

Why the Drive To Practice Matters Just as Much as the Ride Home

Before a child ever steps onto the mat, field, or court, they've already begun forming a prediction in their brain about how the day will go.

That prediction isn't just based on their skill level.

It's based on your tone, your energy, and your expectations.

Common Phrases That Sabotage Before the Practice Begins:

- "Don't embarrass me today."
- "You better listen or we're not coming back."
- "Try harder this time, or I'm pulling you out."
- "You've been slacking lately. Fix it."

While often said in frustration or fear of wasted effort, these statements actually prime a child's brain for stress, not success.

The Neuroscience of the "Drive to Perform"

1. Predictive Processing:

Children's brains are constantly forecasting how events will unfold based on previous interactions.

- If past drives to practice included yelling or guilt, their brain associates the activity with fear—before they even get there.
- This activates a threat response, even if nothing negative has actually happened yet.

2. Cognitive Load Increases:

Pressure to "do well" adds mental clutter, which reduces working memory — meaning they're less likely to retain cues or corrections from their coach.

3. Loss of Autonomy:

External pressure robs a child of their sense of ownership, which is a core component of motivation.

- This triggers a drop in dopamine, making it harder for them to feel good about showing up.

4. Fight / Flight Activation:

Even if they don't say it, the child may:

- Freeze or mentally check out during class.
- Act "goofy" or "lazy" as a defense mechanism.

- Refuse to participate — not because they hate the activity, but because they associate it with emotional distress.

What Parents Can Say Instead on the Drive to Practice

Use the car ride as a confidence primer, not a pressure cooker.

Connection Statements:

- "No matter what happens today, I'm proud of you for showing up."
- "You've worked hard. Just keep learning and having fun."
- "What are you most excited to try today?"

Encourage Ownership:

- "Is there anything you want to focus on today?"
- "How can I support you before you go in?"

Reset with Ritual:

- Play their favorite music.
- Sit in comfortable silence.
- Offer a grounding phrase: "You've got this. I believe in you."

BONUS: What Happens When You Use Positive Connection Instead of Pressure

When you create a safe, supportive environment before practice, the brain responds with:

- Dopamine – for motivation
- Oxytocin– for bonding
- Serotonin – for emotional regulation
- Endorphins – for energy and resilience

This chemical cocktail helps kids:

- Stay calm under pressure
- Try new things without fear of failure
- Enjoy the experience — which keeps them coming back

Summary: The Car is a Classroom

- The way to practice sets the tone.
- The way home seals the experience.

As a parent, you have two powerful windows to shape your child’s mindset. Choose encouragement over expectation. Choose presence over pressure. Choose connection over control.

Because what matters most isn’t whether your child wins, scores, or even gets the technique right...

What matters most is that your child feels safe, supported, and excited to return.