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The parent paradox

Last month I wrote about windows of opportunity for tennis parents. Windows of opportunity are periods in a child’s development when specific skill development can be prioritised. It is commonly known amongst tennis pros that windows of opportunity exist for kids aged 10 and under, when the time is right to develop specific physical skills, known as the ABCS (agility, balance, coordination, speed) and basic technical shapes. I suggested that a parallel window exists for parents, during which time they can learn about 10 and under tennis, and what their children should be learning during that early stage in their career.

This month, I’d like to look at some of the emotions that are involved with being you, the tennis parent. It’s called the parent paradox. It’s not my phrase; in fact it’s been used in many different contexts to describe some of the challenges of parenting. It links to the windows of opportunity which I wrote about last month, because this is a period of time where you can learn how to behave, react and support your child in learning what it means to play, train and compete. This is my take on the parent paradox in a tennis context. As you read it, look in the mirror, reflect on what you have found yourself thinking, saying or doing, and ask yourself if you are ever guilty of the parent paradox. If it makes your feel uncomfortable, I’m glad. If you come out feeling good about yourself because none of this applies to you, congratulations!

Paradox #1 The good reasons we have for encouraging kids into sport can lead to behaviours which teach our kids bad habits! Think about it. We want our kids to be active, right? We want them to take up a sport and to enjoy the friendship and fun. And then suddenly they start to show some promise, they win their first tournament or the they get selected for the team…..and then it all changes. It becomes serious, it becomes the survival of the fittest, it becomes all about winning….at all cost!

Paradox #2 The love and support which parents have for their kids is also the cause of pressure which leads to stress and burn out. You love your kids, right? You’ll do anything for them, perhaps you’ll stop at nothing to see that they have everything that they need to fulfil the potential they have. Have you ever ‘loved’ your child so much that you’ve ended up putting huge pressure on them? But see it from the child’s perspective…….“they want me to win, in fact they treat me differently when I win and when I lose. They’re pushing me to train more and more, and they’re paying more and more money to get me the best support. Dad even said he’d remortgage the house to send me to the best academy! I just want to play and have fun, just like in the early days when I just started out. I can’t deal with the pressure which is being piled upon me”
Paradox # 3 Parents love their children but they get so involved that they ignore their child’s feelings and think about their own. Ever found yourself wishing for success for your child because of what it would mean to you? Have you ever wondered if people would see you differently if your child was a champion? Did you miss out in your own sporting childhood, and have you ever lived your dreams through your child? The irony of love for our kids in sport is that we push them too far, beyond where they want to go, and it becomes more about Mum or Dad than about the child.

Paradox # 4 Parents want their child to succeed so much that they hope other children will fail. Watching your kids compete can be tough. Watching them lose is even harder. But the hardest is watching them lose whilst maintaining respect and a sporting attitude to the opponent that is beating them up. If ever you’ve thought badly of an opponent or team mate of your child in order to secure success for your own, you’ve gone too far; you’ve stepped into the parent paradox.

Paradox # 5 Parents want success so badly that they want “winning at all costs”. We all want our kids to do well, and most parents genuinely want enjoyment before success. But we can’t deny that we enjoy seeing our kids succeed too, and there’s nothing wrong with that. But what about when it goes too far, when it becomes an obsession, when your child just has to win? Have you ever been tempted (or gone further and actually done it!) to encourage your child to cheat, or for you, your child or coach to steal an unfair advantage over your opponent? Welcome to the parent paradox zone!

You could be reading this feeling this is not about you and that it only happens to other parents. Perhaps you’ve seen it happen, maybe your child has been the one to suffer. Whichever way you read this, let’s be clear on one thing........the parent paradox is prevalent in tennis, just like it’s prevalent in every other sport. The best parents are able to put their own desires aside and focus on what their children need. The worst ones live their dreams through their children and push too hard. And good parents in the sporting environment are true heroes, because avoiding the temptation of the parent paradox is really tough!