

## Why Kids Quit in the Car: The Hidden Damage of Post-Practice Pressure

What happens in the car after class, practice, or a game might seem like a small moment—but to a child, it's everything.

This is the moment when:

- Their nervous system is still processing their performance.
- Their inner voice is being shaped by external feedback.
- Their love for the activity is either deepened—or destroyed.

Unfortunately, well-meaning parents often turn this car ride into an unintentional performance review, peppered with:

- Criticism: "You weren't paying attention."
- Threats: "If you don't start trying harder, I'm pulling you out."
- Shame: "You embarrassed yourself today."
- Coercion: "You better try harder next time."

The result?

Children begin to associate the activity they once loved with stress, anxiety, and conditional acceptance.

## **The Neuroscience Behind Why This Backfires**

The human brain—especially the developing brain of a child—responds strongly to emotional experiences. Here's what happens chemically and neurologically during those "car ride lectures":

### **Cortisol Spike (Stress Hormone)**

- When a child feels judged, threatened, or shamed, cortisol floods their system.
- This blocks memory consolidation and inhibits learning—meaning they remember the stress, not the skill.

### **Amygdala Hijack**

- The amygdala (emotional response center) becomes hyperactive.
- Fight, flight, or freeze mode kicks in, which shuts down the prefrontal cortex—where logic, reasoning, and confidence live.

### **Fear-Based Motivation Wears Down**

- Negative reinforcement may create temporary compliance, but over time, it erodes confidence, kills creativity, and destroys joy.

## **What Children Need Instead: Motivation Through Connection**

Let's flip the script by boosting these 4 "happy brain chemicals":

## **1. Dopamine (The Motivation Molecule)**

**Boosts:** Focus, drive, and goal-setting.

**How to Encourage It:**

- Celebrate progress over performance:
  - "I noticed you tried that new move you've been working on—so cool to see you go for it!"
- Use positive anticipation:
  - "I can't wait to watch you grow."

## **2. Oxytocin (The Connection Chemical)**

**Boosts:** Trust, bonding, emotional safety.

**How to Encourage It:**

- Physical touch: Hugs, high-fives, hand on the shoulder.
- Listen more than you talk:
  - "How did it feel in your lesson today?"
- Validate their emotions
  - "It's okay to feel disappointed. That just means you care."

## **3. Serotonin (The Confidence Chemical)**

**Boosts:** Self-esteem, mood regulation, calm focus.

**How to Encourage It:**

- Acknowledge internal wins:

- "You looked so focused during warm-ups—I can tell you're taking this seriously."

-Give them a choice:

"Do you want to grab ice cream or head straight home?"

#### **4. Endorphins (The Joy Chemical)**

**Boosts:** Resilience, stress relief, energy.

**How to Encourage It:**

- Laugh together about something funny that happened.

- Play upbeat music on the ride home to shift the mood.

- Celebrate simply showing up:

"You showed up today—and that's always a win."

#### **Practical Car Ride Alternatives to "The Lecture"**

Instead of grilling your child about what went wrong, try one of these:

-Ask connection-focused questions:

"What was your favorite moment today?"

"Did you learn anything new?"

"What would you like to try differently next time?"

-Offer a simple affirmation:

"I loved watching you today."

-Build routine post-practice traditions:

A snack stop, fun playlist, or short game of "high/low/funny."

### **The Long-Term Impact of Post-Practice Connection**

When kids feel safe, seen, and supported, they:

- Stay engaged in their sport or activity longer.
- Develop intrinsic motivation instead of relying on pressure.
- Build resilience in the face of setbacks.
- Create positive neural associations with effort and practice.

**Final Thought:**

**Your voice becomes your child's inner voice.**

Let it be one that encourages, connects, and uplifts—especially in the car.