



YOUTHFIRST

Volume 1, Series 9

7th and 8th Girls

Communication With Parents is Key to Success

The CNN.com headline reads: "Father of youth hockey player accused of breaking coach's nose" The story goes on to say that the father allegedly became enraged because the coach took his 10-year-old son out of the game in the closing minutes. As the game ended, the father grabbed two hockey sticks; walked up to the coach and cross-checked him in the face, breaking his nose. What is going on in youth sports?

Granted, this is an extreme case, but the problem with parents of the very young and the not so young athlete is not only bad, its getting worse. When asked at the Nike Championship Basketball Coaches Clinic, "What is the biggest crisis or concern facing you as a coach?" Thousands of coaches responded with "parents." So how do you keep parents happy, or at least, just keep them from breaking your nose? Frequent, clear communication

is your only hope.

Communication flows two ways. First and foremost, you have to establish an open line of communication with parents. Communication in general is more effective when people believe it flows two ways. To lay this groundwork early on, schedule a mandatory parent meeting before the season for youth and high school teams. At this meeting, explain your philosophy, expectations and ramifications if the kids (or parents) don't follow the rules. This meeting will also provide the parents an opportunity for involvement from the start and when well orchestrated, sets realistic parameters. Most importantly, though, it shows your willingness to work with them and provide a positive experience for their children.

Establish Parental Code of Conduct.

Another good idea that is becoming more popular these days is the "parent

code of conduct". This is a list of rules that parents must follow through the season. This can be introduced at the preseason parent meeting. Many associations are requiring that parents agree with and sign the code for their child to participate. The National Association for Youth Sports can provide more information on the concept as well as other parent programs.

When a parent has an issue to discuss, encourage him or her to set up an appointment with you. This helps to avoid a confrontation at the worst place...on the court. At a game, emotions are running high for both of you. You both run the risk of saying or doing something you might regret. If a parent does confront you at an inappropriate time, don't be baited.

Diffuse their anger by explaining to them calmly that you won't discuss it there, but will be happy to make

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appointment with them.

Practice active listening. When your meeting with a parent, practice active listening. One high school basketball coach at the clinic complained that he communicated with parents with no success. He agreed to a meeting with the parents in his office. When they arrived he said, "I'm not here to listen to you. You're here to listen to me. I'm the coach and this is my team."

Listening is a great tool. The value of listening to your athletes is obvious to most coaches. It's really the only way to discover how to get through to them...to motivate and educate them. Listening to parents can be equally valuable. Listen carefully to what they say and ask questions to make sure you understand them. Parents aren't necessarily any better at making their points than their kids are. This will help the parents realize they're important to you and you're doing your best to figure

out a solution. Here are some tools for becoming an active listener.

- Cultivate an inner attitude that listening matters
- Assume something valuable will be said
- Think about the content and tone of the message
- Don't reach conclusions until the other person is through speaking
- Block out distractions like phone calls and papers on your desk
- Concentrate on what the speaker is saying
- Look him or her straight in the eye
- Don't let other business interrupt
- Ask occasional, appropriate questions
- Don't interrupt
- Afterward make notes with date and time

Acknowledge their emotion but focus on the issue. When you feel you unde-

rstand their situations and emotions acknowledge it. Remember that they have a right to their opinion. At the same time you don't have to agree with that opinion! "I can see why as parents you may think that..." The bridge to your point of view with a phrase like "however, the key issue is..." Then clearly and concisely state your point of view. These steps can easily be remembered as A-B-C.

A: Acknowledge their emotional position

B: Bridge to your point of view

C: Clearly and concisely state your point of view.

Coaching is tough enough without problems with parents. Be proactive to avoid problems before they occur preventing uncomfortable moments for you and your athletes' parents. Not to mention keeping your nose in tact.

Keeping Youth Sports in Perspective

Coach needs to take active role

Whether or not officials and/or league organizers are present at games can make a difference in the conduct of parents, or any other spectators. Regardless, the control of parental behavior is ultimately the responsibility of one person--the coach. He or she has to take the initiative to spell out in no uncertain terms what is expected of these people. Many coaches send out a letter; others arrange a meeting, which is even better. But they should get to know the parents, share their coaching philosophy and goals, and encourage involvement (keeping stats, bringing drinks, etc.) Each coach must also be an excellent model of good behavior, and hold parents to the same standard.

Undertrained coaches can be problem

Youth leagues are usually in need of, and are occasionally desperate for coaches; one obvious reason is that the stress of dealing with certain types of parents burns them out! Consequently, individuals who are chosen to coach are sometimes undertrained, abusive to players (physically or mentally), or **SEE PERSPECTIVE PG 3**

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overzealous (the coach who holds two weekly practices when league rules allow only one).

Parents can help

First, maintain communication with the coach, voice your feelings (but if your intention is to criticize, do it privately). Second, (for future reference) ask the coach to organize a pre-season meeting for parents. Bring up the subject, or ask to coach to do so, and encourage dialogue. That simple step will create an awareness of a potential problem. Parents who do not attend should be sent a copy of the minutes of the meeting. This can also be a good time to appoint a team mom, organize a schedule for bringing snacks, and just making friends. Third, insist, or at least request, that the league have a training program for coaches. Finally, consider being a coach! If you can be a good role model and a motivator, you will probably do a fine job.

Preseason Parents' Checklist

With summer comes an endless string of youth baseball and softball games and practices. Millions of children nationwide will once again descend on local fields to participate in Little League programs. There will be colorful uniforms, post-game ice creams and, sadly, plenty of unhappy children too. More than 70 percent of children quit sports because of unpleasant experiences in which the coach, despite the best intentions, is often guilty of causing emotional or physical harm.

The National Alliance for Youth Sports offers 10 questions parents should ask coaches before signing their child up to help ensure they have a fun and rewarding experience:

1. How important is winning to you? There's no denying that winning is important, that everyone likes to win and that we should all strive to win. But when winning emerges as the only goal, and it overshadows the essence of doing your best, exhibiting good sportsmanship and playing within the rules, that's when the seeds of trouble have been planted. A win-at-all-cost coach can ruin a child's season and create havoc with an entire program.
2. What's your main focus going to be? If the word fun doesn't pop up immediately look out. This is a clear sign that serious problems loom.
3. Have you been certified? A parent would never enroll a child in a school with untrained teachers. So why is it any different when it comes to enrolling children in sports programs with untrained coaches, where the consequences can be equally severe? Simply put, a first-year volunteer with no coaching experience who has been certified is more likely to be a positive influence on the children than someone who has coached for several years but doesn't understand the do's and don'ts of working with children.
4. Will all the children get to play different positions? Coaches are often guilty of stereotyping kids without even realizing it. An overweight child is often thought of as a catcher, while the team's best player automatically winds up at shortstop or on the pitching mound. To fully experience the sport children need the opportunity to play a variety of positions. Forcing them into one position at an early age infringes on their growth, cuts down on their learning, and often spoils their entire experience.
5. Will there be equal playing time for everyone? The dreaded bench is pretty uncomfortable-especially to a child's psyche. If a youngster is stuck on the bench, his not going to be learning or having any fun. Studies show that children overwhelmingly would rather play for a losing team than sit on the bench for a winning team.

Preseason Parents' Checklist Continued...

6. Are you familiar with all the safety rules and equipment? Injuries are as much a part of sports as grass stains, and they are going to happen. But by using all of the available safety equipment and teaching only proper sports techniques, the number of injuries, and their severity, can be greatly reduced.

7. Is my child going to be properly supervised at all times? Don't treat the coach as if he or she is a babysitting service. Too often parents view practices as an opportunity to run a few errands, but it's not fair to expect the coach to monitor 15 or 20 6-year-olds. Find out if the coach would like some help. It's a good idea for all the parents to take turns helping out at practice. It will also be an eye-opening lesson on what it's like to coach children.

8. Will there be a preseason parents meeting? It's critical that coaches and parents are on the same page before the season begins. At this meeting, coaches can explain their philosophy, get to know the parents and address any questions or concerns. Open communication from the beginning eases parental fears and paves the way for a fun and enjoyable season.

9. What are you going to teach my child? There's more to youth baseball and softball than simply learning batting stances, sliding fundamentals and fielding techniques. Many youngsters automatically put their coaches on a pedestal, so it's important that coaches take advantage of the opportunity and put it to good use by talking about good sportsmanship, the dangers of alcohol and tobacco, fair play, ethics, the importance of doing well in school, as well as a number of other areas.

10. How can I help? Remember, the volunteer coach of your child's team is sacrificing his time and energy to coach. It's an enormous responsibility, and if parents can alleviate some of the workload—arranging carpools, setting up post-game treats, assisting with team fundraisers—the chances for a smooth running season for everyone involved are greatly enhanced.

