

FOCUS FOR PARENTS

LETTER FROM THE CHAIR



*Edna Chang-Grant
Chair,
Parents Committee*

The Parents Committee is working on another major project this year with U.S. Figure Skating Headquarters — the next Parents Survival Guide. Our goal in the sequel to the successful and popular Parents Survival Guide, available through Headquarters, is to address topics that help parents of competitive skaters at all levels. The Coaches Committee listed topics they would like

parents to know, and we are fine-tuning the topics to include several other areas.

The initial list of general topics includes role of the parent of singles, synchronized, pairs and dance skaters; coaches credentials; finding, interviewing coaches and switching coaches; understanding the judging process; talking to judges; recipe for success; balancing school and skating; money management; boots and blades; and packaging your skater. If any of our readers have ideas for topics, please contact Susi Wehrli or Juliet Newcomer at U.S. Figure Skating.

Being a parent of two skaters, I know what it is like to be a nervous wreck at my daughters' competitions. I would be the first person who could use the guidelines developed by Dr. Alan Goldberg. As parents, we feel powerless watching our skaters compete, knowing that we cannot help in any way other than maybe "staying out of the way," or "getting in the way." We feel emotionally drained by the time the competition is over. Dr. Goldberg provides constructive ways to control our nerves, which helps us and our skater. Special thanks to Elaine Theisen, Focus editor, for finding and compiling the information.

My first year as Parents Committee chair has been a rewarding one, and I would like to thank my talented and dedicated committee for their support of our projects and our regional, sectional and national parent meetings. Special thanks and gratitude goes to our writers and authors for the Focus For Parents articles submitted for SKATING magazine. It has been a successful and well-received endeavor in its first year of inclusion in SKATING.

Nervousness — How you can help

While it's not necessarily your job to keep your child calm before the big competition (remember you're not the coach), parents can certainly assist in this area. Sports psychologist Dr. Alan Goldberg has worked with athletes at all levels including the 1999 NCAA men's basketball champions University of Connecticut Huskies. Goldberg believes these 11 tips can help parents keep their children calm and help the skaters enjoy the experience of competition.

- 1.** Stay calm yourself. Kids quickly pick up on the tension of their parents. If you are relaxed about their performances, it will be easier for them to be relaxed. So take a chill pill and model relaxation to your kids.

- 2.** Keep the performance in perspective. Athletes choke if they make the competition too important. Help your child understand that it's only a competition and there will be plenty more. Keep the competition in perspective yourself. Let them know that regardless of the outcome, they'll still be eating dinner with you tonight. Don't fall into the trap of getting yourself too invested in your child's performance or goal.

- 3.** Behave appropriately at practices and competitions. Stay in control. Don't yell at the skaters, your kid or the officials. Don't bad mouth the coach. Smile and cheer all the good efforts, not just your child's. Screaming, inappropriate parents kill the fun, make kids tense and ruin a child's performance.

4. Stress fun. If your child is having fun, he or she will skate to their potential. Try to emphasize that this is what competing is all about — the more fun, the better you perform. This means that you as a parent must also have fun.

5. Keep your kid away from the uncontrollables. Try to steer your child's focus off the things they can't control. This means that you don't talk about how big the competition is, what's at stake, why they have to beat a certain opponent, how bad the judging was at the last competition, etc. Try to get your child to focus on the things that they can control, such as their performance, attitude and how they react to the uncontrollables.

6. Use humor. If a big competition is coming up and your child is panicking, try using some humor to calm them down. Getting them to laugh will quickly relax them. Doing something completely unexpected and perhaps silly may also do the trick.

7. Speaking of distractions — one way to keep athletes away from the stress-inducing uncontrollables and to calm them down is to consciously distract them. You can distract them with activities (movies, games, etc.), friends or by using your imagination. There are no limits to your creativity. Just help them change mental channels.

8. Breathing is good. Getting your child to slow down and deepen his or her breathing is a quick way to calm them down. You can't freak out and breathe from your diaphragm at the same time. Have them follow your lead and do a few minutes of deep, belly breathing.

9. Give permission to fail. Fear of failure is a frequent source of nervousness for athletes. Help your child put this fear in perspective with

the understanding that failure is a necessary prerequisite for success. Failure is nothing more than feedback on how to get better. Therefore, you must respond to the failures in a constructive way. Don't get angry or disappointed in your child when they fail. This will only make them worry more next time they go out to compete. Teach them to forgive their mistakes and failings and to learn from them. What's the best way to do this? Model it yourself and forgive their bad performances.

10. Keep inappropriate thoughts and feelings to yourself. Let's face it — we're all human. You want your child to be happy and skate well. Sometimes when that doesn't happen, your "evil team" begins to whisper nasty things in your ear about the coach, the officials, the other skaters or even your child. Watching your child compete can be emotionally evocative. Remember you're the adult. Be mature. Don't act out these inner feelings. Instead keep them to yourself, smile and cheer. Sooner or later those nasty feelings will go away.

11. Protect your child from overzealous coaches. If your child's coach is one of the main sources of his or her stress, then you may be well advised to find another coach. Not only must you do all 10 of the above suggestions, but the coach must also. Kids begin to focus on the uncontrollables when coaches place too much emphasis on winning, make a child feel that failing should be avoided at all costs, yell and scream too much and have no perspective. If you have a coach that is generally angry and a nervous wreck at competitions, you can be sure that your child will never stay calm under pressure, will end up hating the sport and may soon become a dropout statistic.

Compiled by Parents Committee member Elaine Theisen, Diamond Ice FSC, St. Louis, Mo. Theisen can be reached by e-mail at sk8gurustl@aol.com. For more information on Dr. Goldberg visit his web site at www.competitivedge.com.

