



HEAD START

— **BASKETBALL** —

MENTAL TOUGHNESS

Improve your brain - improve your game

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Is your young player mentally tough enough to compete?

It is not simply a matter of their knowledge, ability and skill in basketball. There is another piece of the puzzle. Are they mentally prepared for everything the game of basketball demands of them? Mental toughness includes the ability to deal with the stress of competition, recovering from mistakes and failure quickly, determining strategies to overcome difficult situations, making adjustments in response to new situations, integrating themselves with their team, enjoying their success but not becoming overconfident or unrealistic and keeping positive thoughts before, during and after the game.

First, let's focus on what mental toughness is. Jim Loehr (1993) is a noted sport psychologist who has worked with many top athletes over the last twenty years. He has created the following definition for toughness: "Toughness is the ability to consistently perform toward the upper range of your talent and skill regardless of competitive circumstances".



There are six components of mental toughness. Your young player needs to ask, am I mentally tough enough to compete?

1. **Sportsmanship.** Mentally tough players exhibit sportsmanship. They don't let the opponent know when he or she has gotten them down. We all experience disappointment, taunts from others, and losing games. The behavior exhibited by mentally tough players after losing or experiencing disappointment sets the tone for the rest of the team. Does your young player blame others for a loss or a mistake or do they take responsibility and look for ways to change the outcome the next time?
2. **Resiliency.** Mentally tough players rebound from disappointments, mistakes and missed opportunities and get right back in the game. They have an ability to fight through the worst of a situation. They remain optimistic in the face of adversity and quickly change when necessary. Does your young player hang their head when things aren't going well or do they fight through it? When a call goes against your young player do they make a face and pout or do they sprint back on defense to help their team?
3. **Fortitude.** Mentally tough players do the right thing for the team. They suppress the temptation to cut corners or to undermine others so they come out on top. They have the courage to make the hard but right decisions for the team.



Mentally tough players ultimately win by making the right and courageous decisions. Does your young player focus on what's best for the team or for his or herself? Are they a team player or are they selfish?

4. **Tenacity.** Mentally tough players are able to exert and resist great force when under pressure and to keep going against insurmountable odds. They find the strength to dig deep and summon the resolve to keep going, even when in a seemingly lost game. They focus on giving their best and fighting hard until the end, with persistent intensity throughout the game. This is a great lesson to instill from an early age. The best encouragement you can give is to praise your young player's consistent effort under all circumstances, good or bad. Great players think, "While this is tough, I am a whole lot tougher." Great players want the ball in pressure situations. If the other team was going to foul at the end of the game, I **always** wanted the ball in my hands. The amount of practice I put in gave me confidence I would make the free throws. Even in pick-up games I always wanted the last shot. I missed the shot plenty of times, but that's how I learned to handle pressure, failure, and ultimately success.
5. **Poise Under Pressure.** Mentally tough players are able to remain engaged and connected with a situation when under pressure. They are constantly identifying the opportunities, challenges, and threats during a game. A young player must think the game and respond accordingly. When the other team starts pressing full court, don't panic and turn the ball over, instead remain calm and understand your role in helping the team break the press.
6. **Adaptability.** Mentally tough players have the ability to absorb the unexpected and make adjustments. They maintain a sense of humor even when the situation becomes tough. If something isn't going well or doesn't turn out as expected, they remain flexible in their approach and look for new ways to solve the problem. A young player needs to be able to make in-game adjustments based on the opponent's game plan, the time, and the score. If the opponent is taking away your young player's right hand, are they flexible and skilled enough to score going left?

How can your young player improve their mental toughness?

The best way is to develop more confidence in their basketball skills and abilities. Skill building is confidence building. The more shots your young player has taken, the more dribbling they have done, the more game situations they have been in, the more confident your young player will be to call on those skills in pressure situations. The mentally tough player is a highly skilled player. Mental toughness allows young players to tap into emotional and mental resources that keep their play at its best as often and consistently as possible.





Help your young player remember that basketball is a team sport. There are other players on the team. Your young player needs their support and skills in order to succeed. It's not just up to them.

Help your young player remember that nobody expects perfection. They are going to miss free throws, or make defensive mistakes. When not performing well, your young player can make adjustments and improve.

Help your young player remember they cannot control everything. They can't control the referees or how well the other team playing. They can't control the decisions the coach makes or mistakes by their teammates. Help them focus on what they can control, playing hard and smart at all times during the game.

Develop a list of personal affirmations – Have your young player write down a number of positive statements about themselves. Start with just a few and add to it over time. These are meant to be general basketball-related affirmations.

For example:

I have really improved this year.

I am mentally tough

I love the challenge of pressure situations

I focus well in big games

Once they have come up with a number of affirmations, write them on an index card and repeat them on a regular basis. They should include important aspects of your young player's game that have meaning for them and can be repeated during practice, in the locker room, on the sideline, or even on the court. It is helpful to change or add to this list over time.

Develop a list of achievement reminders

For example:

I played great in the fourth quarter this year.

I led the team in assists last year

My free throws won the game last month against team x.

I was voted most improved player last season.

Your young player should not worry about being modest. This is for their eyes only. They can update and change the list as needed. Try and be specific. Feel free to review it as much as necessary.





Personal pep talks - Have your young player recall some of the most useful things a coach, friend, or parent ever said to them about basketball or even life. Have them repeat the words to themselves or write it down or just focus on it when they need to. When I was in fourth grade I threw a pass that went through my teammate's hands and out of bounds. I was pretty upset after the game because the play had taken place during a critical moment in the game. My dad said something to me that I often repeated to myself all the way through my college playing career. "Keep making those passes, eventually you'll play with guys who are good enough to catch them." That is still great advice for any young basketball player!

Use positive self-talk - Your young player should focus on what they are doing and not on the result. For example, I need to set a good screen to here to get my teammate open vs. If I don't set a good screen the coach is going to pull me out of the game.

Use imagery to drive high performance - Mentally visualizing success has been shown to increase success in in real life situations. Using imagery must be practiced like any other skill. Your young player will get better at it the more they do it. It is best to use imagery in situation when they are relaxed. Right before bed can a great time to practice visualization. Your young player should try to incorporate as many senses as possible into the imagery. Hear the crowd, what does the gym smell like, what does the ball feel like leaving their hand, etc.



Develop a consistent pre-game ritual - What does your young player do at home on game days? Develop a routine for when they get up, what they eat, what time they get to the game. What do they do at the gym prior to the game? Develop a routine for getting dressed, warming up, and preparing mentally for the game.

Work on their weaknesses first - When your young player chooses to work on the hard things in life they get tougher, when they always choose the easier things they get weaker. When they start a practice or training session with their weaknesses, their intensity and focus will be better leading to greater improvement.

Set challenging goals and write them down - Make the goals measurable and record the results as your young player pursues the goal. Look at the goals as often as possible as a reminder of what they are trying to accomplish. Reaching a goal instills confidence and builds mental toughness.



Remember that what your young player thinks determines how they act – “I’m not good enough.” “I’m tired.” “I can’t.” These should be replaced by “I’m ready for this challenge.” “I’m energized” or “I can do this!” Just putting a positive spin on a situation can make all the difference in success and failure.

Develop a “Short Memory” – Mistakes are going to be made. Your young player must learn from each mistake, but quickly move on to the next play. If they carry the burden of each mistake on their shoulders, it will be like carrying a ton of extra weight during the remainder of the game – there is no way they can play to their full capability. Learn from mistakes, forget them quickly, move on and play the game.

Learn to Deal with Distractions – Your young player must be able to maintain focus in a game (or even in practice). They can improve their mental toughness by working on the way they handle distractions. There are so many different types of distractions that can affect a player – crowd noise, coaches yelling, comments from other players, personal struggles at home, boyfriend/girlfriend problems, referee calls, grades, and many others.

Young players need to learn to overcome any type of distraction, and find a positive way to deal with distractions as they occur. One way is to relax the mind and remain calm. They can close their eyes, take deep breaths, and try to think of a positive outcome. They must remain calm so their mind can quickly deal with any type of distraction that arises.

Play with heart – A young player that plays with heart will go all out. Heart cannot be taught. If they don’t love the game they’ll never work hard enough to be great.

Don’t make excuses – Young players should learn to look inward to solve problems rather than blaming others or their situation. Making excuses is a habit that can be broken. Develop a new habit by asking “What could I have done better?” Young players should look for ways to overcome obstacles, not waste time making excuses. Take responsibility and use failure to build a self-improvement mindset.

Develop a winning attitude – Does your young player have a winning attitude when things are going their way? That’s easy. It is much tougher when their team is losing, the refs just blew a call, or their coach is blaming them for someone else’s mistake. Having a winning attitude means giving your best under all circumstances. That is hard to do. How can your young player develop this type of attitude? They must make a conscious decision to overcome obstacles that are put in their way.

Pay attention to details – Focus on doing things right every time. In practice, in games, on the driveway, any time your young player picks up a basketball. This habit creates a player who is consistent and expects to be able to perform at a high level at all times.

Accept and learn from criticism – No one likes to be criticized. Young basketball players have to learn to understand that the criticism is not a personal attack, but rather a method for pointing out mistakes that allow the player to improve. The best way to take criticism is to nod, keep quiet, and try to learn from it (even if you disagree). If your young player is going to have a long basketball career, criticism will be a part of it. This is especially true if the programs and coaches they play for set high standards and demand excellence from their players. If your young player is





being coached, they will be criticized. The faster they learn to accept it and learn from it the better.

You can always give more - Despite what we often hear, no one gives 100% on the basketball court throughout an entire game. That means there is always room for the mentally tough player to give just a little more effort. Sprint back on defense a little harder, cut through the lane a little faster, jump a little higher for a rebound, encourage a young player to look for ways to boost their effort during the game.

Embrace Nervousness - Remind your young player that getting nervous is a great part of playing sports. As adults do we get nervous at our job? Probably not too often. The emotional excitement leading up to a game should be embraced. Sports are a rare opportunity to experience that type of emotional high. Our bodies are priming us for competition and getting us ready to do our best. Your young player may win the game or lose it, but they should enjoy the experience of being nervous and preparing to play their best.

Play hard - Whenever I watch a game it is easy to pick out the player that is playing the hardest. They usually stand out like a sore thumb. Playing hard is not a sophisticated skill. Anyone can decide to play hard. Encourage your young player to be the one everyone recognizes when they sit down in the bleachers to watch a game. "Wow! Does that kid play hard."

Being mentally tough is a skill that can be developed just like physical skills such as shooting, dribbling, and passing. Refer to this guide often and keep encouraging your young player to develop the winning habits of a mentally tough player in addition to working on their basketball skills out on the court.

