

Parent/Coach Question of the Week

How can I encourage parents to motivate their children in sports and discourage them at the same time from coaching their children?

We are all well aware of the term "back seat driver" and not too many of us manage to avoid becoming one for a very good reason -- our life depends on the front seat driver's performance. The enormous physical and emotional energy parents invest in their child and her/his sporting experience inevitably leads some to the "back seat coaching" trap. As long as both parent and coach share a mutual understanding of their roles and responsibilities, unintentional disruptive parent behavior and energy may be redirected to provide a positive contribution to the league experience.

PRINCIPLES OF POSITIVE COACH--PARENT INTERACTIONS IN ORGANIZED YOUTH SPORTS

Al Rosen, a former major league baseball player suggested several questions that serve as a reminder of the scope of little league parents' responsibilities. Coaches that take the time to discuss those questions at the time of the first team meeting may prevent later miscommunications with parents.

- "Can the parents give up their child?" is the question that addresses the issue of "back seat coaching." Parents must understand that when their child joins a team he/she is at that time under the responsibility and supervision of the team's designated head coach. This does not mean that the parent must temporarily stop being the parent. Rather, it means that the parent must accept the fact that her his child is now looking up to and demonstrates her/his admiration to a relative stranger and follows instructions and is part of a team.
- "Can the parents admit their shortcomings?" Can they admit that they do not "know or can do it all?" Can the parent allow the coach to be the expert on all issues relating to the league environment?
- "Can the parents accept their child's triumphs?" without feeling the urge to tell their sport stories and triumphs and take the attention away from their child.
- "Can the parents accept their child's disappointments?" Do we always need to lecture to our child after a game and go into a detailed analysis of what took place during the game? Is it O.K. to sometimes just let go, and let the child lead the discussion if he/she feels like it.
- "Can the parents show their child self-control?" Unintentional errors and fouls do occur during games. Unfortunately, some not so nice behavior may also take place during any contest. Can the parent show self-control and deal with either incident in a mature manner?
- "Can the parents give their child some time?" and not just drop the child off and pick her/him up, but also stay and watch, and occasionally volunteer to stay and help for the full practice session.
- "Can the parent let their child make her or his own decisions?" Let the child chose the sport and decide when he/she had enough (with some clear ground rules, of course).

Dealing with the Disruptive Parent

- Parents should remain seated in the spectator area during the contest.
- Parents should be advised not to yell instructions or criticize the children.
- Parents should be strongly advised not to make derogatory comments to players or other parents of the opposing team, to officials, or to league administrators.
- Parents should be encouraged to cheer for all kids from both teams, regardless of what the other parents do. Good sportsmanship means going beyond the written rules.
- Parents should not interfere with their children's coach. They must be willing to relinquish the responsibility for their children to the coach for the period of the contest. Parents should be encouraged to share their concerns with the coach at a special time and place away from the kids.
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Parent-Coach Communications

- Parents have the right to ask questions and get answers.
- There is a proper time and place for parent-coach interaction and that time and place is when the kids are no longer around.

Causes for parent coach disagreement

- Who has the final say about the child's role and position on the team? The coach has the final say. Parents who find it hard to follow this rule should be encouraged to join the coaching ranks. As the coach the parent will now become the decision maker and will be able to run her/his own show.
- What is the child's skill level? There may be a discrepancy between the coach's and the parent's assessment of a child's skills and playing ability. The parent has every right to discuss her/his assessment with the coach, but he/she must be willing to accept the fact that the coach has the final say about the line-up, playing positions, and game formations. In a child centered system this question is less thorny since the emphasis is on the process and not the outcome. Thus, the coach may rotate the players regardless of their efficacy in any specific position.
- How should problems be resolved? Any concerns should be addressed in an "adult and mature" fashion. All involved need to approach the situation with a "kids first" philosophy. While a few adults were very upset and disturbed by the refs' call during a U9 semi-final post-league tournament game I observed in the early 1990s at a Beverly Hills park, I overheard a kid pondering whether this means the kids won't be getting their popsicles that day.

Some Common Problems with Parents

Disinterested parents: The coach may consider implementing a required parent attendance policy for a predetermined number of practice sessions and games. Parents who find this requirement too hard to comply with may privately discuss their issues with the coach.

Overcritical parents: The parent may not be aware of her/his overly critical tone. The coach may tell the parent that "This is what I heard you say to your child, did you mean to say...? Consider this: "...., would that work for you?"

Parents that "do not get it" but seem to be very energetic may be recruited to help with some busy work, such as, collecting game statistics (number of touches, complete passes, incomplete passes, blocks, shots on goal etc.). Also, I never get tired of the saying "One role model is worth a thousand critics."

Screaming parents from behind the bench and side line coaches: Coaches and league administrators must meet and agree on a range of acceptable and unacceptable side line behaviors. Consequences that address unacceptable side line behaviors must also be implemented. This information must be made available to all coaches, parents, referees and league administrators. League administrators and officials may use a card system to warn those who break the rules, and if the unruly behavior persists, ask the adults to leave.

Overprotective parents: Discuss the risks involved in the activity and provide the parent with information that addresses their fears and concerns. Explain to the parent what it is that you do in order to maintain a safe practice and game environment for your team. Ask about and explain how a child's special needs are addressed in the league environment. The parent may need to go through some form of systematic desensitization. Let the parent stay and have her/him leave a few minutes earlier each time they come to practice. There's no need to be very strict and one should expect relapses, especially if child gets upset or hurt during practice or a game.

THE COACH PARENT MEETING

Content and Conduct of the Meeting

- Introduction (10 min.)
- Objectives and coaching philosophy (15 min.)
- Details of your sport program (15 min.)
- Coaching roles and relationships (5 min.)
- Parents' roles and responsibilities (15 min.)
- Coach-parent relations (5 min.)
- Summary, questions, and general discussion (20-25 min.)

Parents' Code for Children's Sport Participation

- CHILDREN HAVE THE RIGHT TO PARTICIPATE AS WELL AS THE RIGHT TO CHOOSE NOT TO PARTICIPATE IN SPORTS.
- THE ACTIVITY IS FOR THE CHILDREN AND THEIR NEEDS NOT FOR THE PARENTS' NEEDS.
- CHILDREN SHOULD BE ENCOURAGED TO FOLLOW THE RULES; BE FIRM AND CLEAR ABOUT YOUR FEELINGS ABOUT CHEATING.
- TRYING HARD AND STRIVING TO WIN THROUGH FAIR PLAY ARE THE MOST IMPORTANT ASPECTS OF COMPETITION. BY FOLLOWING THIS VIEW WINNING AS WELL AS LOSING MAY BE KEPT IN PERSPECTIVE.
- CHILDREN SHOULD NEVER BE YELLED AT, CRITICIZED, OR PUNISHED IN ANY WAY FOR DEMONSTRATING POOR SKILLS OR LOSING A CONTEST. HOWEVER, WHEN CHEATING OR DEMONSTRATING POOR SPORTSMANSHIP, CHILDREN SHOULD BE CHASTISED AND SANCTIONED; ALWAYS BETTER IF DONE IN PRIVATE.
- CHILDREN ARE GREAT IMITATORS. CHEER FOR BOTH TEAMS WHEN THEY DEMONSTRATE GOOD SKILLS, PERSONAL IMPROVEMENT, AND OR GOOD SPORTSMANSHIP.
- RECOGNIZE THE FACT THAT THE REFEREE MORE OFTEN THAN NOT IS IN A BETTER POSITION TO MAKE A CALL AND THAT THEY UNDERTAKE THE DEMANDING TASK OF OFFICIATING FOR THE LOVE OF THE SPORT AND THE BENEFIT OF THE CHILDREN. DO NOT SECOND GUESS THE OFFICIAL.
- ACTIVELY WORK WITH THE COACHES AND OFFICIALS IN KEEPING YOUTH SPORTS FREE OF VERBAL AND PHYSICAL ABUSE.
- THE VAST MAJORITY OF VOLUNTEER COACHES ARE INVOLVED WITH YOUTH SPORTS FOR THE JOY OF COACHING THEIR'S AND OTHER CHILDREN. IF YOU THINK YOU CAN DO A BETTER JOB, VOLUNTEER AND COACH YOUR OWN CHILD AND TEAM.