



# BRING YOUR MIND TO THE GAME

## SPORT PSYCHOLOGY

### &

## MENTAL TRAINING

**KUNASHNI PARIKH**  
CLINICAL AND SPORTS PSYCHOLOGIST



## The Parent Presence Protocol

Helping Your Child Perform Freely — Even When You're Watching

### Purpose

This protocol is designed to help parents reduce unintended performance pressure and create an environment where children can perform freely, confidently, and without fear of losing love or approval.

It is not about being less supportive.

It is about being supportive in the right way.

### What's Happening in Your Child's Brain?

When your child knows you're watching, something subtle shifts.

Instead of just playing, their brain enters **evaluation mode**.


- The **prefrontal cortex** (self-monitoring, overthinking) becomes more active.
- The **amygdala** (threat detection) may interpret your presence as social evaluation.
- Attention splits: *perform well + manage how my parent feels*.

That's double the mental load.

This pattern isn't unique to children. Research from the Michigan State University's Institute for the Study of Youth Sports shows that children often feel pressure long before parents realize it.

And work by Professor Guy Roth highlights something deeper:

Children constantly scan for one signal:



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“Does my parent’s love change based on how I perform?”

Even subtle changes — tone of voice, eye contact, silence in the car — can register as conditional approval.

Over time, performance becomes linked to identity.

Now the game isn’t just about winning.

It’s about belonging.

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## The Parent Presence Protocol

A structured guide to reduce social evaluation pressure and protect intrinsic motivation.

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### Step 1 — Separate Love From Performance (Before the Game)

#### What to tell yourself:

- “My job is not to evaluate.”
- “My job is to witness.”
- “My child’s performance does not reflect my parenting.”


Children are incredibly sensitive to emotional shifts.

If your nervous system is tense, theirs will be too.

#### Pre-Game Rule:

Say only one thing before competition:

“Have fun. I love watching you play.”



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Nothing tactical. Nothing corrective.

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## **Step 2 — Normalize Neutral Reactions (During the Game)**

Your facial expressions matter more than your words.

Avoid:

- Dramatic reactions
- Visible frustration
- Coaching from the sidelines
- Intense staring after mistakes

Instead:

- Neutral posture
- Soft expression
- Light applause for effort, not outcome

You are not the coach.

You are the emotional anchor.

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## **Step 3 — Control the Car Ride Home (After the Game)**

This is the most sensitive moment.

Do **not** ask:

- “Why did you miss that?”
- “What happened in the third quarter?”
- “Why didn’t you try harder?”

Instead, say one of these:



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- “I loved watching you.”
- “Did you enjoy yourself?”
- “I’m proud of your effort.”

Then let them talk first — if they want to.

Silence is not punishment.

It becomes punishment when it feels emotionally cold.

Keep tone consistent — win or lose.

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## **Step 4 — Remove Conditional Rewards**

If you celebrate wins loudly but losses quietly, the message becomes:

Winning = connection  
Losing = distance

Keep rituals the same.

If you get ice cream after a win — get ice cream after a loss.

Consistency protects self-worth.

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## **Step 5 — Reduce Exposure Frequency**


Sometimes, the most supportive move is strategic absence.

Not every practice needs an audience.

Not every game needs observation.

Allow some performances to belong entirely to your child.

Autonomy builds resilience.



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## Step 6 — Shift From Outcome Identity to Effort Identity

Instead of praising:

- “You’re such a star.”
- “You’re the best player.”

Praise:

- “I love how hard you worked.”
- “You stayed focused even when it was tough.”
- “You kept going.”

Effort praise builds durable confidence.

Outcome praise builds fragile confidence.

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## Step 7 — Anchor Unconditional Signals

Make sure your child experiences:


- Physical affection unrelated to performance
- Normal conversation unrelated to the game
- Consistent tone regardless of result
- Shared time not linked to achievement

Your child should never feel they must *earn* warmth.

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## What This Protocol Protects

- Intrinsic motivation



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- Emotional safety
- Healthy identity development
- Long-term love for the sport

Because the goal isn't just to raise a great athlete.

It's to raise a child who:

- Loves the game
  - Performs freely
  - Feels safe being imperfect
  - And knows they are loved — regardless of the scoreboard
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