

Parental Involvement in Youth Sports: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly

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In a response to 'loutish' behavior on the behalf of parents and coaches, officials of the 200 team Northern Ohio Girls Soccer League proclaim a game day of silence. On this day parents and coaches are banned from making any noises during competitive play. League officials attribute the disorderly behavior of the parents and coaches to an over fixation with winning and losing. (Free Press, October 1999).

A growing concern amongst those involved in youth sports is that certain aspects of parental involvement are detrimental to the development and experiences of young athletes. An increase in the number of reported instances of parents engaging in violent, abusive, and controlling behavior toward athletes, coaches, officials, and fellow spectators has led many organizations to reconsider the role of the parent in youth sports. For example, the National Alliance for Youth Sports (<http://www.nays.org/pays/index.cfm>) has developed 'The Parents Association for Youth Sports Program', to promote sportsmanship behavior and teach skills such as self-control. Similarly, the American Youth Soccer Organization (<http://www.soccer.org>) requires parents of players below 8 years of age, to attend classes addressing sportsmanship and behavioral conduct. Closer to home, the Michigan High School Athletic Association (MHSAA) has created a video to help educate parents about what is and is not appropriate behavior in youth sports. The video is entitled 'What kids wished their parents knew about sportsmanship' and is available at the MHSAA website (<http://www.mhsaa.com/services/>)

Parents are becoming increasingly involved in the lives of young athletes. Greater competition for athletic scholarships and the lure of professional sports has motivated many parents to commit their children to specialized training regimens at an early age (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2000). Parents are also investing larger amounts of time and finances into the athletic development of their children. Further, parents' decisions to send or transfer children to and from academic institutions are increasingly based upon the athletic and not the academic reputation of the schools concerned (Frenette, 1999). Although such actions are supposedly taken in 'the child's best interests', there is a concern that the over-involvement of parents may negatively affect the child's immediate and long-term experiences in sports.

How involved should parents be in the lives of young athletes? A moderate degree of parental involvement is important as it communicates interest and support to the child. Children's perceptions of parental support and involvement in physical activity have been identified as positive predictors of enjoyment, participation in physical activity, and continued participation in youth sports. The problem arises when parents become too involved in the lives of young athletes. When parents are over-involved, athletes often feel that they have relinquished control over their decision to play sports. Athletes that feel that they have little say or control over their decisions to play sports typically report less interest in sport, lower levels of enjoyment and satisfaction, and are more prone to drop out of sport (Vallerand, Deci, & Ryan, 1987).

As a parent how do you walk the fine line between being involved and over involved in your child's life? The keys to becoming an effective parent are finding out what children want out of sports and helping them achieve these desires. For example, when a child who has always liked soccer but has recently move up an age group comes back from soccer practice and announces that he or she wants to quit, parents must explore why the child has changed his or her mind. Parents may need to get additional information from the coach. Parents and children need to discuss the issue of dropping out and explore and what can be done to better meet the child's goals. Sometimes, children need to understand that older youth play more because they are bigger, stronger and more experienced. As younger players, they must continue to work and improve their skills so they will be the best players when they are the oldest players on the team.

Parents must not lose sight of why youth participate in sport. A study of over 25,000 children from across the US revealed that the most popular reason for playing youth sports was 'to have fun'. The next most popular reasons for playing sport were to learn new skills, to be with friends, and to experience the thrill of competition. Although the children did identify winning as a reason for playing sport it was not one of the most popular reasons. Many parents erroneously believe that winning is the number one reason that children want to play sports. Parents who become preoccupied with winning and losing place an unreasonable amount of pressure on their child and risk turning their child off to youth sports.

An effective parent should also understand his or her role and the expectations associated with being a sports parent. The primary role of the parent in youth sports is to provide emotional, financial and provisionary support for their children (Rowley, 1986). Emotional support involves engaging in activities such as helping the child deal with winning and losing, discussing tactics, providing verbal encouragement, looking out for cheats, and helping the child understand the lessons that sport can teach. Some parents become so invested in the lives of their children that they find it difficult to separate themselves emotionally from their children's experiences and become emotionally over-involved. Athletes of parents that become emotionally over involved during practices or competitions often feel embarrassed, guilty or stressed, particularly following poor performances or losses. Emotionally over-involved parents often think that it is their responsibility to push, persuade, or support the children's fantasies or sporting objectives, even if athletes themselves do not share these aspirations. Athletes of parents that are emotionally over involved often feel that their parents view them as 'athletes' and not 'individuals'.

There are two types of parents that are emotionally over-involved in youth sports, namely, excitable and fanatical (Lee, 1993). The excitable parent is typically supportive but tends to get 'caught up in the heat of the moment'. During practices or competitions they are typically loud, yelling encouragement or instructions to players, coaches, and/or officials. The excitable parent also tends to be overly concerned with the physical welfare of their child. This is the type of parent that runs on to the field every time their child takes a bump or bruise. Although such actions are taken in the best interests of the child, they can be embarrassing and distracting. The children of excitable parents often try to discourage their parents from attending practices or competitions.

The parent that poses the greatest risk to the long-term development of young athletes is the fanatical parent. Athletes of fanatical parents experience greater parental pressure, argue more frequently with coaches and officials, experience problems with eating and sleeping, show less effort and enjoyment during training sessions, and are more likely to drop out of sports. Fanatical parents are controlling, confrontational,

preoccupied with winning and losing, and believe that their child's reasons for playing sports are to win medals and trophies, gain social status and recognition, or become a professional sports star. Such parents often have unrealistic expectations about their child's ability and believe that their child has the potential to become the next Mia Hamm or Tiger Woods. Fanatical parents typically pressure the child with expectations that are out of reach (e.g., winning every competition), see the child's experience as an investment in the future, and fail to recognize or listen to the child's concerns. Coaches and administrators need to take the time to explain to parents that although they have the best interests of their children at heart, the chances of their child becoming a professional athlete are small. The latest figures suggest that less than one half of 1 percent of all high school athletes will ever become professional athletes.

Fanatical parents often try to live vicariously through their child. Frank Smoll, a sport psychologist at The University of Washington, refers to this as a reverse-dependency trap. Parents that over identify with their children start to see their children as an extension of their own egos. In this situation the parent becomes dependent upon the child for feelings of self-worth. If the child is successful the parents feel good about themselves. If the child fails, however, the parents feel bad about themselves. Not surprisingly this situation places the child under a high degree of pressure

Parents that feel pressure for their children to be successful also tend to behave in a manner that is inappropriate for youth sports. Sources of pressure include competition, social expectations, and even personal pride. Parents who have been successful athletes themselves often feel greater expectations that their children should also be successful athlete. They may, however, be more realistic about their child's ability or chances to succeed at higher levels. Many parents who are former athletes want their children to follow in their footsteps. Alternatively, they may feel pressure from coaches and others who expect their child equally successful in sports.

As previously mentioned a primary role of the parent is to provide financial and provisionary support. For most parents this involves running the child to and from practices and competitions, paying for membership

or travel fees, and making sure that the child has the appropriate equipment and attire. The amount of financial and provisionary support that a parent will have to provide varies with the nature of the sport, the level at which the child is competing, and the status of the family (i.e., married/divorced, number of children).

Sports such as gymnastics, figure skating, and ice hockey are notorious for the amount of time and money that parents have to invest. These commitments can disrupt family life and place the family and the child under a high degree of stress. Parents who have invested a significant degree of time and money in the athletic development of their child often feel that their children owe it to them to apply themselves and continue participating in sports. Such parents sometimes use guilt as a motivating factor for their child's continued participation in sport. Athletes feel guilty about the consequences of their involvement in sport (e.g., marital disharmony, disruption to family life, loss of free time, cost of training and competition) and feel pressured to continue participating. Not surprisingly, the children that are most likely to experience burnout are the talented young athletes who perceived their parents as controlling and having made significant financial and time commitments (Coakley, 1992).

Traditionally, it has been believed that fathers, in comparison to mothers, were more involved in the development of young athletes. Studies of parent-child interactions in soccer, wrestling, and figure skating suggest, however, that mothers play an equal, if not more important, role in the psychological and behavioral development of young athletes. Although fathers are most likely to initiate the child's involvement in youth sport, it is the mother that is more likely to provide the long-term support required for the child's continued participation. Young athletes tend to perceive their mothers as being more positive and supportive than their fathers. This is perhaps a reflection of the roles that fathers and mothers play. Fathers may be more inclined to provide critical or evaluative feedback regarding the child's involvement in sports. Mothers, in contrast, may be more inclined to provide emotional support and provisionary support. Coaches and administrators need to recognize that the mothers are just as important, if not more so, than fathers in the development of young athletes.

Although there may be a general increase in the number of instances of negative parental behavior at youth sports events, it is important to recognize that the majority of parents behave in a manner that is fitting for the youth sports environment. Most young athletes believe that their parents provide them with a supportive, stable, secure, and encouraging environment (Hellstedt, 1995). Athletes that perceive their parents as being positive role models, supportive, and having positive beliefs about their ability are more likely to enjoy sports, feel more confident about their ability, and are less likely to drop out of sports. As a youth sports coach or administrator what can you do to encourage positive parental involvement? First, it is important to create an atmosphere that puts the interests of the child before the interests of winning. A parent orientation meeting should be held to inform parents about their roles, your philosophy on youth sports, and your goals for the season. In his book ‘Successful Coaching’ Rainer Martens provides some useful tips to help you organize a parent orientation meeting.

The meeting should be held at least a week before the season starts. A time should be chosen when most parents will be able to attend (e.g., evening). The meeting should be held in a place that is conveniently located such as a local school or community center. Invite parents individually by phone or through a letter. A sample agenda follows.

Parent Meeting Agenda

1. Introduce yourself and your assistant coaches 10 mins.
State your experiences and qualifications, even if you have none, and your reasons for becoming a coach.
2. Review your coaching philosophy 10 mins.
 - a. The value of playing sports

- b. Your methods of teaching. Describe a typical practice session
 - c. The emphasis you place on winning and losing, having fun, sportsmanship, safety, and learning
 - d. What you expect of each athlete and parent
- 3. Demonstration of the sport 15-25 mins.
 - a. Familiarize parents with the rules and skills of the sport.
Select a few players to assist you in a demonstration.
 - b. If you do not have the space to hold an active demonstration, then use a video that highlights the rules and skills associated with your sport
- 4. Potential risks and Safety 10 mins.
 - a.
 - a. Highlight some of the risks associated with playing your sport
 - b.
 - b. Outline the safety procedures that you have created to deal with any injuries or physical ailments
- 5. Specifics of your Program 10 mins.
 - c.
 - Pass on some essential information about your program
 - d.
 - a. Schedule of practices and competition

- b. Responsibilities of parents to transport players to and from practices and competitions
- c. Playing time and player selection policies
- d. Travel schedule and expenses
- e. Required equipment and where it can be purchased
- f. Team and league rules
- g. Disciplinary procedures for players and parents

6. Question and answer session

10 mins

Leave plenty of time so parents can ask you any questions or voice any concerns that they may have.

You may want to create a brochure that can be handed out to athletes and parents. This brochure should outline team and league rules, practice and competition schedules, and explain what is expected of all parents and spectators. The brochure should also identify penalties associated with inappropriate behavior on the behalf of athletes, parents, and spectators. Penalties for inappropriate behavior on the behalf of parents and spectators might include a game suspension (i.e., parent banned from spectating for one game), or the temporary/permanent removal of their child from the program.

A clear set of rules should be established regarding appropriate and inappropriate behavior. Parents need to be encouraged to take an active role in the development of these rules. A sense of ownership will increase the likelihood that parents will abide by these rules. Rules that should be include in your policy are...

- Parents need to be on time when picking up their children after practices and competitions. Parents that fail to pick up their children following practices or competitions or turn up late are at risk of being charged with parental neglect.
- Parents/spectators should be in control of their emotions at all times and should cheer for their own team and players while showing respect for the opposition and officials.
- Parents/spectators should refrain from coaching their children from the sidelines and should not make derogatory comments to coaches, players, officials or other parents.
- Parents/spectators with questions or concerns should wait until a competition or practice is finished before approaching coaches, officials, or league administrators.
- Encourage parents to sign a contract that states that they understand and will abide by team and league rules.

How to Handle Confrontations with Parents

- If parents approach you during a game or practice in an emotional state, politely ask them to wait until they have cooled down.
- Hold meetings with parents outside of practice and competition. This will help eliminate distractions and diffuse confrontations.
- Encourage an assistant coach or league official to join you at the meeting. They may act as an impartial judge.

- Summarize the situation to make sure that everybody at the meeting knows the full story
- Bring evidence (i.e., club/school or league rules) that support your actions or decisions.
- Listen impartially. It is possible that the parent may have insight into a situation that you have not considered or are unaware of.
- Arrive at a solution that can be stated as a specific behavior that the parent, coach or athlete must do.

Parents of Young Athletes Should ...

- Listen to their children's views about playing sports
- Provide unconditional love during both successes and failures
- Help children understand that the definition of a good performance is giving one's best effort
- Encourage the players to be self-reliant and to accept responsibility for their decisions and actions
- Encourage non-sport interests
- Allow their children to set their own standards of excellence
- Provide encouragement and hopeful optimism when needed by the athlete
- Emphasize enjoyment above all!

Parents care about the welfare of their children. Like you they want children to enjoy playing sports, learn new skills, become active and learn valuable life skills. Your relationship with the parents of your players will help determine the success of your program both on and off the field. Include parents in your program and encourage them to support their children.

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