

CROSSCOURT IQ

What Nobody Tells You

The tennis parent's guide, for families who never played the game.

If you did not grow up playing, the first two years are lonely. Everyone at the court seems to already know something you do not. The coach uses words you have never heard. You search for answers and find forums arguing with each other.

You are not behind. Nobody told you, that's all.

Free · Written to save you money, not spend it

Written by a tennis parent who learned all of this the hard way.
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Five things you can do this week

Before you read anything else. None of them cost money.

- 1 **After the next match, say five words: "I love watching you play."** Then stop. No questions, no observations, not even kind ones. Chapter one explains why this is the most important page in the guide.
- 2 **Pluck the strings on their racquet.** If the note is dull, or the strings sit in little grooves and no longer spring back, it needs restringing. Dead strings hurt arms. This costs less than a lesson and matters more than most of them.
- 3 **Turn their shoes over.** If the outsole is smooth under the ball of the foot, they are finished — long before they look worn out to you. Playing in dead shoes is how ankles and heels get hurt.
- 4 **Ask the coach the question you have been too embarrassed to ask.** Any of them. Every good coach would rather explain than have you guess.
- 5 **Arrange one match against another child their own age.** Not a lesson. Not a camp. A match, with a score in it. This is the single cheapest and most under-used piece of development in the sport.

Everything in this guide is meant to save you money, not spend it.

Tennis has a lot of people willing to sell you certainty. Almost everything that actually matters is free or cheap.

One note before you start. Nothing here is medical advice, and none of it replaces a coach. Where your child's body is involved, see a professional. Where the tennis is involved, a good coach beats any book, including this one.

The car ride home

The most important ninety seconds in junior tennis, and the easiest to get wrong.

We are starting here because it matters more than everything else in this guide put together, and because it is the one thing you can get right tonight.

What you say in the first ninety seconds after a match will do more to decide whether your child still plays this sport at sixteen than any coach, racquet or tournament.

Say: "I love watching you play."

Then stop. That is the whole thing. It is the most researched, most repeated and most ignored piece of advice in junior sport.

Not now:

- What went wrong
- What you noticed from the fence
- What the coach has been telling them
- Questions — even kind ones. A question is still a debrief.

If they want to talk, follow them. Let them lead it, and let it be about whatever they raise, even if it is tactically the wrong thing. They will talk when they are ready, and they will talk far more if the last hundred car rides felt safe.

The real debrief happens later — the next day, in writing, or through the coach. If you have something genuinely useful to say, write it down and give it to the coach. It lands better coming from them, and it keeps you as the parent rather than the second coach.

And when you do talk, the frame is always the same: "You can't control the result. You can control your effort and your decisions."

It is true, it is fair, and it is the only part of a tennis match a child actually owns. They do not control the draw, the opponent, the calls, the wind, or the fact that the other player has been at this three years longer. They control how hard they chase and what they choose to do with the ball.

This is also what gives you something honest to praise after a loss. "You never stopped running for the drop shots" and "you kept going crosscourt until you got the short one" are real compliments. They are specific, they are true, and they are available on the worst day of the season.

One warning about it: said often enough and vaguely enough, it becomes a noise a child stops hearing. "Good effort" is empty. Name the thing you actually saw.

The test: your child should be able to lose badly and still want to get in the car with you. If that is true, you are doing the hardest part right, whatever the results say. And it applies after wins too — a child who only gets warmth after a win learns exactly what you are really watching for.

When the drive home goes wrong

It will sometimes. That is worth a page of its own.

Why waiting is not just being nice. Here is the part that changes how this feels. **What you can see an hour after a match is not what you will see the next morning.**

In the car you can mostly see the errors. That is not a character flaw, it is how disappointment works, and it happens to everybody. By breakfast you can usually see what they tried, what they did well, and how they carried themselves when it went wrong. Both of those people are you. **The one at breakfast is seeing more of the match.**

So waiting costs you nothing. The lesson is still there tomorrow. It is a better lesson tomorrow, and it arrives from a more accurate version of you.

When you get it wrong, and you will. Every parent in this sport has had the drive home they wish they could take back. The match got the better of them, and for a few minutes they stopped talking to a child and started talking to a result. **It happens to people who know better and it happens to people who have read this page.**

It is worth being honest about that here, because a guide written for a perfect parent is no use to a real one. If it has happened to you, you are not unusual, and it is not the end of anything.

What a child remembers is not really that it happened. **It is whether somebody came back later and said so.** Not a speech. "I was still angry about the match and I took it out on you. That was mine, not yours." That sentence does more repair work than a week of being careful, and it teaches something no tennis lesson can.

Give them the words too. Tell your child, out loud and before the next tournament, that they are allowed to say "*can we talk about it tomorrow?*" and that the answer will always be yes. A child who can say that will use it — and a child who cannot will simply go quiet instead, which looks like the same thing and is not.

Words your player can borrow

The car ride again, this time written to the person in the passenger seat.

Everything so far has been addressed to you. This page is written to your player, and it is here so you can hand it over. Read it together once, before the next tournament, and it will do its work months later without either of you mentioning it again.

You are allowed to not want to talk about it. That is not rude, and it does not mean you do not care about the match. Caring is exactly why it is hard to talk about ten minutes after it finished.

Here are the words. Borrow them exactly as they are.

“Can we talk about it tomorrow?”

Most people in your corner will say yes. They are usually just as churned up as you are, and a lot of them do not know what to say either.

One thing worth holding on to. How somebody speaks to you straight after a match is about that moment. It is not a measure of how you played, and it is not a measure of what they think of you.

Tomorrow really is a better day to look at it. You will see more of what actually happened, and so will they. What you can see an hour after a match is mostly the errors. By breakfast you can usually see what you tried, what you did well, and how you carried yourself when it got hard.

Losing a match you cared about is supposed to hurt. That is what caring feels like. Give it a night.

And for the parent, one last time. If your player uses those words, the answer is yes, every time, without a face. The first time it is honoured is the only reason there will be a second time.

What to do during the match

You are allowed to watch. You are not allowed to coach. They are different things.

Where you sit matters. Somewhere your child can see you if they look — and they will look, some of them after every single point — but not directly behind the baseline they are serving to, where you sit in their eyeline all match.

Your face is the whole of your coaching during a match.

Not your words. Children read a parent's face from sixty feet away and they are extremely good at it. A wince after a double fault says more than anything you could shout.

The rules, and these are actual rules, not manners:

- No coaching. No signals, no hand gestures, no "come on" after their opponent misses.
- No line calls from the fence. Ever. It can get your child defaulted.
- If it is going badly, stay. Walking away says far more than staying does.

Write, do not talk. Take notes instead. It gives you something to do with the nerves, it stops you commentating, and it turns two hours of helpless watching into the most useful thing you will produce all week.

On tracking apps. If you use a tennis tracker to log the score, first-serve percentage, winners and errors, break points — good. It beats memory, and it turns arguments into numbers. Two warnings:

- **Do not let the phone replace watching.** The most useful things — footwork, body language, what they did between points — are not in any app.
- **Never show your child the stats straight after.** A number is a debrief, and chapter one applies.

If you only track one thing, track rally length. How many balls crossed the net in each point. It tells you more about a developing player than winners, errors or the score — and it is the number that moves first when they are improving.

How to tell they're improving when they keep losing

The scoreboard is the worst measure you have, and the only one you can read.

Wins are a **lagging** indicator. They arrive long after the improvement that caused them, and they depend heavily on who happened to be in the draw. A child can play the best tennis of their life and lose 6–2 6–2 to someone two years older.

So if you only read the scoreboard, you will conclude your child is not improving during exactly the period when they are improving fastest.

Measure these instead. All of them are visible from the fence:

- **Rally length.** Are points lasting longer than they did three months ago?
- **Double faults.** Going up can be a good sign — it often means they finally stopped tapping the second serve in.
- **Did they follow a plan?** Any plan. Having one and sticking to it beats winning without one.
- **What happened after a bad point?** How fast they reset is a skill, it is trainable, and it shows.
- **Who are they losing to now** compared to a year ago? Losing 4–6 to a player who beat them 0–6 is enormous progress that the result sheet records as a loss.

Our own son lost his first ten matches. Every one of them.

We had entered him well above the level he should have started at, because we did not know any better. That part was on us, not on him. He turned up the next day, every time, and asked when the next one was.

Showing up again after losing again is not the absence of mental strength. It is the whole of it. If your child is doing that, they already have the part nobody can teach them.

Keep the sheets. Three months of match sheets will show you a trend that no run of results ever will — and it gives the coach something far more useful than "he lost again."

The child who develops differently

If your child is brilliant in matches and hopeless in drills, this page is for you.

Most tennis teaching is built around a particular kind of child: one who stands in a line, absorbs a technical correction, repeats it fifty times, and looks better by the end of the session.

Plenty of children are not that. They lose focus in a drill within ninety seconds. They cannot see the point of hitting the same ball again. Their technique arrives months later than everyone else's — and then in a live point, with something at stake, they do things nobody taught them.

That is not a worse player. It is a different operating system.

A drill is a task with the situation stripped out of it. Some children need the situation before the task means anything. Take it away and they disengage — not because they cannot do it, but because it is not a real question yet.

What actually helps:

- **Put a score on it.** Almost anything becomes a drill for these children the moment it is a competition. Games to seven, first to five, a target with a consequence.
- **Give them the why first.** Two sentences of reason before the repetition, every time.
- **Find a coach who plays with them,** not one who feeds from a basket. It costs the same.
- **More match play, less lesson.** Their learning happens in live situations, so give them more of the thing they learn from.

What to protect them from: a group session where the good balls flow to the child who already looks good in a line. It happens naturally, without anybody meaning it, and a term of it teaches your child something about themselves that is not true.

The one thing to hold on to: confidence first, everything else after. A child who believes they are good at this will out-develop a technically neater one who does not — and the reverse is very hard to undo.

Who they hit with matters more than how much

The most common mistake here feels like the safe, sensible choice.

The instinct is to buy the best hitting partner you can afford. A coach. A college player. A strong twenty-year-old who hits a beautiful ball.

That ball **is** beautiful. It is also nothing like a match.

A good hitting partner sends the ball at the same height, the same pace, into the same spot, and sends it when your child is ready for it. They are **trying to help**. Nobody in a match is trying to help. So your child looks wonderful in that session — they were meant to. It was built that way.

If the only people your child hits with are better than they are, they are practising for a match that does not exist.

They need all three, and each teaches something different:

- **Better players their own age.** Where they see what the next level feels like, and where they lose. Losing is where most of the learning actually happens.
- **Players at their own level.** The real one. Close matches decided by decisions rather than talent — which is what the whole sport comes down to.
- **Weaker players.** The one everybody skips. Closing out a match you are expected to win is a completely separate skill, and being the favourite is its own kind of pressure.

Why the peer ball is the one that counts: it is inconsistent, and adjusting to a ball you did not expect is the skill. It also arrives with intent — someone is genuinely trying to beat your child, which changes everything about how it feels.

And rallying is not practising. Two hours of comfortable hitting feels like hard work and develops almost nothing. The difference is simple: **a practice can be won or lost, and a rally cannot.** One of these three turns the first into the second.

- **A target.** Something on the court they are trying to hit. Ten forehands crosscourt past the service line before we move on.
- **A score.** First to seven. Or start the game at 30–40 down, so every point costs something.
- **A consequence.** Missing has a price attached. Lose the drill and you pick up the balls, or you owe five serves at the end.

None of it has to be clever. It only has to have an answer at the end, and "we hit for an hour" is not an answer.

None of this means never hit with a stronger player. There is real value in it — rhythm, seeing a cleaner ball, confidence. Use it as seasoning, not as the meal.

The coach who will do the hard part

The most expensive coaching mistake is the one where everything looks fine.

The most common arrangement in junior tennis looks like this. One or two lessons a week. The coach feeds balls, your child hits them, the balls look better by the end of the hour, and everybody goes home pleased.

Nothing was corrected. Not that week, not that month, and in some cases not that year.

That is usually not laziness. **Feeding balls is the thing nobody complains about.** Changing a stroke makes a child worse for a few weeks, and the coach who does it gets an unhappy player and a worried parent by the third lesson. The easy path is easy for a reason.

Why technique is worth the trouble. It is not about looking good and it is not about copying a professional. Technique decides what a shot does when the ball is *not* perfect — late, low, stretched, or arriving when your child is tired.

- A stroke that only works on a comfortable ball works in a lesson and vanishes in a match. Matches are mostly uncomfortable balls.
- **Poor technique has a ceiling**, and it is usually reached around thirteen or fourteen. The player does not get worse. They stop getting better, and nobody can tell you why.
- The repair gets harder every year. At eleven there are only so many repetitions to undo. By sixteen there are a great many.

One step back for a few weeks buys two steps forward for the next ten years.

If your child loses to somebody they used to beat while a change is being made, that is the price of the change. It is not proof the coach is wrong. It is usually the only proof you will get that something real is happening.

Ask one question, and listen for whether the answer is ready: *"What are we changing right now, and what will get worse before it gets better?"* A coach doing the hard part answers that in a sentence. A coach who is feeding balls will tell you your child is doing great.

Two things that are also true. Not every quirk needs fixing — a coach who wants to rebuild everything at once is as much a problem as one who fixes nothing. And never change coaches in the middle of a change. You pay for the dip, then leave before the payoff arrives.

Coaches, tournaments and where the money goes

The three biggest cheques you will write, and what each one actually buys.

Choosing a coach. Watch a session before you pay for one. You are looking for whether the coach talks to your child by name, whether your child is moving, and whether anything specific was taught — not whether the balls looked good.

- **Count the heads.** Eight children on a court is supervision. Four is coaching. Two is a lesson. The brochure will not tell you which one you bought.
- **Ask your child what they did today.** If the answer is "we rallied," ask again tomorrow. A child can spend six months somewhere and never be taught one specific thing.
- **When to leave:** when your child stops wanting to go, when nothing has changed in six months, or when you cannot get a straight answer about what they are working on.

Tournaments. Levels vary by country, region and year, and the naming changes — so check your own association's current structure. The principle underneath does not change:

Enter at the level where your child sometimes wins and sometimes loses.

If they never win a match, nothing is being built. If they never lose one, nothing is being built either. The middle is where the learning is. We got this wrong at the start, and it cost our son ten straight losses before we understood it.

Fewer and better beats more. Tournaments are tiring, expensive and emotional. A child who plays every weekend gets worse at competing, not better, because there is never any time to work on the thing the last one exposed.

Worth paying for: a coach who will actually *hit* with your child; court time for match play; strings and shoes; fitness and movement work.

Be careful with: large group sessions sold as an academy; anything sold to you on fear — that they are behind, that the window is closing, that everyone else is doing it; and gear upgrades bought to fix a technique problem. They never do.

Not every family has ten thousand dollars for an academy — and you do not need one to develop a good player.

The body during the growing years

The part where doing less is often doing more.

Growth spurts make children temporarily worse. Arms and legs get longer, timing goes, and a player who was clean a month ago starts shanking balls. This is not regression and it is not laziness. It passes. Telling them it is normal is one of the most useful things you will ever say to them.

Serving is the shot that hurts people. It is the only one where the arm goes up above the head and swings at full speed, over and over again.

That repeated overhead motion is what puts young shoulders, elbows and lower backs at risk. Not one bad serve. A hundred tired ones, on a body that is still growing.

Stop at 20–25 serves in a set, and around 60 in a session, whatever the score says.

And never serve through a sore shoulder. The session is over, not paused.

Heel and knee pain in the growing years is common. It is usually the growth plate rather than anything sinister, it is usually manageable, and it is genuinely worth seeing a professional about rather than reading forums at midnight. Different practitioners will sometimes give you different answers. Get imaging if it persists.

Rest is training. A day completely off — no court, no fitness, no talking about tennis — does more for a tired eleven-year-old than another session. If they look beaten up on a Saturday morning, let them do nothing. No questions.

Watch for the quiet one: a child who suddenly does not want to go is more often tired, sore, or worried about something than lazy. Ask about the body first, the tennis second, and the feelings third — in that order, because the first two are easier to admit to.

Racquets and shoes

The most common expensive mistake, and the switch nobody mentions.

Racquets are sized by length in inches — roughly 21, 23, 25, 26, then 27, and 27 is a full adult racquet.

The jump from 26 to 27 is where families lose money and children lose shoulders.

A 26-inch junior frame weighs around 240 to 260 grams strung. Adult frames run from about 265 grams up past 300. The temptation — often encouraged in a shop — is to buy a heavier adult frame because it will "last longer."

Go to 27 inches at 265 to 270 grams. Not 280 and up.

The extra length is already a big change. Adding weight at the same time is how a growing child ends up swinging late, muscling the ball, and complaining about their shoulder six weeks later. They can move up later. There is no prize for getting there early.

Grip size: smaller is safer. A grip that is too big makes them squeeze, and squeezing travels straight to the elbow. Start small and build it up with an overgrip — you cannot make a big grip smaller. **Stiffness:** stiff, powerful frames feel great for ten minutes and send more shock into a young arm. Comfort beats free power every time.

Shoes. Running shoes are built to go forwards; tennis is played sideways. A child in runners has nothing holding their foot in place, and most clubs will tell you they mark the courts.

Move out of junior court shoes and into adult women's models as soon as the foot fits.

This is the tip almost nobody gives you. Junior tennis shoes are usually thin, lightly built and offer very little support. Women's models start at small sizes, are built properly, have real outsoles and heel structure, and often carry an outsole warranty. The price difference is smaller than you think and the difference under the foot is enormous.

What to look for: a firm, well-cushioned heel above all — growing heels take a beating. Then lateral support in the upper, and the right outsole for your surface. Try them on late in the day, in the socks they play in, and let them move *sideways* in the shop. Replace them when the outsole goes smooth, long before they look worn out.

Strings — the cheapest thing that matters most

This is the page most parents have never read.

The racquet gets all the attention. The string does most of the work, costs a fraction, and is the single biggest comfort decision you will make.

Type	What it does	For a junior
Multifilament	Soft, comfortable, gives free power	Yes. Start here.
Synthetic gut	Cheap, fine, a little firmer than multi	Perfectly good budget option
Polyester ("poly")	Stiff, controlled, great for heavy spin	Only if they are genuinely breaking strings and hitting big
Natural gut	The best feel there is	Wonderful, expensive, fragile in damp weather

Our recommendation is simple: use multifilament. It is kind to a growing arm, it helps a smaller player get depth without swinging out of their shoes, and it removes an entire category of problem you do not need yet.

If you do use poly, it must come out before it dies.

Poly does not get softer as it wears out. **It gets harder.** That is what hurts arms — not the string, the string left in too long. The child who only restrings when it snaps is the child who ends up with a sore elbow.

How to tell a string is finished, without knowing anything about tennis:

- **Count hours, not breaks.** Poly is dead long before it snaps. Roughly every ten hours of play in a junior racquet — sooner if they hit hard.
- **Pluck the strings.** They drop in pitch as tension goes. You will hear it change over a couple of weeks.
- **Look at the crossings.** When strings stop springing back into place and sit in little grooves, it is done.
- **Listen to your child.** "It feels dead" and "the ball is flying" both mean the same thing.

Tension, in one paragraph. Measured in pounds. Lower is softer and more powerful; higher is more control and harsher on the arm. Multifilament usually sits in the mid-50s, poly much lower in the mid-40s. Cold air makes balls fly less and strings feel stiffer, so drop a couple of pounds — heat and humidity do the opposite. Indoor courts have no wind, so the ball goes exactly where it was hit. Every number is a starting point; a good stringer adjusts for your child. **Restring at least as many times per year as your child plays per week.**

Calling the lines

Junior players officiate themselves. Almost no parent is told the rules.

At junior level there is usually no umpire. The children call their own lines. This surprises every new tennis parent, and it is the source of most of the tears.

The rules your child needs to know:

- **You only call the balls on your own side.** Never theirs.
- **If you are not certain it was out, it is in.** Doubt always favours the opponent. This is the actual rule, not just good manners.
- **Call it immediately and loudly.** A late or quiet call causes arguments.
- **You cannot ask for the point back** because you changed your mind after seeing where it landed.

When your child is getting bad calls — and they will — the sequence is short:

- Ask once, politely: "Are you sure?" That is allowed, and it often fixes it.
- If it keeps happening, ask for a roving official. Every junior event has one.
- Never call a ball wrong in return. It feels fair and it costs the match, because the player who starts cheating back stops playing tennis.

And the rule for you: you do not call lines from the fence. Ever.

Not a word, not a gesture. It is against the rules, it can get your child defaulted, and it teaches them that they cannot handle it alone. They can.

Learning to hold your nerve through a bad call is one of the genuinely valuable things tennis teaches. It is also miserable to watch. Both things are true.

The words, in plain English

Keep this page. It is the one you will come back to.

You'll hear	It means
Crosscourt	Hit diagonally. The longest, safest way across the court.
Down the line	Hit straight ahead, parallel to the sideline. Shorter court, higher net. Riskier.
Deep	Landing near the far baseline — at a competitive level, two to three feet inside it. Almost always good.
Margin	Nothing to do with the margin in a school book. It is the spare room you leave yourself — the gap between where you aim and the line, so a shot that goes slightly wrong is still in. Aiming at a line means every small mistake is out; aiming a few feet inside it means most of them are still in.
Short	Landing near the service line. Usually a gift to the other player.
Topspin	Brushing up the back of the ball so it dips down and kicks up. Lets you hit hard and still keep it in.
Slice	Cutting under the ball. It stays low and skids. Good for defence and drop shots.
The T	Where the centre line meets the service line. A serve "down the T" goes up the middle.
Wide	A serve aimed at the outside corner, to drag them off the court.
Deuce / ad side	The two halves of the court. Deuce is the right half as you face the net, ad is the left.
Unforced error	A miss you had time and balance for. Nobody made you do it. Junior matches are mostly decided by these.
Approach shot	The shot hit on the way to the net. It is not meant to win the point — it is meant to earn an easy volley.
Kick serve	A serve with heavy topspin that jumps up off the bounce. The second serve most good players build.

When a coach says something you don't understand, ask. Every good coach would rather explain than have you guess. The ones who make you feel small for asking are telling you something useful about themselves.

The words, in plain English

The rest of the list, and one last thing.

You'll hear	It means
The +1	The shot straight after the serve. Coaches care about it enormously.
Split-step	The small hop players do as the opponent hits. It's how you start moving in time.
Recovery	Getting back to position after hitting. Where most points are actually lost.
Pusher	A player who just returns everything and waits for mistakes. Very effective. Not cheating.
Moonball	A very high, slow, deep ball. Also very effective, also not cheating.
Inside-out	Running round the backhand to hit a forehand diagonally across court.
UTR	A rating number that goes up as you beat better players. Roughly 1 to 16.
Let	A serve that clips the net and still lands in. It is replayed, and it costs nothing.
Seed	The players a draw expects to win. They are placed apart so they cannot meet in the early rounds.
Bagel / breadstick	Winning a set 6–0 or 6–1. Neither one tells you much about how the match actually felt.

If this helped, pass it on. It is free and it always will be. We also build **Crosscourt IQ** — decision training for competitive junior tennis. **538 real match situations** across eight volumes: the choice in front of the player, a court diagram, and the full reasoning behind the right answer. Written so an eleven-year-old can read it alone, and so whoever is in their corner can talk it through with them. Ten cards are free, so you can judge it before you spend anything. It exists because we could not find it, and we will judge it a success if it saves you one bad drive home. crosscourtiq.com

Nothing in this guide is medical advice. Where your child's body is involved, see a qualified professional. Equipment weights and string tensions are starting points, not prescriptions — a good stringer and a good coach will adjust them for your child.