

## The 4 Steps Parents Should Take When Their Child Is Cut or Benched

It's a fact of life that at a certain point as an athlete -- or as an artist, singer, dancer, musician, or anything else where many compete for few professional spots -- you're told you're no longer good enough. And no matter when it happens, it's a horrible feeling.

When it happens to your kid, it makes you feel even worse. I know this personally. It seems like nothing can prepare you for the moment when your child is told by some other adult that he or she is no longer good enough. I think this note I received recently from a reader and father (whose name I'll leave out) is a good example:

"Bob, I'm in tears and don't know what to do. Long story short - my son has always dreamed of playing varsity football, and just found out today (entering his senior year) that he won't be playing (except in blow-outs like you describe). In past years there were kids older than him who were fantastic, so he knew he had to keep working hard and waiting his turn. Now he's been passed up for kids a year or two under him.

The crux is - this is his dream (not mine) and he is devastated. And my heart has never been more broken than to see him not achieve his dream. I've read your article - I know that no one gets everything they want. But it hurts so much. I don't know what to do."

I know already there are some of you thinking this is really some helicopter parent who probably should have told his kid a long time ago he stinks, and that you don't get a starting spot by just hanging around long enough. But I think there are more effective ways, that won't involve future resentment or therapy that will help you and your child deal with the brutal finality of the end of an athletic dream.

### **1. Mourn with your child.**

The moment your child tells you he or she has been cut or benched, that is not the time to wax philosophical about the way the athletic world works. If your child is crying, there's no shame in doing like the father above, and cry along. You don't have to shed actual tears. But this is your child, and there's nothing wrong with feeling bad for him or her at that moment.

### **2. Encourage your child -- and yourself -- not to make any immediate, emotional decisions.**

Maybe your child who is benched wants to quit a sport. Or maybe you want to barrage the coach with questions about why your kid wasn't good enough and why you, coach, are so stupid not to see the talent you just let go. I can't give you an exact, sufficient mourning period, but I would recommend everyone at least sleep on it. Especially before anyone emails anyone else.

### **3. After a cooling-off, ask your child questions -- and don't give him or her answers yet.**

As a parent, you always would like to use your experience to help your child, and in many cases, that works. However, in this case, I would recommend asking your child some questions to help the both of you focus on the next step. The questions could focus on another activity -- what are other options for sports, or something else? Or maybe they are about dealing with a diminished status on the team -- do you still like being a part of the team? Do you feel like the sports is still preparing you for something else in life? The important thing is to listen, not just to what's said, but also what's not said. Your child will give you clues or what he or she might do next -- and succeed.

By the way, this is the step where things go much easier if your child has participated in and/or enjoyed many activities in the pursuit of being a well-rounded person. At the least, it means if, say, baseball didn't work out, there's always still the choir. I'm not saying your child is immediately jumping for joy over this prospect, but it's something. Also, if your child is well-rounded, it also helps you as a parent not to wrap up your whole identity in your child as a softball player only, or a football player only, or... you get the idea.

This also goes much easier the younger your child is. For one thing, he or she might not have gotten too emotionally invested yet in a sport. Also, he or she has time to pick another activity without anyone worrying so much about how far ahead others are. You also might learn, especially if your child is younger, that he or she is not nearly as upset about it as you are.


#### **4. Guide your child toward the next step.**

Once you've asked questions and listened to your child -- whose answers, depending on the circumstances, could take days or weeks, so you might have to be patient -- now is the time to step in and offer suggestions. Maybe they involved starting a whole new activity. Or maybe it's making the best of a bad situation while remaining on the team. When I say "guide" your child, I don't mean "tell him or her exactly what to do." I mean lead them to where they've hinted they might want to go.

Now there is a fine line between telling and leading, and here is where you can straddle it. Offer options in the form of a general statement, such as, "Staying on the football team, especially in light of such difficult circumstances, is something that would look good on a college application." Or, "you've always received more encouragement in theater than you did in sports -- maybe that's something to concentrate on while you figure out if you'd like to do any other sports." Or, "unfortunately, no matter what activity you do, sometimes working hard isn't enough. Sometimes that's the case in adulthood, too. The question is, how do you respond to the adversity? how do you recognize other opportunities that could be before you? And what can I do as a parent to help?"

I would love to say this four-step process guarantees that, in the end, parent and child are happy after the child is told he or she isn't good enough to start, or play at all, on a sports team. Recovery from such a declaration is never a clean and smooth process. But I think following these steps will make the process cleaner and smoother than it otherwise might be -- and allow the child, someday, to recognize that maybe not being "good enough" was a blessing in disguise.

## **Bob Cook**

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A youth sports blog written by Bob Cook. He's contributed to NBCSports.com, or MSNBC.com, if you prefer. He's delivered sports commentaries for All Things Considered. For three years he wrote the weekly "Kick Out the Sports!" column for Flak Magazine. Most importantly for this blog, Bob is a father of four who is in the throes of being a sports parent, a youth coach and a youth sports economy stimulator in an inner-ring suburb of Chicago. He reserves the right to change names to protect the innocent and the extremely, extremely guilty. You can follow me at [facebook.com/notgoingpro](https://facebook.com/notgoingpro) and [twitter.com/notgoingpro](https://twitter.com/notgoingpro). I'm endlessly fascinating.

## 5 Things to Say When your Child Doesn't Make the Cut

by Barbara Greenberg

Since many of your kids are in the thick of this, we need to have a good conversation about it sooner rather than later. I'm talking about one of the most stressful aspects of going back to or starting high school. So let's all say it out loud once and for all — #TRYOUTS.

Your sons and daughters are trying out for sports teams and feel like the world might end if they don't make the team. In fact, in their worlds making or not making a team is a major part of their adolescent lives.

Consider an incoming freshman boy who has been playing soccer since he was 5 years old. Now here he is going through four days of being evaluated to maintain that part of his life and identity. And, he's being evaluated publicly in front of new coaches and peers. He may or may not make the team. His responses can range from happiness to sheer humiliation. I know this. These boys are sitting in my office practically crying about tryouts.

Now consider a sophomore teen girl who may have been playing soccer for most of her life. She was on the freshman team last year. This year she desperately wants to make the varsity team and be a star like many of her peers. She is at high risk to experience a major letdown if she makes the junior varsity team and her good friends all make the varsity team. Tryouts are no small thing in the lives of teens. And precisely because of that they are no small thing in the lives of parents.

So let's say you're kid makes the desired team. Then the mood around the house is celebratory and upbeat and you can exhale.

What if your kid does not make the team? Should you join your kids in a collective sense of outrage and immediately call the coaches to complain about the injustice of this decision or should you berate your child for their poor performance during tryouts.

Well, hold on please. Before you react please consider my suggestions. Your job is to make your teen feel whole again not to further intensify bad feelings.

If your teen doesn't make the team consider:

1. **Suggesting that this is not where things end for them sports-wise.** In fact, maybe they are not ready for this level of competition yet and can spend this year working on their skills.
2. **Talking to your teen about other opportunities.** Perhaps he/she would like to try a new activity.
3. **Making sure that you don't make this about yourself.** This is solely about your child. No vicarious living through your child here.

**4. Use this as an opportunity for your child to learn how to deal with disappointment.** Dealing with disappointment is a major resiliency skill and helps all of us recover from disappointing daily experiences.

AND

**5. Encourage your child to “remember who they are.”** This is one of my very favorite expressions. Remind them that they are about more than just the sport that they are playing. I know that this can be a harrowing time of the year. I wish you all grace and dignity in handling it well for your own well-being and especially for you teens’ sense of self and self-esteem.

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## When Your Child Doesn't Make the Team

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The beginning of the new school year means that school sports tryouts are just around the corner. And for those interested in acting in the school play or performing with an advanced musical ensemble, there's this in common with the athletes: some will make the cut, and many will not.

At any level, being cut from a team or group of selected individuals hurts. Being young doesn't prevent kids from feeling a pretty sharp sting of rejection if they don't make the team, especially if it's in a sport or activity that they've done well at and really enjoy doing. And sometimes parents can make the process even harder.

Parents ultimately can't control whether their child makes a team or not, but if he or she doesn't, it's up to the parents to try and soften the blow. Parents can yield a lot of influence at this vulnerable point, for better or for worse. They can discourage the young athlete or performer from any further attempts, or they can help them learn to deal with rejection as a part of life that everyone experiences sometimes, and help them bounce back with grace and renewed energy to the next endeavor.

So how can you help your child deal with the rejection of getting cut? Joel H. Fish, PhD, Director at the Center for Sport Psychology, and author of *101 Ways to be a Terrific Sport Parent*, offers this helpful advice on how parents can help support and encourage the young athletes in their home.

- **Be self-aware parents.** Parents need to be aware of their own attitudes towards making the team, and towards winning and losing because inevitably these attitudes will be picked up by their children. Fish cautions, "I believe parents are extremely well intentioned, but parents often have an emotional response to their child not making the team." Parents who display anger or immediately want to challenge the coach's decision are adding an extra dimension to their child's burden. Charles Kuntzleman, author of over fifty books on fitness and health, says that "The most powerful thing is to not display, when they get home, displeasure with what the coach did. Parents have to learn to bite their tongue; it's demoralizing to the team, and a great disservice to the child."
- **Give your child a chance to feel.** Parents can help their child cope by giving him or her 'permission' to have a normal response. Fish says, "There's a tendency for parents to rush in there and say 'it's ok' – sometimes we need to say to our kids 'that must hurt,' or give them a hug, or not say anything." Parents who respond to their child not making the team by saying "Well, soccer is a stupid sport anyways!" invalidate the hurt their child is feeling as well as dismissing something that may well be very important to him or her.
- **Help your child see the big picture.** There's much more to being successful in life than simply making a sports team, however important it may seem at the time, and parents can help their children realize this. Fish suggests that, before a tryout, parents make a list together with their child of multiple goals which reflect what the tryout is really about. One of those goals can be making the team, but include others as well, such as having fun, trying your best, being good team mate, and learning something. Says Fish, "When not all the eggs are in the outcome basket, that can be really helpful for a child who doesn't make the team, because he's going in with multiple definitions of what it means to be successful."

Parents can also help kids realize that even though they didn't make it on the team they were hoping for, they have other options. Community or church leagues may offer opportunities to get involved, or maybe a different sport or activity altogether would provide a fun and exciting challenge. Some kids who

have been cut from one team have gone on to be very successful in a totally different area. Others who were at one time cut from their high school teams, like basketball great Michael Jordan, have gone on to become outstanding athletes.

Every young athlete or performer who is making the effort to succeed will eventually encounter some stiff obstacles and competition. Parents can help their kids to not only handle these setbacks graciously, but to actually grow from them!