

Wynne Leon (00:01)

It is surprisingly hard to watch someone else try. Not when it's going well, not when it's working, but when they're in that middle space. Uncertain, figuring it out, maybe failing. You can feel it in your body. You want to help. You want to fix it. You want it to turn out okay. And without realizing it, that feeling can shape how we show up. It can turn into pressure.

our expectations or subtle signals about what we hope will happen. I'm Wynne Leon and in this episode of the Life of Try podcast, I explore the question, what does real support actually look like? Not the finish line, but in the middle of trying. Because maybe support isn't about helping someone succeed. Maybe it's about helping them stay in it. I pull stories and lessons

From legendary UCLA basketball coach John Wooden about how to build a framework that leads to success. And refer to psychologist Carol Dweck's research about praising effort, not results. Because often the way that we respond to other people's trying might shape whether they keep going at all. This is The Life of Try.

So I've been watching a lot of Little League baseball this spring. And there's so much about baseball that syncs with trying. Think about some of our favorite phrases. I'm gonna take a swing at it. Swing for the fences. It's a swing and a miss. You can't hit the ball if you don't take a swing. And on and on.

One of the fascinating things I've noticed is the reaction of the parents as our young kids, aged six to eight, come up to bat. There's the parent who winces every time because her child hasn't been hitting well. And then they're the parents of the twins. The boys not only react to how they do, but also their performance as it relates to how the other twin did.

And these parents just hope that both of their kids do well at the same time. And then there's the parents of the young phenoms, who consciously or unconsciously seem to have high expectations for how their kids will perform. Watching all of this is like a window into the question of how we can support each other when we try.

This speaks to me not only as a parent, trying to encourage my kids to try, but also as a tryer a friend, a family member, and co-worker. It might be harder to watch other people try than to do it ourselves. Because we experience the fear of disappointment without having the agency to help with the outcome.

I started looking around for stories about how to support others with their trying. My favorite example was Coach John Wooden. Since we're in the middle of the NBA playoffs right now, it seemed extra fitting. A quick bio. John Wooden was born in 1910, he played basketball for Purdue University, and then he briefly played professional basketball before starting teaching and coaching at the high school level.

He served as a lieutenant for the US Navy during World War II, and then he coached at Indiana State University before taking the head coaching job at UCLA in 1948. If you just looked at his record of results at UCLA, you'd think John Wooden was obsessed with winning. Ten national championships, seven in a row, one of the greatest dynasties in sports history.

But if you listened to him talk or watched him coach, you'd see something almost surprising. He rarely talked about winning at all. Instead, John wouldn't define success this way:

Success is peace of mind. Knowing you did your best to become the best you are capable of becoming. That's a completely different target. Not the scoreboard, not the trophy, but the

There's a famous story about his very first practice of the season. The players, some of the best athletes in the country, showed up ready to run drills, scrimmage, prove themselves. And John Wooden started with something else entirely. He taught them how to put on their socks. Carefully, smoothly, no wrinkles. Because wrinkles cause blisters, and blisters take you out of the game. It sounds almost absurd.

Until you realize what he's doing. He's saying, we're gonna focus on the smallest details of effort. Not because socks win championships, but because attention, care, and discipline, those are the things you can control. From day one, he's directed their attention away from outcomes and toward how they show up.

During his games, John Wooden didn't react the way many coaches do. A player might score a beautiful basket and get no reaction. But if that same player hustled back on defense, dove for a loose ball, or made the right pass instead of forcing a shot, that's when Wooden would respond. Because those were the things he cared about. The controllables, the effort, the decision to play the right way.

Players learned quickly. It's not did you score? It's did you do the work? And that's where this gets really interesting. By not emphasizing winning, John Wooden actually freed his players from the fear that often comes with it.

They didn't have to carry the burden of what if we lose? What if I mess up? What if I disappoint everyone? Instead, they had a clearer, much simpler job. Set a good screen, make the right pass, play with effort and discipline. And then let the outcome take care of itself. One of his players once said that playing for Wooden felt different because

You knew exactly what was expected, and it had nothing to do with the scoreboard. What's powerful here isn't just Wooden's philosophy, it's how he supported his players. He wasn't motivating them by pressure or fear. He wasn't tying their worth to results. He was

giving them something much steadier. A clear definition of success they could reach every day.

A focus on actions they could control, and feedback that reinforced effort, not outcome. In other words, he created an environment where trying was safe, where players could miss a shot and still feel aligned with what mattered, where effort was always available, even when results weren't.

And of course, the paradox is, by focusing so relentlessly on effort, they won. A lot. But winning wasn't the point. It was the byproduct of a system that was built on preparation, discipline, and consistent supported effort. And of course, this matches with the parenting wisdom for praising effort, not outcomes.

And is based on the work from psychologist Carol Dweck on how praise shapes motivation. In classrooms, she found that when kids were praised for being smart, they avoided harder challenges. But when teachers praised effort, strategies, and persistent, kids chose harder problems and kept trying.

The support shifts from judging outcomes to honoring the process of trying. And that directly increases persistence. Support isn't always about saying good job. Sometimes it's about saying, keep going, you're not there yet. And circling back to baseball.

I was reminded this weekend by one of the coaches on my son's team about the importance of the on base percentage. It measures how often someone gets to first base. It's a stat that's less flashy than the number of home runs or runs batted in, but by getting on base, players help move the team forward. That's a great reminder for me as a parent and as a try-er

Supporting others isn't about the overall outcome, just being present to help them keep swinging.