



Participating in sports, extracurricular activities, and other competitions can be good for a child's mental health. They may feel a sense of pressure during these activities, which isn't always bad as a little stress can help us increase our motivation and perform better than expected.

But sometimes, kids struggle to handle the pressure that comes with a big game or event. If the focus is always on winning or being the best, that constant stress can impact their emotional well-being. Coaches, parents, and caregivers have a front-row seat to changes in a young competitor's emotions and behaviors. They also have a role in encouraging them to take care of their physical and mental health. When competitive stress becomes overwhelming, try these five ways to help kids deal with pressure:



**Have a conversation.** We can't say it enough; it's important to talk to kids about how they are thinking and feeling. This will help you see how they handle pressure and are thinking about competition. Download our [conversation starters](#).



**Practice emotional awareness and regulation.** Have you seen Olympic athletes with headphones on right before they get in the pool or take their mark on the track? Talk to your child about what they can do to manage the pressure they feel – from [breathing exercises](#) to listening to their favorite playlist. Our [emotional empowerment materials](#) can help all ages become more aware of their feelings.



**Encourage other hobbies and interests.** If you find a child in your life is focusing exclusively on one sport or competitive activity, help them find other clubs or groups they can be involved in. Taking mental breaks away from their primary sport will help them build resilience. Encourage them to practice self-care activities, such as [mindfulness](#) to relieve stress.



**Be careful how you say things.** When a coach or parent yells out, “Don’t be a quitter!” it can send the message that if you don’t succeed, you aren’t trying hard enough or there’s something wrong with you. We don’t want young athletes to push so hard that they get injured or grow to dislike their sport. Instead, encourage with statements like, “Do your best” or “We believe in you.”



**Give praise for effort and learning skills, even after a loss.** Make it a habit to congratulate the team whether they win or lose. Try to think of something that each team member improved on or tried hard at. This is especially important after a game or competition that didn’t go well. Because children are always growing and learning, a game loss today can be a powerful motivator going forward.

**Conversation Starters:**  
For Youth Athletes Dealing with Pressure



 <p>What sports situations have made you feel pressure or stress?</p> <p>ON OUR SLEEVES</p>	 <p>What does your body feel like when you're struggling with pressure or stress?</p> <p>ON OUR SLEEVES</p>	 <p>What feelings do you have when there's a lot of pressure or stress?</p> <p>ON OUR SLEEVES</p>
 <p>What do you feel yourself thinking about before a big competition?</p> <p>ON OUR SLEEVES</p>	 <p>Where do you think most of the pressure to perform comes from?</p> <p>ON OUR SLEEVES</p>	 <p>How do you like to release stress?</p> <p>ON OUR SLEEVES</p>
 <p>What sort of music do you listen to for relaxation?</p> <p>ON OUR SLEEVES</p>	 <p>What comforts you when you've made a mistake?</p> <p>ON OUR SLEEVES</p>	 <p>What would you say to a teammate who has made a mistake during a competition?</p> <p>ON OUR SLEEVES</p>

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For suggestions on how to have a conversation around the pressure to perform for youth athletes, download these **conversation starters** (available in **English** and **Spanish**). It’s important to have these talks to understand more about what they are thinking and feeling each day.

Don’t forget to let us know how you’re using *On Our Sleeves* resources. Share what you’re trying on social media, using **#OnOurSleevesJax** and **#OnOurSleeves** so we can see! You may also hit the **reply button** to tell us your *On Our Sleeves* story.

Sincerely,  
Wolfson Children's Hospital

The mission of The On Our Sleeves Movement For Children’s Mental Health is to give expert-created resources to all U.S. communities so everyone can understand and promote mental health for children. For more information, visit [OnOurSleeves.org](https://OnOurSleeves.org). To access educational resources and revisit the mission of On Our Sleeves®, visit [WolfsonChildrens.com/OnOurSleeves](https://WolfsonChildrens.com/OnOurSleeves).

If you or someone you know is thinking about suicide, contact the Suicide & Crisis Lifeline by calling or texting 988 or contact the Crisis Text Line by texting “START” to 741-741.

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**Our mailing address is:**

800 Prudential Drive  
Jacksonville, FL 32207

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