



Why My Daughter is a Cheerleader (and why I wish I had been one)

First and foremost, I am a parent. So if you are an athlete reading this essay ~ be forewarned ~ it is coming from the perspective of a Mother, not a peer! :) But if you are a fellow parent, especially one who is new to the sport of Cheerleading or if you are considering entering it, read on! I hope you gain some insight into why we “Cheer Moms” are so passionate about cheerleading ~ you might be surprised!

My child, who happens to be a girl (but these lessons apply to boys just as fully) has learned more about how to master the challenges in life at the ripe age of 11 (after her 5 years of cheering) than I learned well into my twenties. As a Mother, I cannot tell you just how much I value the “life lesson” conversations that cheering brings to the surface during The Car Ride Home (all you seasoned Cheer Moms *know* why that phrase is capitalized!)

Here is just a sampling of what she has learned, and is learning, that I wish I had known at her age:



How to really, truly function as a team member & the indescribable value of self discipline

You may be thinking, “Many sports offer teamwork as a benefit!” But really? How many sports require an *entire* team of 20 to 35 youths and adolescents to work in rapid-fire, *perfect* synchronization with all-out athleticism for a full routine?

Cheerleading requires that every athlete put forth their best work every practice, every competition, every time. My daughter has learned how to work for the benefit of her team even when she doesn’t feel like it. When she is tired. When she is lazy. When she is discouraged and her heart is not in it. When she has a headache, body ache, cramps, and low mileage per gallon. She learns that her team is really depending upon her and if she does not do her part, her team cannot fully do their part. There is no bench.

My daughter has learned how uncomfortable it is to practice when she would really rather not, thank you. But, she has gained a *greater* understanding of the rewards of persevering through “off” days, pulling herself up with her bootstraps and going to work for the benefit of her team ~ and contributing to the production a dazzling outcome. This emerging self-discipline and the rewards it brings to her developing personality will be of benefit her entire life.



How to get along with people that she would not otherwise choose (while under pressure, no less!)

I have learned that cheerleading is full of extraordinary young women and men, who for the most part, get along well and have a wonderful time. But.... they are kids! They do not always see eye-to-eye, and,

by definition, they are developing in the maturity department. Add to this varied mix of personalities that they are on teams that must function in synchronization, and it can sometimes be a recipe for stress. Does this sound like your job?

My cheerleading daughter is building life skills by learning how to get along with people when they are under stress, and perhaps not on their best behavior. How to accept them. How to forgive them. How to monitor and control her own behavior when she feels the same. And most importantly, how to Get The Job Done in spite of it. She has learned that when it comes to critical cheer team functions, such as building and executing stunt groups and pyramids, she *must* put aside her differences and work with *all* her teammates to produce a work product that benefits everyone. Now how valuable is that?



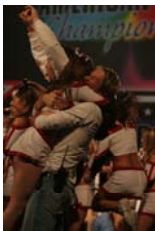
How to perform, compete, and meet high expectations in front of thousands of screaming fans ~ and gracefully accept the consequences.

I will never forget my daughter's (and my) first national competition. The huge arena, the thousands of spectators, the theatre of strobe lights and the vibrating music surrounding the stage. She was thrilled ~ and petrified. She was only 6 years old! Thanks to the skill of her extraordinary coach she was well prepared, but she had never experienced anything like it. The thought of going out in front of her friends, family and coaches to perform really shook both of us.

Through the following 5 years, I watched her self-confidence grow exponentially as a result of cheerleading. She can now stand and speak or perform for anyone ~ and she enjoys it! I look back to my first experience in public speaking and deeply wish I had the experience she carries at her young age!

She has also learned how to graciously accept the consequences of spectacular performances and of performances that did not go as planned. She has participated in many competitions in which our gym dominated the entire event ~ *we owned the house!* She and I have had many conversations about winning with humility and understanding the perspective of those teams who have worked as hard as hers but experienced a difficult day. She is learning how to accept the admiration and congratulations of those around her without the accompanying arrogance that can be so tempting.

She has also had a few competitions in which she cried ~ a lot. She learned how to forgive herself, her teammates, and sometimes, her coaches. She learned how to accept it when her teammates needed to forgive her. She learned that a difficult competition or a difficult year is not a reason to give up and quit ~ they can be reasons to try harder. She learned that the world does not spin off its axis ~ life goes on and opportunities to learn from the negative experiences are just as valuable, if not more so, in learning how to improve. All of these experiences and lessons are those that I learned on-the-job at a much later stage in life ~ I envy that she is learning them so much earlier!



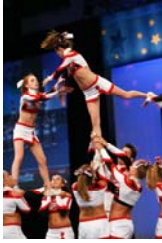
How to implement a plan established by her boss with which she does not completely agree

Let's face it ~ its human nature that when there is a team of 20-35 members, there will be 20-35 differing opinions on how things should go! In her early years, this was not so much of a challenge for my daughter, but as she developed into a more experienced cheerleader, she developed into a more opinionated one!

We are truly blessed at Cheer Legendz to have some of the Best coaches in the nation. They are extraordinarily skilled at assessing each athlete's talents and abilities and placing them on a squad and in a routine for their benefit and for the benefit of the squad. However, the athlete does not

always agree with the coach's assessment! My daughter is learning that it benefits everyone, herself included, to implement the plan the coaches have developed even when she does not fully comprehend all of its nuances. She is learning that adults with more experience have perspectives that she has yet to gain.

Through the years, she has performed in nearly every position possible on her cheerleading teams. She has been a cheerleader from level 1 to level 5, a base and a flier, a front and back dancer, and on teams in which she earned a tumbling pass and on teams in which she did not. She is gaining a perspective that regardless of her squad placement and her position within the squad, being an enthusiastic, contributing team member benefits her team ~ and benefits her. I am sure she will carry this forward throughout her life.



Personal fitness

This last point is a little out of theme. It has little to do with what my daughter has learned but rather about what she has achieved. Because she is a cheerleader, she has attained a level of physical fitness that is rarely seen among her non-cheerleading peers. Cheerleaders (girls in particular) have a level of strength, endurance, flexibility and power that benefits them immensely.

In a world in which health professionals are very worried about the health and fitness of children, cheerleaders are in direct opposition to the trend.

Their high level of fitness has enormous emotional benefits too. It gives them the physical and emotional confidence to tackle any task, to act as motivators in leading others to accomplish it, and to approach it with a well-earned sense of self-discipline.

So, that is why I am an enthusiastic "Cheer Mom"! Granted, it is just plain fun to work out in a gym that consistently wins recognition and awards, but the trophies are not the most valuable prizes she and I are taking away from her experiences as a cheerleader ~ there is so much more that she will carry with her long after she has forgotten which place she took at which competition.

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