- **Ball placement in front and drive up on the serve**

### **Don't talk about consequences!**

One of the biggest problems players face when playing matches is that their mind starts to wander to the consequences of what they are doing or are about to do. When this starts to happen it cripples good performance. This can happen before, after and even during a match or point.

For example, a player is about to take on a short ball, looking to hit it a winner, but as they are about to execute, their mind jumps forward and thinks: 'If I hit a winner here then I'll be match point up.'

Thoughts like these affect the execution of the stroke. To play well it's vital a player doesn't worry about the consequences of what they have done or are about to do – they have to stay in the present. You can help this by not talking about the potential consequences of a match before it has even started.

Avoid talking about the next opponent, the fact that they might look silly if they lose to a certain player, the prizemoney, the ratings and rankings points etc. Instead, reaffirm the key points they should be concentrating on during a match. Players need to focus on executing these goals during a match and only worry about the consequences once it has happened.

### **Stress-busting!**

Pre-match nerves and high stress levels are common in all players. They aren't necessarily a bad thing. If you care about something and want to do well in it you are going to get nervous. Your body senses this and pumps adrenaline into the system preparing you for action by sending blood to the brain and the muscles.

For most players nerves start to disappear as they start to play. For some, however, they remain with them and can inhibit performance. In these situations you need to have some stress-busting tactics up your sleeve.

- **Make sure your child understands that all players get nervous. All the top players get nervous, but they have perfected the art of dealing with those nerves.**
- **Make sure your child understands that nerves can be a good thing – it shows they care. Explain that feeling nervous will produce adrenaline which will help them move quicker and think faster.**
- **Make sure they understand that a lot of the physical effects they are feeling are because of adrenaline. For example, butterflies in the stomach are created by blood leaving the stomach and being sent to the muscles and brain (this can also lead to a loss in appetite).**
- **Help them to understand that they should only be nervous and worry about things that are within their control. A lot of players worry about things they can't control. For example, what people will think of them. In this situation a player needs to understand that they can worry about their performance – what people think about them as a result is not their problem.**
- **Consistent pre-match routines help players deal with stress. Establish a consistent warm-up routine and use this all the time in practice and before matches.**
- **Have a relaxation routine. Deep breathing, familiar music, eyes closed picturing a 'relaxed place'.**
- **Humour and laughter helps – even if slightly nervous laughter!**
-

# What do I say and do after a match?

## **Be Consistent !**

Try to be consistent in how you react after defeats and victories. Remember that how your child has done on the tennis court shouldn't affect your relationship with the child as a person.

If you are very up or very down depending on how they have done then the child will start to worry about the consequences of the match while they are playing it – this will lead to poor play and increased stress levels.

The best way to be consistent in your reaction is not to rush in too quickly and talk about the match.

## **What to say and do after a win**

Remember, the skill is to learn to be analytical after a victory.

- **Congratulations, good win etc.**
- **Remember to give in the result, cool down, re-hydrate, shower etc.**
- **Do you know when you're playing next?**
- **How did you feel you played?**
- **Did you manage to achieve the goals that you identified before the match?**

## **After a loss:**

- **Hard luck, good effort (if it was), are you okay? Don't say "never mind" because that implies that the outcome is of key significance.**
- **Remember to give in the result, cool down, re-hydrate, shower etc.**
- **Do you know when you're playing next?**

At this point, it may be best to leave it there for the time being. For most players, the period immediately after a loss is a difficult time. A parent's main job is to support and look after the player. If you are too quick to give your opinions a confrontation may develop. When your child has had a chance to cool down and relax a little, it's perfectly okay to discuss the match, but try to stick to a consistent format.

- **How did you feel you played?**
- **Did you manage to achieve the goals that you identified prior to the match?**

## **The journey home**

Unless your child wants to talk about the match, talk about something else! The time spent in the car is remarkably significant in how parent-child relationships form. It is a time when a child can express themselves without anyone else hearing or interrupting. If car time is filled with you lecturing them on how they should have played or behaved it can create a negative situation very quickly. You need to create an environment where they feel that the journey home is an opportunity to talk to you about things that they find difficult or are unhappy about. If you are not happy about something, then say so, but agree to talk about it later. Then make a point of talking about something different.

Find something that you can both be positive about.

## **Real life examples - What would you do?**

### **Pre-Match chats**

Consider your thoughts and feelings in the following scenarios, and what your pre-match talk and behaviour would be like in these situations.



**Your child appears nervous prior to going on to play a 'bogey' player and complains of feeling tired.**

In this instance, you will need to reassure your child about what's important, eg, how hard they try and to keep thinking on the court. Encourage them to think of the pleasure of competing well rather than the fear of losing. Excite them with positive possibilities – future news headlines.

**Your child is about to go on to play an opponent who he or she beat quite comfortably in a tournament three weeks ago.**

Remind them that their job is to play to win but, perhaps more importantly, to play to get better. Ensure some specific goals are set for the player to structure their match tennis around, eg, attack returns on second serves; hit between five and 12 backhands down the line.

**Over the last 10 days, your child has chosen not to practice much.**

After playing and behaving poorly in the first match but winning, he or she is really 'up for' the next match. You need to consider what you stand for and what kind of behaviour you wish to instill and reinforce.

The important thing here is to ensure that your child does not associate their poor practice attitude with their success in the match, and that your child's motivation for playing is not mainly influenced by success or otherwise in matches. In this situation it is important not to show much pleasure with your child's success. They have to realise that it's their effort and attitude towards day-to-day practice rather than one-off performances in matchplay that will be prized and valued by you.

## **Post Match Chats**

Consider your thoughts and feelings in the following scenarios and your consequent post-match talk and behaviour.

### **Your child performs well, tries hard and wins.**

First and foremost, praise the effort and then the performance, with very little if any recognition of the actual result of the match. You will need this approach when you are talking after a match in which your child has just performed well in, tried hard but went on to lose.

Use your feedback to link the process with the outcome. Begin to develop a belief in your child that trying hard is what he or she is really good at.

### **Your child shows low levels of effort and poor behaviour, yet wins.**

Criticise your child's behaviour (not him or her). Show no pleasure in them winning the match. If your child's poor behaviour has involved showing a lack of respect to either you (eg, banging racket, which you have bought, shouting at you etc) or his or her opponent then you may wish to administer the consequences you see fit.

### **Your child wins easily (eg, 6-1, 6-1) but does not achieve their pre-match goals.**

Simply acknowledge the win first of all and then ask them to rate how successful they were in achieving the goals they identified and agreed on before the match. Stress that winning is important but learning and improving how to win is critical.

Winning a match so easily and not striving to improve their game can be highlighted as a wasted opportunity. There is far too much emphasis on outcome and not enough on performance, so criticising your child's pre-occupation with winning at the expense of developing their game may come as a welcome surprise to your child.

### My child behaves badly

Tennis is a high stress sport. Children that excel at tennis are often highly competitive with a strong perfectionist streak.

This combination of factors often leads to players having problems coping with mistakes, their opponent's good play, bad bounces and other stressful events.

#### Advice to parents

- **Never condone poor behaviour, although it is important to understand the nature of the game and how it can happen.**
- **Look to the referee of the tournament to enforce the code of conduct. Poor behaviour should be dealt with through code violations.**
- **Identify some positive role models to follow. Look for older juniors or professional players that your child respects and that also display a positive attitude on the court.**
- **Read the 'Being a good tennis parent' channel of BritishTennisParents.com. There is lots of advice that's relevant, eg, pre-match chats and dealing with issues.**
- **Make it clear to your child that you fully support them in everything that they are doing and that you have great pride in many of the things that they do, but that you are not happy about this one area, and it upsets you to see it happen.**

#### Advice to players

Coping with mistakes is one of the toughest challenges in the game and it is important that you see it as just that. It is a part of the battle that makes tennis such a fantastic, almost gladiatorial, sport. If you can rise to and eventually defeat this challenge then you will be one of the best.

It is okay to be angry and annoyed about mistakes – anyone that tells you not to let it bother you has not played the game! The key is to find a way of coping and dealing with that anger so that you can come back and fight for the next point.

All the top players experience the same feelings and emotions. The only difference is that through experience and hard work most of them have got better at dealing with them.

Decide who your role model is going to be. How do you want to react when the going gets tough. It is an easy way out of difficult situations to have a tantrum, throw your racket and then the match. Are you really tough enough to react to these situations and take on the challenge?

#### **There are two simple things that you have to achieve**

1. Find a way of reacting to your mistake that is within the laws of the game:

- **Turn your back on the court and your opponent immediately.**

- **If you need to react with anger then do it – decide what your legal angry words will be.**
- **If anything has to be hit then bounce the ball down into the court.**

2. Find a way of coping with the anger, stress and annoyance.

- **Put your racket into your non-playing hand.**
- **Take three long, slow, deep breaths as you walk all the way to the back fence.**
- **Once you get to the back of the court it is okay to be annoyed about what you've done, although is there anything that you could do differently next time?**
- **When you're ready, turn back into the court, but as you step into the court feel your stress, anger and annoyance stay at the back court, leaving you ready to start the new point.**

To begin with this process may take you some time to perfect and you'll find yourself spending lots of time trudging to the back fence! As you get used to it, though, you will find that the process of calming down doesn't take so long. After a while you may find that simply turning your back on the court and switching the racket into your non-racket hand will be enough.

## **My child's opponents cheat**

This is possibly the most difficult and sometimes distressing thing that a tennis parent has to deal with. There is nothing worse than seeing your child trying hard and playing well yet being denied a victory by an opponent's bad line calling and/or gamesmanship.

It is also very difficult to know what to do during a match if you think it is happening and what to say at the end of the match to a distraught child.

### **During a match**

Unfortunately, there's not an awful lot you can do. If you run off to get the referee you will immediately be branded a 'nightmare pushy parent' and probably not help matters. It is something that all players have to learn how to deal with and the best way to learn is probably to fight it out and find it out for themselves.

### **After a match**

Immediately after the match is not the time to discuss what your child could have or should have done. Support, understanding and a shoulder to cry on are the main things your child needs right then. Leave the discussion and the advice until later when things have settled down. The thing that will amaze you is how quickly they get over it.

## **Advice To Players**

### **Calling your lines**

- **Be firm but fair: If you are sure that the ball was out then call it out – immediately and firmly.**

- **If you are unsure whether the ball was in or out then play on or if the rally has stopped play a let.**
- **Your opponent is allowed to challenge your calls. If they do and you are sure that your call was correct then stick to your call. You are under no obligation to play a let.**
- **Your opponent is allowed to call the referee if they are unhappy about your calls. The referee will come onto the court and ask you where the ball landed and if you are sure about your call. Assuming you are, then stick to your call and the referee should rule in your favour.**

### **Calling the score**

- **After each point make sure you call the score out clearly.**
- **If your opponent calls the score and you do not agree – do not play on. Discuss the score with them and if you can not agree by counting back then call the referee.**

### **Your opponent's line calls**

- **Your opponent is usually in the best position to call their lines. In most situations you should trust their call even if you are not sure yourself.**
- **You do have the right to challenge their call by asking, 'Are you sure?' If they reply 'yes' then you have to accept the call.**
- **If you are continually unhappy about your opponent's line calling you have the right to call the referee. The referee will not change calls that have already been made, but they will usually stay and watch to make sure that the lines are being called fairly.**
- **Remember bad line calls very rarely decide matches. But how a player reacts to a bad line call can often decide a match. If you feel that you have been the victim of a bad line call then make sure that it only costs you one point by re-focusing immediately and getting on with the next point.**

### **Calling lines on clay**

- **On clay, the marks left by the ball can be used to judge line calls.**
- **If a line call is in question then the player should draw a semi-circle around the mark that the ball left so that it can be examined.**
- **If a player removes a mark then it is assumed that the ball was in.**

# My child cheats

**This can be a sensitive discussion and will need to be approached carefully.**

One way to present the information you wish to deliver is to deliver it in the third person. The feedback given will appear less advisory and confrontational if delivered in the form of a story involving another person.

You could tell a story about a fictitious young player who became overly concerned about the result of matches and sadly felt that they were being judged by whether they won or lost.

This difficult and sometimes unrealistic goal of winning matches coupled with the feelings of a lack of total control to influence the result of a match resulted in the player becoming anxious and fearful. The player's distorted thinking about what the outcome of the match meant and his doubt in his ability to win the match resulted in him calling some balls out that were in.

Notice that no mention of the word cheating is used as this would be an interpretation of the fact that a ball which landed in had been called out.

## **The opponent's perspective**

Another approach is to reverse the story and present it from the perspective of the opponent of the player who is cheating. It might go something like this:

"I remember being told by a coach about one of his good young players who was getting frustrated and annoyed when he thought that his opponent was calling balls out that he thought were in. The coach asked his player to think of some reasons why the opponent might be calling balls out that were in, which would be helpful to him (the player). This encouraged the player to think of positive reasons, reasons which would benefit him, for why his opponent was behaving in this way."

## **Role-reversal**

You could also try role-reversal: ask your child what they would say to one of their friends if they knew they were cheating.

Once these methods have started a conversation about the issues should you move the conversation on to focus on them. Elicit from your child how they might apply the facts. Now is the time to use the word 'you'.

"What do you make of this? Do you see anything in what I have said that may help you?"

Lastly, look at yourself. The problem may be with you. Check that your behaviour reinforces that the outcome of the match is not a key factor and that your child as a person is not being judged based upon the outcome of their matches.

# My child loses to players he/she shouldn't

This is another common source of frustration! The first point to make is that the majority of players feel that they play better in practice than they do in matches. So, if you feel that your child is not playing as well in a match as they can do, then bear in mind that their opponent may not be either!

One of the main issues here is who believes that the player shouldn't be losing to certain players. Is it your child or you, or both? If it is your child, reinforce to them that lots of results don't reflect rankings or ratings. You could show them a drawsheet from a tournament showing several examples of lesser-ranked players defeating higher-ranked opponents.

The key word in the title is 'shouldn't'. Shouldn't is a word of obligation, such as 'must' and the phrase 'ought to' and with this inflexible expectancy comes pressure and with that anxiety, frustration and fear.

There are, however, things that both parent and player can do to help bring out the best tennis in important matches.

## Advice to parents

- **One of the most common causes of under-performing in matches is players worrying about the outcome (the result of the match) and or the consequences of the outcome before and during the match. Reassure your child that the only truly important thing is that they try their best and look to implement their game plan.**
- **Phrase things positively: talk about the game plan, strokes and court presence that you would like to see; do not start to talk about what you fear may happen.**
- **Get the player to re-affirm to you what they are looking to do in the match and how they want to be on court.**
- **Encourage them to go through their consistent pre-match warm-up routine.**
- **Help them to relax. Do not say things that will increase the expectations on them.**

## Advice to Players

- **Have a consistent warm-up routine. Use the same warm-up routine before you practice and before a match.**
- **Work with your coach to come up with one or two key goals to focus on during a match. These goals need to be process rather than outcome-related, eg, 'meet the ball in front', rather than 'don't serve double faults'. Concentrate on and judge yourself by your execution of these goals and try not to worry about what the result of the match will be. It may help to write these goals down to remind you at the change of ends.**
- **Find ways of relaxing before and during a match. Before the match try listening to a favourite piece of music. During the match take your time in-**

**between points, breathe deeply and slowly, relax your shoulders and feel the tension drain out of your finger tips. Remember that it's okay to feel nervous and tense but always try to leave those feelings at the back of the court.**

- **Play the ball not the opponent. During a match, if you start to become too aware of who you're playing and you can feel yourself getting anxious, replace your anxious thoughts regarding your opponent with positive cue words relating to your pre-match goals.**
- **What worries you the most? Losing to a certain player or what other people will think or say if you lose to that player? If it's the latter then you are playing for the wrong reasons! Play for your own satisfaction and to achieve your dreams.**

## **My child keeps losing matches from winning positions**

The first point to make here is that due to the nature of tennis scoring, losing from winning positions is very common. Many parents feel that their child has a particular problem in this area when actually it is the same for everybody.

However, closing a match out from a winning position is an important skill to learn. There are certain things that parents and players should try to do to help in these situations.

### **Advice to parents**

- **Is your anxiety about this situation affecting what you are saying to your child? Make sure that you are not saying, "This time when you get into a winning situation make sure you win." If you are, then you are only making things worse. As soon as your child gets into a winning situation your supposedly helpful words will be rattling around their heads.**
- **Help reduce their anxiety. Talk to them about winning matches. Watch tennis on the TV and discuss it. Talk about how getting over the finishing line is one of the biggest challenges in the game. If they have lost from a winning position then they are in good company, as every top player has done it.**
- **Discuss how it can be tough to convert a match as the player in the losing position starts to relax as they expect defeat, resulting in improved play. Talk about ways that the top players counteract this by playing very positively to keep their opponents out of the game.**
- **Read through and discuss the next page: Advice to players. Understand the difficulty, support your child and they will cope much better next time.**

### **Advice to Players**

- **When you get ahead in a match stick to your game plan, strokes and attitude that got you there. Stay focused on achieving those three things and the result**

**will come. If you feel yourself looking for the finish line then re-focus your thoughts on those three things. Players in winning positions tend to do one of two things. They either want to rush to the finish line to seal the match quickly, therefore trying to finish the point off promptly with overly aggressive attacking shots or they become afraid to lose and begin to push the ball back into play hoping their opponent will make a mistake.**

- **Focus on a cue word that makes you hit the ball positively. It is common to start hitting tentatively when in a winning position, so using a cue word as you strike the ball such as 'accelerate' or 'go'. It will help you stay positive.**
- **If you find yourself getting tentative a good method is to use a tactic that forces you to be positive, such as serving and volleying or chipping and charging. This change in tactics can also surprise your opponent who will be busy planning their comeback.**
- **It helps to understand that it is a two-way process. When a player gets behind they will often relax as the expectation on them is lower, this helps them play better and to start a comeback. It is important to understand this when you are leading in a match so if your opponent mounts a comeback you are less likely to blame yourself.**
- **You can try reversing the score in your head. If you are serving at 5-4 in the deciding set tell yourself that you are 4-5 down. See if you can find the attitude of a player fighting for survival rather than one nervously trying to find the finishing line. You can do the same within games as well: if you're 40-15 up try thinking it's 15-40.**

## **My child can't handle losing**

If you're serious about tennis you can't be afraid to lose! Losing is never easy. If your child isn't disappointed and occasionally upset after a loss then that would be more of a worry. Losses are great learning opportunities, though, so it's important that both you and your child learn how to handle it and to take something positive out of it.

The following article is based on the comments and actions of Pat Rafter after he lost the memorable 2001 Wimbledon final to Goran Ivanisevic. It provides a great model for parents and players to follow.

Tennis: for Pat's sake, learn the 10 commandments of defeat. It's in defeat you need role models like Pat Rafter.

Hundreds of thousands of young Australians would have watched Rafter endure another Wimbledon tennis final loss, despite the late hour.

They could not have had a finer teacher in the art of how to make sport a character-builder, rather than a character-wrecker.

These are some of the lessons Rafter illustrated so superbly for them, in word and deed:

- Don't pretend it doesn't hurt. It's OK to be disappointed. "This time hurts a little bit more than last time," Rafter said. "The first time was just fun to be there. Second time, you know – I didn't want second. I wanted to win this time."
- Take it on the chin and get over it. Move on. It's history. "Someone has to lose and I'm the loser again," said Rafter. "I've had my little depression." His mum Jocelyn said: "He'll get himself together again. Pat's not a person to look backwards."
- Keep it in perspective. "It's disappointing but at the end of the day it's a tennis match," said Rafter.
- Pay respect to your opponent. "You've got to take your hat off [to Goran Ivanisevic]," said Rafter. "He was just serving really well, it's not much fun down the other end trying to get it back." That final hug at the net is also worthy of remark. It was one of mutual respect, the sort of thing that ennobles sport.
- Pay respect to yourself, too. It's an achievement just reaching the final, or the semi, or the team, or sometimes just the first round. "I was really close again," Rafter acknowledged. Find some humour in it all, somewhere. Rafter gave a self-derisory laugh and said: "I'm sick of making bloody history."
- Try to learn from it. What might you have done better? What could you have done differently? How might you have prepared better? Rafter, like all pros, will be automatically trying to answer those questions.
- Make no excuses. Rafter didn't blame his shoulder, or the delay in playing the final, or the weather, or crowd noise, or line calls, or anything. Accept that you lost to a better player on a particular day.
- Make sure you enjoy the whole experience, from the pre-match nerves to the post-match speeches. "It was an amazing, amazing atmosphere," said Rafter. "It was electric. This is what we play for, this is what it's all about – it was so much fun. If you can have that attitude, you're not going to get too down."
- Thank those who have helped you, like your family, friends and fans, and really mean it. Rafter didn't forget coach Tony Roche, either. "He's a great mate," he said. "I would have loved to have done it for him as well." Small wonder his brother, Jim Rafter, was able to declare: "We're proud of Pat, not for the matches that he wins but for the graciousness in which he accepts defeat."

## Go beyond the excuses

Here's an interesting article by top sports psychologist Dr John F Murray who has a great website dedicated to mental skills and regularly runs coaching workshops in this country. You will find lots of interesting articles and information at [www.JohnFMurray.com](http://www.JohnFMurray.com)

"Go beyond the excuses" first appeared in Tennis Magazine and if you have a child who regularly finds excuses or blames other people for poor performances, it might just help you to understand why!

## **Go beyond the excuses**

There is a certain fire in the eyes of a player once he or she stops making excuses and starts taking full responsibility for their destiny. I'll often tell a circuit pro player to not only "not make excuses" but to go beyond the excuse and pretend there are no excuses at all, even when some really legitimate ones might be apparent! This kind of attitude promotes toughening.

We all need to strive for that rare determined resolve that leaves no room for unnecessary fears, worries or hesitation. Players who take their performances to new dimensions of efficiency and excitement understand that the "excuse" has no place in the heart and mind of the warrior. Rather than unveiling a fancy new strategy, let's just roll up our sleeves and remove the excuses and justifications which might make us feel better in the short term, but offer no hope for long-term growth.

## **The Blame Game**

How often do your opponents leave the court offering multiple explanations for their loss? How does it feel if you just played your best match in months? Maybe you too have a habit of justifying your losses. The all too familiar script includes lousy weather, wet grips, tight shoes, injuries, lack of practice, poor fitness, fast courts, high altitude, poor line calls, or just plain bad luck. Players at all levels in tennis engage in this blame game, but true champions reject this option and seek even greater responsibility for their actions and outcomes.

When mentally strong players lose, they accept defeat graciously the way Marcos Baghdatis did after his gruelling five-set loss to Andre Agassi at the 2006 US Open. Marcos could have justifiably complained about his severe muscle cramps in the fifth set, but you saw none of it.

He was more determined than ever, hopping around like a wounded animal, but pumping his fist to his chest, and smiling throughout the final moments of the match! What a rare and amazing display of sportsmanship and inner resolve. He also fully credited Andre for the win without complaining.

## **Excuses and justifications**

Excuses and justifications abound after a loss. Players try to deflect social disapproval and the negative feelings surrounding poor outcomes by creating excuses. Excuses help reduce uneasiness and shift blame for a negative outcome to extenuating circumstances. This would be fine if it were adaptive, and it enhanced performance, but it clearly does not.

Excuses reduce apparent responsibility for negative outcomes, leaving the athlete with less perceived control over future events. With extenuating circumstances in control rather than the player, he or she often sets lower goals and reduces effort. With responsibility reduced, practices become less meaningful and confidence is harder to acquire. Sort of like being demoted from a higher to lower position at work, the player, or employee, might think, "I have less responsibility now so I'm not going to try as hard." We only hurt ourselves by taking on less responsibility for the good things we are seeking.

A close cousin to the excuse is the justification. In this case, players may downplay the negative meaning of a poor performance and even suggest that there are hidden benefits to performing poorly. For example, a top junior tennis player may assume that "it can't get any worse than it is" and totally neglect to correct obvious flaws in performance that led to the loss.

A tennis player may also justify a loss or dismal showing to the fact that the other player had a "higher ranking". A much more productive outlook is for the player to responsibly correct mistakes and realise how irrelevant ranking is.

## **Owning every performance**

There are few perfect weather days and many reasons indeed to explain performance and outcome. By taking full responsibility for your actions and the results of your actions, you set yourself up for success.

Performance is yours to flash brilliantly or botch horribly. Rather than looking to save face after a loss, redirect your energies to finding a better solution next time. Here are some tips to help you eliminate the ifs, ands and buts from your vocabulary:

1. Allow your opponent to offer all the excuses and justifications possible, but do not say much. They remain in mediocrity, and we all know the saying about arguing with a fool! Bite your own lip following a tough loss, even if you know you can perform 100 times better. By concealing your areas of weakness, you are positioning yourself for a much better effort next time and assuming greater responsibility for performance. An honourable loss without excuses can often be better than a win in the long haul.
2. Always credit your opponent when you lose. They may bask in the temporary glory of their victory, but you will return with a renewed vigour to turn the tables. Offering excuses will just fuel your opponent's motivation for the rematch. Keep your opponents clueless about your intense desire to reverse this tough loss.
3. Never offer too many explanations for match outcome. Your emotions are often high and you might say things you would not in a more rational state. It's wise to cool down, reflect on what happened, and quietly prepare an improved strategy for the next time.

By being fully responsible for your actions and outcomes, and eliminating excuses and justifications, you are taking the narrow path from which true improvement and growth emerges. You are hereby promoted to a higher mental standing. Take full advantage of it in your next match!

### **Why is setting goals so important?**

A person, player or team is very healthy when there is minimum confusion about the goal.

Goal setting is fundamental to achieving excellence in sport. Much research on athletes and coaches that succeed at high levels points to quality goal setting as a significant factor in their achievements.

### **Setting goals is important because:**

- Maximising your potential is a long journey. If your child is to be successful on this journey then they need a map. Goal setting maps out where a player wants to be in the future and then gives a series of stepping stones to enable the player to get there.
- When players are training regularly it gives each session a purpose. Without goal setting player and coach tend to drift through sessions and the quality of work drops.
- The player has ownership of the goals. Players that have committed to and set their own goals are more likely to be motivated in working to achieve them.
- Knowing where they are trying to get to is motivating and exciting for a player. Having longer-term goals in place such as a higher ranking or gaining selection for a county team is very motivating to a player and gives everything an added sense of purpose.
- Goal setting is driven by long-term outcomes, but it gives the player, coach and parents short-term goals to focus on. This is a great help to parents around tournaments as it gives them something to focus on and talk about other than the outcome.

**“If you haven't set yourself meaningful goals, it's all too easy to turn back and go home when it's a miserable day and training doesn't appeal. Goal-setting is the key to motivation.”**  
*Kirsten Barnes, Canadian rower and double Olympic gold medallist*

The importance of goal setting cannot be emphasised enough. It is safe to say that without goal setting and regular review (three-monthly) your child has little or no chance of maximising their potential in tennis.

## **How do you goal set?**

As a parent, you shouldn't be carrying out the goal setting with your child. Your child and their coach should carry out the goal setting process. You may have some input into the discussion, but unless your child feels that they own their goals then the process is a waste of time.

If, even after some gentle encouragement from you your child's coach does not start goal setting then it is time to find a new coach rather than set about doing the goal setting yourself.

Having some further understanding about goal setting, however, will help you relate to the things that your child is trying to achieve and will help you talk to them about their tennis.

There are many different formats used for goal setting and your child's coach may have their own that they like to use. The most commonly used format in the UK are the goal setting sheets at the front of the LTA Tournament Planner. [You can download a copy of this from the LTA website](#)

Good goal setting should be driven by longer-term (1 year-plus) outcome goals. These set out where your child is looking to get to. An outcome goal could be a particular ranking or selection for a representative trip. It is important to start with these outcome goals, as they are motivating to the player and provide direction for the whole process.

The next stage will be to set the performance goals. These goals will outline what your child needs to be able to do to achieve the initial outcome goals that have been set. For example, it could be that they need more power on their first serve or more consistency on their backhand drive.

The final stage is to plan the detail – these are known as the process goals. The process goals are what your child needs to do to enable them to achieve the previous performance goals. For example, if your child is looking to increase power on the first serve then the process goals could be to improve leg strength and to improve the position of the elbow in relation to the shoulder in the throwing action. When done well this three-stage process will bring tremendous benefits to your child's tennis.

The long-term outcome goals give the whole process a purpose and a sense of ambition. The performance goals will give you and your child something to focus on around competitions other than the result. The process goals will give your child and their coach purpose in their day-to-day work and make sure they are working as part of a long-term process.

## **Your child is injured – what do you do?**

If they have an injury that has just happened then they should be checked out medically by your GP, a physiotherapist or a hospital (depending on the type of injury).

Children's bones don't break the way adults' do. If you are unsure what they have hurt but they still have pain and are not using the affected limb the next day, get them checked out.

If they have a knock or a sprain then follow this regime:

- **PROTECT the area from further injury**
- **REST the affected limb or area, stop them exercising or moving while it's painful**
- **ICE: wrap an ice bag in a damp towel, don't put plastic straight on to skin or you might give them an ice burn. Put on the injured area on and off for about 15 minutes.**
- **COMPRESSION: (if swollen) but make sure any bandage you use is not too tight and don't leave it on in bed overnight.**
- **ELEVATION: raise the limb to help circulation and rest on pillows.**

## **When should I seek medical help?**

Obviously with some injuries this should be straight away but less serious injuries will not come to too much harm if you leave them until the next day and see how your child improves.

Be wary of the following and seek advice:

- **Any neck or back pain that seems to affect what they can do or comes on during or after exercise**
- **Groin pain**
- **Any pain that doesn't go away**
- **Any pains that only occur at night or is constantly there day and night.**
- **Any new lumps**

Your GP is a good point of contact. For more specialist advice, go to a sports injuries clinic where a physiotherapist can assess your child and will tell you if they need further medical opinion from a specialist. They will also advise on what to do to recover from the injury.

## **How do I know my child is fit to return to their sport?**

They will probably have been allowed by the GP or physio to do some light training that doesn't cause them pain. To be able to return to full tennis training follow these steps...

- **Can they do everything they would normally do – walk, sleep, go to school with no pain?**
- **Do they have full movement and stretch in the injured area?**
- **Can they do a five-minute jog/swim with no pain?**
- **Can they do school PE with no pain?**

- **Can they do a light sport-specific training with no pain?**
- **Gradually increase their sport specific training with the coach until they can train fully with no pain.**

**Two full training sessions should be completed before then they can compete again if fully fit.**

# Choosing the right racket

Straight-Forward Advice to Parents

## 8-10 year olds

Eight-year-olds that are strong players, and nine and 10 year olds should be using rackets with the following specs:

**Size:** a junior racket that is 26 inches long (1 inch shorter than full-size). Construction: made of graphite or at least a graphite composite (contains some aluminium).

**Grip size:** small. Ask for a grip size 1 or 2.

**Head size:** around 95sq cm.

**Weight:** Light, around 250g is ideal.

**Balance:** The racket should be evenly balanced. Do not get a racket that has all the weight in the head. 10-11 year olds At around this age players should be moving up to their first full-size racket.

## 10-11 year olds

At around this age players should be moving up to their first full-size racket.

**Size:** 27inches. Do not be tempted by a long-body racket.

**Construction:** graphite.

**Grip size:** grip size 2 is recommended. That could also be described as 4 ¼ inches.

**Head size:** 95-98sq cm. Do not be tempted by an over-size head.

**Weight:** Light, 280-300g is ideal.

**Balance:** The racket should be evenly balanced. Do not get a racket that has all the weight in the head. 12-14 year olds Players will now begin to want the rackets that the pros use. Generally, this is okay as the rackets that are sold in the shops are lighter than the actual rackets that the pros use. The pros will customise their rackets with lead weights to get more power.

## 12-14 year olds

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**Size:** 27 inches. Do not be tempted by a long-body racket.

**Construction:** graphite, although a few of the rackets will have traces of various space-age metals in them. If it works for you, go for it!

**Grip size:** a grip 2 or 3 is recommended. That could also be described as 4 ¼ inches or 4 3/8 inches. It is important that the grip size is not too big as it can lead to incorrect grips being used.

**Head size:** We would recommend 95-98sq cm. Be wary of rackets with over-size heads.

**Weight:** Light, 280-320g is ideal. **Balance:** The racket should be evenly balanced. Don't buy a racket that has all the weight in the head.

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## **14 years plus**

They won't listen to you anyway, so I'd stop worrying about it if I were you! Their games should now be fully formed, so they will start to develop individual preferences towards certain manufacturers and styles of racket. Make sure that they have a go with a demo' model before deciding to buy a racket.

All the major manufacturers make good rackets. Look for the rackets that the pros use – do not get tempted by the large ranges of 'game improvement' rackets, these are designed for people that are struggling to hit the ball. Pros wouldn't go near them and aspiring pros shouldn't go near them either.