

## Knowing Your Destination: Setting the right goals



By Jessica M. Mohler, Psy.D., CC-AASP  
Clinical and Sport Psychologist  
United States Naval Academy

I am sure you have experienced this before: two sailors de-rigging at the end of the day, one has a smile on his face and seems excited about how he did on the water, the other appears upset as you hear him saying to his friend he only finished fifth. Or maybe as a parent, you have had one of your children celebrate on a windy day because she sailed around the buoys without capsizing, while your other child is upset with his second place finish. The post sailing day reaction shows us that success to one child can mean failure to another depending on their goals.

Just recently I attended a post race meeting where a 10-year-old child was asked how his day was on the water. He replied, "terrible." I sat there thinking about whether that child stated the day was terrible because he did not win or place high enough in the standings, or because he had made several mistakes and was swamped by a powerboat. I obviously hoped it was the latter.

We define success and failure through achievement goals (Roberts & Treasure, 1996). It is an individual's perception of his ability that helps to formulate his goals and then the perception of whether their goals have been met, which defines success and failure. For instance, two young sailors can have the same outcome, place fourth in their division, and have two different reactions. Determining whether you have been successful or failed can have a significant impact on a child's confidence, their interest in sailing and lastly their effort and persistence with the sport. Ultimately it will dictate how well a sailor performs in the future and if she or he will stay in the sport.

While some children are sailing this summer because mom or dad thought it was a good idea, some children will CHOOSE to come back next year because they enjoyed it and learned or improved a skill. Sport participation peaks around the age of 12 and then begins to decline. Research by Gould and Petchlikoff (1988) \* suggests that this happens for three reasons:

1. Perception of competence (Am I a good sailor?)
2. Goal Orientation (Am I sailing to get better or to place at regattas?)
3. Stress (Am I having fun or do I worry too much every time I sail?)

In one study of youth athletes, there were a number of reasons boys and girls wanted to participate including to have fun, to improve skills, to be part of a team, to get exercise, etc... but one reason that did not make the top 10 list for either boys or girls was to win. When children take pride in their progressive improvement of knowledge and ability relative to their past performance, they are more likely to continue sailing. However, when children compare themselves to others, and use a finish in a race as their only motivation, they are more likely to stop sailing. Many of you probably know the story of Michael Jordan. He was cut from the Varsity basketball team in high school, but continued to play on the Junior Varsity and improved his skills, making the Varsity team the next year. Could you imagine if he had stopped playing basketball? Youth skill development does not happen at the same time for each child. While one youth sailor may develop the skills necessary to perform consistently as a skipper in sailing by age 10, another child may not. Remember, just because that 10-year-old could not do well in races at age 10, does not mean he will not be a crew member on a Wednesday night series in the summer as an adult. As well, just because a youth sailor has success at age 10 in sailing around the buoys, does not mean he will want to go back to sailing camp next year. If he becomes too focused on his outcome and has a couple of bad regattas, the chance is pretty low. There are ways for parents and coaches to increase the likelihood that both kids will end up continuing in the sport of sailing, and goal setting can help.

Creating goals that are focused on skill development verses outcome are important at all levels of sport. Even Division I athletes in college can get too caught up in outcomes, increasing their risk of quitting the sport because of what happens to most Division I athletes, they start losing when they get to college. They may have been the best in high school and now may be average, or even worse, riding the bench their entire freshmen year. Having the desire to win, but being able to focus on the skills and abilities necessary is ideal. I think many parents believe that their child's focus on regatta finishes is some genetic trait that they have little ability to influence. However, parents have an incredible opportunity to guide their youth sailors to focus on what is important. Ginsburg, Durant and Batzell recommend a three step approach to setting goals for children to maximize not only their performance, but also their health and character:

**1. Know your child**

"Kids are not just smaller than adults, they are physiologically and psychologically different." It's important to take into consideration your child's CURRENT strengths, weaknesses, both physically and psychologically.

**2. Know yourself**

"As parents, we serve our children and ourselves well by becoming aware of our own emotional history, particularly as it pertains to issues of competition, achievement and athletics." Parents can think about their own sports related behavior that was frustrating, upsetting or exciting and how those feelings can be triggered by their child. Knowing your own trigger points and telling your partner, may result in less negative emotional reactions to your child's sailing performance.

**3. Know your child's sports environment**

"We must know the community we live in and its approach to sports." Sailing is not immune to the unhealthy aspects of our society. Find a sailing program that fits

with your family mission and be as diligent as you would be with any childcare provider or school.

Once you have an awareness of these factors, it's time to get your child involved. Parents of young children can ask them to draw a picture to show their goals: what they want to achieve this summer; what they want from sailing; what sailing or sailboat racing means to them etc. Encourage them to consider and incorporate all aspects of sailing and sailboat racing (e.g., skill improvement, meeting friends, enjoyment) into their pictures. Getting your youth sailor to draw their goals rather than write them will get them to think more broadly rather than just saying "I want to sail faster" or "I want to do my best."

For older children, take time to sit down and discuss what they hope to accomplish in sailing; what is their dream: to improve their skill, race in a regatta, make friends, have fun, etc... Once you know what they want to accomplish, ask them to think of 5-10 skills or abilities that are part of accomplishing their goal. Once you have your destination and a set of controllable skills or abilities, it is much easier to set goals that your child can accomplish, thereby building confidence.

Finally, using the acronym **SMART**, write your goals down.

- **Specific:** Identify the skill or ability
- **Measurable:** Establish concrete criteria that can be measured
- **Attainable:** Make the goal setting steps possible to complete in the time your child has.
- **Realistic:** Based on your child's strengths and weaknesses make sure the goal fits where your child is now.
- **Timely:** Have a time frame for achievement so you can assess whether your child's goals are being accomplished.

While one child may dream of being part of a team and having fun on the water, you may identify the need to be friendly as a skill that your child has to develop. Using the SMART acronym, a goal of meeting one new person at camp for the next three weeks may be a great goal. For another child who is looking to increase her level of competition and dreams of racing at a national event, she may identify the need to learn how to accelerate quickly from luffing. She could create a goal to complete three starting / stopping drills of 10 minutes each over the next week. Ultimately, having success as a youth sailor is based on individual personalities, skills and abilities, it is an ever-developing process. While goal setting may take more time, helping our children get to their destination while creating opportunities for skill building and enjoyment has life-long rewards not only for our children, but for the sport of sailing.

See you on the water!

Dr. Jessica Mohler

\*References:

Ginsburg, R., Durant, S. and Baltzell, A. (2006), Whose game is it anyway?

Gould, D. and Petchlikoff, L (1988) Participation motivation and attrition in young athletes. In Children in Sport, 3rd ed, edited by F. Smoll, R. Magill and M. Ash (Champaign, IL; Human Kinetics)

Roberts, G. C., & Treasure, D. C. (1996). Orthogonality of Achievement Goals and Its Relationship to Beliefs About Success and Satisfaction in Sport. Sport Psychologist, 10(4), 398-408.

\*\*\*\*\*

TUESDAY, JUNE 14, 2011

## Developing Youth Sailors: What parents can do to build a strong foundation

By Jessica M. Mohler, Psy.D., CC-AASP  
Clinical and Sport Psychologist  
United States Naval Academy



Jessica Mohler is a clinical and sports psychologist, and a sailing mom too. In this article, Mohler provides an interesting outlook on parenting youth athletes from a sailing perspective and makes recommendations that will help you build a strong foundation for your youth sailor.

I am a sailor. I started at sailing camp at the age of 10. I competed in Lasers during high school and as a varsity sailor in college. I went on to teach and coach the sport to children and adults. My current sailing endeavors include crewing on a J-22. Along the way I became a clinical and sport psychologist. I have now taken on my most challenging role, being a parent of a child who is interested in sport, including sailing.

If you are reading this, there is a good chance you are a parent who enjoys the sport of sailing and wants the best for your child, whether that means simply learning how to sail, or competing in sailboat racing. Sailing is a skill that when taught at a young age can become a lifelong sport and hobby. While parents want their children to succeed, providing guidance can be challenging and there is never one right answer. I hope these recommendations will help you build a strong

foundation for your youth sailor, not only for competing at a high level, but also to develop a lifelong enjoyment of sailing. Sport psychologists agree that sport participation can help children learn important lessons, however, they also agree that it is not the sport itself, but the people who surround the child in the sport, such as parents, coaches, teammates, competitors and administrators, who build character in our children. Building a foundation for excellence as an athlete and as an adult, in many ways, can take the same path. In fact sailing provides a great analogy for this process of development.

If you think about a day of sailing, many of the decisions you make as you get ready and sail to your destination are similar to raising your child. First, you choose where you are going, and gather information about the weather, the current, the time you have and the distance. Similarly setting goals, deciding where you are going and what is important while thinking about what is realistic for your child factoring in his or her abilities is an important step. You pack all your gear for the day, selecting what is necessary for a day sail, just as your child builds his abilities and skills that are consistent with his goals as a sailor. You decide who is going to take the tiller, and as the parent you decide when to let your child steer or when it is best that you take the helm through a narrow channel. Just as you provide guidance and rules for your child, parents need to know when to let their child be independent and when he needs you to intervene to provide guidance. The skipper constantly adjusts to the breeze by looking at the tell tales and trimming the sails, adjusting to the environment so that the course is maintained. Parents need to do this with their child in sport as well, knowing your child strengths and weaknesses as they grow and change is important as you provide guidance through all of life's headers and lifts.

Finally arriving at your destination, whether it's an anchorage and picnic lunch, or a national regatta, requires all of these steps. I remember teaching at J World, a sailing school for adults. The owner of J World, an experienced sailor and educator, instructed us to stand near the stern so at any moment we could nudge the tiller with our foot to avert a crisis. We always started the weeklong instruction standing right near the tiller, but as the week progressed, we could move farther away, always staying within reach of the tiller. In so many ways this is what we do as parents, allowing our children to slowly have more independence, to steer their own boat, always ready at any moment to provide direction and get them on their course. I know parents who have planned for a day sail, but forgot to check the weather, only to end up in a storm, soaking wet without ever reaching their destination. While there are lessons to learn in those types of experiences, they may not be much fun. Ultimately research supports that the more enjoyment a child has in sport, the more likely they are to continue in the sport, play harder and have more success.

In the Book *Whose Game is it Anyway?*, a book by Richard Ginsburg, Steve Durant and Amy Baltzell, the authors suggest that the first step to building excellence in your child is to develop a family mission statement. While many families can involve their children in this process, as parents you decide what is important for your child. Most parents probably have some ideas about the characteristics and values they want their child to have, but it is easy to get caught up in everyday life and what other families are doing, which can detract from your ideals. Developing a mission statement is not simply a thought you have one time, but should be written down and posted around your home, so that both you and your children are reminded about what is important. These authors suggest that building a mission statement can be facilitated by answering two questions:

1. When my child is 21 years old, what kind of person do I want him or her to be, and how will sports help us, as parents, get our child there?
2. What are the three most important virtues or lessons that I want my child to learn through involvement in sports?"

If you have answered these two questions for your family, you have built a foundation to help your child not only learn how to sail well, but to also learn life lessons that will serve them beyond the water. For example, your 12 year old daughter comes home from sailing after her first week of summer sailing, and asks if she can be part of the traveling team. To answer this question you may try to see how this decision fits with your values of compassion, honesty and pursuit of excellence. Can being part of the traveling team build these values and how as a parent can you ensure those values come first? Let's say as a parent you decide it does fit with your family mission and you decide to let her travel. After her second regatta, she comes to you because the girls on the race team are not as friendly to her as her friends from summer camp. What will you say? How will you guide her decision to stay on the team or to go back to the-learn-to-sail program? Alternatively, what if your son comes home from sailing one day and says he wants to quit because he keeps coming in last around the buoys. How will you provide guidance? Is doing well in racing the only reason you continue to sail? Having a family mission statement may help your daughter and son cope more effectively with the challenges they will face. When you build a family mission statement, decision making becomes more meaningful.

In one of the first chapters of *Whose Game is it, anyway?*, the authors conclude that "Ultimately, raising a healthy child who demonstrates good character is neither immediately gratifying nor guaranteed. We know it cannot be purchased. It cannot be measured by daily results like some sort of stock report. The path to this goal is neither easy nor well traveled. We have to live with and manage our own anxieties, disappointments, fears, and frustrations while staying the course with our children."

As I said at the beginning of this article, there is no one right way to develop a strong foundation for your children, but by thinking about the values and ideals you want your child to build in the sport of sailing, you can be more confident that you are making the right decisions for YOUR family. Now the foundation is built, but what comes next? I will be continuing to write about youth development in sailing each month including my top five tips for developing excellence:

- 1) Knowing your destination: Setting the right goals
- 2) Reading the tell tales: Taking cues from your child to develop success
- 3) Preparing for shifts in the breeze: Building confidence and character through sailing
- 4) When to grab the tiller: Encouraging and setting limits for performance excellence
- 5) Working with the crew: Communicating with your child's instructors and coaches

See you on the water.

Regards,  
Dr. Jessica Mohler

For more information on youth sport:  
Ginsburg, R., Durant, S. and Baltzell, A. (2006). *Whose Game Is It Anyway?*