

Enhancing Coach-Parent Relationships in Youth Sports: Increasing Harmony and Minimizing Hassle

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ABSTRACT

The so-called “athletic triangle,” consisting of coach, athlete, and parent is a natural element of the social system comprising youth sports. With respect to the coach-parent dyad, a coach’s role in relating to parents critically affects the consequences of participation for young athletes. The objective of this article is to assist coaches in working effectively with parents by fostering better understanding of i) the difference between youth and professional models of sport, ii) the goals of youth sports, iii) parental responsibilities and challenges, iv) how to achieve effective two-way communication with parents, and v) how to organize and conduct sport meetings with parents.

Key words: Coach-Parent Relationships, Sport Parents, Youth Sport Coaches

INTRODUCTION

Youth sports are a firmly established part of societies around the world, and they directly touch the lives of millions of children, adolescents, and adults¹. In the United States alone it is estimated that about 60.3 million youngsters 6-to-18 years of age participate in agency-sponsored sports, such as Little League Baseball, the American Youth Soccer Organization, and the Boys and Girls Clubs². Additionally, about 7.5 million youth (4.4 million males, 3.1 million females) participate in high school sports³. As programs have become more highly organized, parental involvement has increased, and their role has attracted serious attention from sport scientists. Research has shown that parents not only influence children’s socialization into sport, but they have a profound impact on the psychological consequences that accrue⁴⁻¹⁰.

Through their cooperative efforts, many parents are productive contributors to youngsters’ sport experiences¹¹. Unfortunately, however, the negative effects of a rather small minority of parents are all too obvious. The following are extreme examples of mass-media reports concerning parents engaging in criminally violent actions:

- In Massachusetts, a coach died after he was beaten unconscious following a hockey practice by a father who was upset about rough play in a scrimmage. The assailant was convicted of involuntary manslaughter.
- At a Philadelphia-area youth football game, a player's father brandished a .357 magnum during a dispute with a coach over his son's playing time.
- A Long Island, N.Y., soccer mom angered over being dropped from the team e-mail list for game-day directions was arrested after slamming a metal folding chair across the face of her daughter's coach. The woman was charged with second-degree reckless endangerment.

Fortunately, such incidents are not the norm. Yet, in their own dramatic fashion, they illustrate persistent problems that have caused some programs to take steps to protect the welfare of youth sport participants, coaches, and officials.

"THE ATHLETIC TRIANGLE"

The coach-parent-athlete triad has been referred to as the "athletic triangle"¹². The members of this social system interact with one another in complex ways, and the nature of those interactions can have significant consequences for the psychological development of the child^{13, 14}. Indeed, coaches are in a position to channel parents' genuine concerns and good intentions in a way that heightens the value of athletes' sport experiences. Further, parents can influence the quality of the dyadic coach-athlete relationship, as defined by feelings of closeness, commitment, and complementarity¹⁵. The purpose of this article is to assist coaches in working effectively with parents, thereby increasing the harmony and minimizing the hassle for all concerned. The objective is to foster better understanding of i) the difference between youth and professional models of sport, ii) the goals of youth sports, including a healthy philosophy of winning, iii) parental responsibilities and challenges, iv) how to achieve effective two-way communication with parents, and v) how to organize and conduct sport meetings with parents.

DEVELOPMENTAL VERSUS PROFESSIONAL MODELS OF SPORT

An important issue is the difference between youth and professional models of sport. Youth sports provide an educational medium for the development of desirable physical and psychosocial characteristics. The sport environment is viewed as a microcosm of society in which children and youth can learn to cope with realities they will face in later life. Thus, athletics provides a developmental setting within which an *educational process* can occur.

In contrast, professional sports are an explicitly commercial enterprise. Their goals, simply stated, are to entertain and, ultimately, to make money. Financial success is of primary importance and depends heavily on a *product orientation*, namely, winning. Is this wrong? Certainly not! Professional sports are part of the entertainment industry, and as such, they are enormously valued on a worldwide basis.

What, then, is the problem? Most of the negative consequences of youth sports occur when adults erroneously impose a professional model on what should be a recreational and educational experience for youngsters—the so-called "professionalization" of youth sports. When excessive emphasis is placed on winning, it is easy to lose sight of the needs and interests of the young athlete.

OBJECTIVES OF YOUTH SPORTS

Participation in youth sports can yield many benefits. Some of them are physical, such as acquiring sport skills and increasing health and fitness¹⁶. Others are psychological, such as developing leadership skills, self-discipline, respect for authority, competitiveness, cooperativeness, sportsmanship, and self-confidence. Youth sports are also an important social activity in which children can make new friends and acquaintances and become part of an ever-expanding social network. Furthermore, the involvement of parents in the athletic enterprise can serve to bring families closer together and strengthen family unity. Finally, of course, youth sports are (or should be) just plain *fun!*

The basic right of the young athlete to have fun participating should not be neglected. One of the quickest ways to reduce fun is for adults to begin treating children as if they were professional athletes. Coaches and parents alike need to keep in mind that young athletes are not miniature adults. They are children, and they have the right to play as children. Youth sports are first and foremost a play activity, and youngsters deserve to enjoy sports in their own way. In essence, it is important that programs remain *child centered* and do not become adult dominated.

What about *winning*? The common notion in sports equates success with victory. However, with a “winning is everything” philosophy, young athletes may lose opportunities to develop their skills, to enjoy participation, and to grow socially and emotionally. Well-informed coaches realize that success is not equivalent to winning games, and failure is not the same as losing. Rather, the most important kind of success comes from striving to win and giving maximum *effort*. The only thing athletes can control is the amount of effort they give.

An effort-oriented philosophy of winning is one of the core principles underlying the creation of a mastery motivational climate—a learning environment that emphasizes skill development, personal and team success, maximum effort, and fun¹⁷⁻¹⁹. A large body of research indicates that in sports, as in other achievement settings, mastery achievement goals and a mastery motivational climate are associated with salutary effects on athletes. Compared with ego-oriented athletes, those high in mastery orientation report higher feelings of competence, greater enjoyment of the activity, and higher intrinsic motivation and effort. A mastery orientation (particularly in combination with a low ego orientation) is also related to lower levels of cognitive trait anxiety and pre-event state anxiety. Finally, a mastery goal orientation is related to a variety of adaptive achievement behaviors, such as exerting consistent effort, persistence in the face of setbacks, and sustained and improved performance. Although an ego orientation has at times been linked to high levels of achievement, it also has a number of less desirable correlates, such as inconsistent effort, higher levels of performance anxiety, reduced persistence or withdrawal in the face of failure, decreased intrinsic motivation for sport involvement, and a willingness to use deception and illegal methods in order to win^{17, 20, 21}.

The notion that “winning is not everything” is shared by many young athletes. A recent season-long study of young basketball players revealed that athletes’ evaluations and enjoyment of the sport experience were more closely related to the motivational climate created by their coach than the won-lost record of their team²². Athletes at all levels of competition should be taught that they are never “losers” if they give maximum effort in striving for excellence. This philosophy is relevant to parents as well as coaches. In fact, it may be more important for parents to understand its meaning. They can apply it to many areas of their child’s life in addition to athletics.

What about the objectives that young athletes seek to achieve? A survey of more than

100,000 youth sport participants in the state of Michigan indicated that young athletes participated for the following reasons (listed in the order of their importance): a) to have fun, b) to improve skills and learn new skills, c) for thrills and excitement, d) to be with friends or make new friends, and e) to succeed or win²³. In a report based on data derived from a national survey of approximately 8,000 boys and girls, these same items were included in lists of the 10 most frequently selected reasons youngsters play non-school and interscholastic sports²⁴. Coaches may wish to consider these reasons when establishing goals for the season. Furthermore, coaches should be aware that none of these outcomes is achieved automatically through participation in sports. Coaches, parents, and sport administrators should be part of a team trying to accomplish common goals. By working together to reduce chances of misunderstanding and problems, the objectives can be attained. In this regard, parents should be encouraged to view their involvement in youth sports as an integral part of their child-rearing responsibilities.

PARENTS' RESPONSIBILITIES AND CHALLENGES

When a child enters a sport program, parents automatically take on some obligations. Some parents do not realize this at first and are surprised to find what is expected of them. Others never realize their responsibilities and miss opportunities to help their children grow through sports, or they may actually do things that interfere with their children's development.

To begin with, parents must realize that children have a right to choose *not* to participate. Although parents might choose to encourage participation, children should not be pressured, intimidated, or bribed into playing. Athletes who feel "entrapped" report less enjoyment, lower intrinsic motivation and benefits of being involved in sports, and are more likely to drop out of sports²⁵. In fulfilling their responsibility, parents should counsel their children, giving consideration to the sport selected and the level of competition at which the children want to play. And, of course, parents should respect their children's decisions.

Sometimes the best decision is not to participate. Participation in sports, although desirable, is not necessarily for everyone. For those children who wish to direct their energies in other ways, the best program may be no program. Many parents become unnecessarily alarmed if their child does not show an interest in sports—particularly if the parents themselves had positive sport experiences. They think that a child who would rather do other things must somehow be abnormal. But forcing a child into sports against his or her will can be a big mistake. Sometimes the wisest decision is to encourage the child to move into other activities that may be more suited to his or her interests and abilities, at least until an interest in sports develops.

Parents can enjoy their children's participation more if they acquire an understanding and appreciation of the sport. This includes knowledge of basic rules, skills, and strategies. Coaches can serve as valuable resources by answering parents' questions and by referring parents to a community or school library or a bookstore for educational materials (books and videos). For example, a self-instructional DVD entitled the *Mastery Approach to Parenting in Sports*²⁶ is designed to help parents create a mastery motivational climate and thereby get coaches and parents "on the same page." In addition, coaches should devote part of an early season practice to a lecture/demonstration of the fundamentals of the sport. Parents having little background in the sport should be encouraged to attend this session.

THE REVERSED-DEPENDENCY PHENOMENON

Parents often assume an extremely active role in youth sports, and in some instances, their influence becomes an important source of children's stress^{3, 5, 6, 27, 28}. One factor that might

constitute the underlying basis of parent-induced stress is what has been labeled the *reversed-dependency phenomenon*²⁹. All parents identify with their children to some extent and thus want them to do well. Unfortunately, in some cases, the degree of identification becomes excessive, and the child becomes an extension of the parents. When this happens, parents begin to define their own self-worth in terms of their son's or daughter's successes or failures. The father who is a "frustrated jock" may seek to experience through his child the success he never knew as an athlete. The parent who was a star may be resentful and rejecting if the child does not attain a similar level of achievement. Some parents thus become "winners" or "losers" through their children, and the pressure placed on the children to excel can be extreme. A child *must* succeed or the parent's self-image is threatened. Much more is at stake than a mere game, and the child of such a parent carries a heavy burden. When parental love and approval depend on adequacy of performance, sports are bound to be stressful.

Coaches may be able to counteract this tendency by explaining the over-identification process to parents. They can tell parents that placing excessive pressure on children can decrease the potential of sports for enjoyment and personal growth. A key to reducing parent-produced stress is to impress on parents that youth sport programs are for young athletes and that children and youth are *not* adults. Parents must acknowledge the right of each child to develop athletic potential in an atmosphere that emphasizes participation, personal growth, and *fun*.

COMMITMENTS AND AFFIRMATIONS

Other important challenges must be met by youth sport parents as well. To contribute to the success of a sport program, parents must be willing and able to commit themselves in many different ways. The following questions serve as important reminders of the scope of parents' responsibilities—questions to which parents must honestly answer "Yes"³⁰:

Can Parents Share Their Son or Daughter? This requires putting the child in the coach's charge and trusting him or her to guide the sport experience. It involves accepting the coach's authority and the fact that the coach may gain some of the admiration and affection the child once directed solely at the parent. This commitment does not mean that parents cannot have input, but the coach is the boss! If parents are going to undermine the coach's leadership, it is best for all concerned not to have their child join the program.

Can Parents Accept Their Child's Disappointments? Every child athlete experiences "the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat" as part of the competition process. In addition to enjoying triumphs, parents are called on to support their children when they are disappointed and hurt. This may mean not being embarrassed, ashamed, or angry when their son or daughter cries after losing a contest. When an apparent disappointment occurs, parents should be able to help their children learn from the experience. By doing this without denying the validity of their feelings, parents can help their children see the positive side of the situation and thus change their children's disappointment into self-acceptance.

Can Parents Show Their Child Self-Control? Parents should be reminded that they are important role models for their children's behavior. It is not surprising that parents who lose control of themselves often have children who are prone to emotional outbursts and poor self-discipline. Coaches can hardly be expected to teach sportsmanship and self-control to youngsters whose parents obviously lack these qualities.

Can Parents Give Their Child Some Time? Parents need to decide how much time can be devoted to their children's sport activities. Conflicts arise when they are very busy yet are also interested and want to encourage their children. To avoid this, the best advice coaches

can give parents is to deal honestly with the time-commitment issue and not promise more time than they can actually deliver. Coaches should recommend that parents ask their children about their sport experiences and make every effort to watch some of their games.

Can Parents Let Their Child Make His or Her Own Decisions? Accepting responsibility for one's own behavior and decisions is an essential part of growing up. Coaches should encourage parents to offer suggestions and guidance about sports, but ultimately, within reasonable limits, they should let the child go his or her own way. All parents have ambitions for their child, but they must accept the fact that they cannot dominate their child's life. Sports can offer an introduction to the major parental challenge of letting go.

CONDUCT AT SPORT EVENTS

The most noticeable parent problem is misbehavior at games. As part of their responsibilities, parents should watch their children compete in sports. But their behavior must meet acceptable standards. In addition to acknowledging some obviously inappropriate actions (using profanity, drinking alcohol, throwing objects, and so forth), the following rules for parental behavior (*do's* and *don'ts*) have been recommended³⁰:

1. *Do* remain in the spectator area during the event.
2. *Don't* interfere with the coach. Parents must be willing to give up the responsibility for their child to the coach for the duration of the practice or game.
3. *Do* express interest, encouragement, and support to young athletes. Be sure to cheer good effort as well as good performance. Communicate repeatedly that giving total effort is all that is expected.
4. *Don't* shout instructions or criticisms to the children.
5. *Do* lend a hand when a coach or official asks for help.
6. *Don't* make abusive comments to athletes, parents, officials, or coaches of either team.

What about parents who violate the rules of conduct? Good sportsmanship among spectators is a goal worth working for. Parents have the obligation not only to control their own behavior but also to remind others, if necessary. When parents misbehave, it is the duty of other parents and league administrators to step in and correct the situation. The rule of thumb for all spectators is that nothing in their actions should interfere with any child's enjoyment of the sport.

TWO-WAY COMMUNICATION

Parents have both the right and the responsibility to inquire about *all* activities that their children are involved in, including sports. For this reason, coaches should be willing to answer questions and remain open to parents' input. Remember that *communication is a two-way street*. If coaches keep the lines of communication open, they will be more likely to have constructive relations with parents.

Fostering two-way communication does not mean that parents are free to be disrespectful toward coaches in word or action. Rather, it is an open invitation for parents to express their genuine concerns with the assurance that they will be heard by the coach. There is, however, a proper time and place for parent-coach interaction. That time is not during practice or a contest, and it is never in the presence of the youngsters. Coaches should tell parents what times and places are best suited for discussions.

The most common cause of coach-parent conflicts is a difference of opinions about the

young athlete's abilities. In this regard, the use of a performance measurement system not only provides valuable feedback to athletes but can be an objective source of performance evaluation for parents. Nevertheless, sometimes parents will disagree with what coaches are doing. The main thing is for coaches not to get defensive. They should listen to what the parents have to say. They might find some parents' suggestions helpful. However, even if they do not agree, coaches can at least *listen* and evaluate the message. They should realize that they have the final say and that no coach can please everyone. No one can ask any more than what coaches ask of their athletes—doing the very best job they can and always looking for ways to improve.

In some instances, it is desirable to have an athletic director or league official serve as a mediator for a coach-parent consultation. The presence of a third person reduces the likelihood of conflict or hostility and can potentially contribute to the resolution process. It is also desirable to bring documentation that supports one's position or actions. This could include an established parent code of conduct, league or team rules and regulations, or educational materials. The objective is to reach a clear and shared solution that is stated in behavioral terms—that is, specific actions that a coach, parent, or athlete should or should not engage in.

In establishing good relations with parents, coaches should be aware that most parents are really enthusiastic and have a true concern for their children. Sometimes, however, parents simply do not realize the trouble they are causing. Instead of being angry with them, coaches should recognize that they have a problem—one that the coaches can help solve. The task is to point out to these people, tactfully and diplomatically, the negative influences of their actions and get them to become more constructive and helpful. Some common types of “problem parents” are identified below. In addition to describing their traits, recommendations are included for dealing with them.

DISINTERESTED PARENTS

Distinguishing Characteristics. The most noticeable characteristic of disinterested parents is their absence from team activities to a degree that is upsetting to their child.

What Coaches Should Do. Coaches should find out why the parents do not participate and contribute, and let them know that their involvement is welcome. Coaches should avoid the mistake of misjudging parents who are actually interested but have good reasons (work, sickness, etc.) for missing activities. Explaining the value of sports and how they can draw children and parents closer together may provide parents with a new interest in the activities of their children. In this situation, the athletes need help, too. Coaches should encourage the athletes and show that they are really interested in them as people.

OVERCRITICAL PARENTS

Distinguishing Characteristics. Overcritical parents often scold and berate their child. Such parents are never quite satisfied with their child's performance. They give the impression that it is more “their” game than it is the athlete's.

What Coaches Should Do. As discussed earlier, some parents unconsciously relate the success or failure of their child with their own success or failure. As a result, they are often hard on their children. Coaches should attempt to make over-critical parents aware of this problem as tactfully as possible. They can explain how constant criticism can cause stress and emotional turmoil for their youngster—irritation that actually hinders performance. They can tell the parents why they prefer to use praise and encouragement to motivate and instruct young people, and how parents can do the same.

What Coaches Can Say. “Mr. Jones, I know you’re only trying to help Nathan, but when you criticize him, he gets so nervous that he plays worse, and that certainly takes any fun out of it for him.” *Or* “Mr. Jones, I’ve found that Nathan responds much better to encouragement and praise than he does to criticism. If you were to encourage your son instead of criticizing him so much, sports would be a lot more enjoyable for both of you. After all, it’s the kids’ game. They play for fun, and too much criticism spoils it for them.”

PARENTS WHO SCREAM FROM BEHIND THE BENCH

Distinguishing Characteristics. Some parents seem to have “leather lungs” and large vocal chords. They often sit directly behind the bench, which makes them a distinct danger to the well-being of coaches’ eardrums. They frequently rant and rave and virtually drown out everyone else speaking in the area, including the coach. Everyone is the target for their verbal abuse—team members, opponents, coaches, officials.

What Coaches Should Do. Coaches must not get into an argument with a screaming parent. It will not do any good and will probably make things worse. During a break in the contest (half time, between periods), coaches can calmly, tactfully, and privately point out to the person that such yelling is a poor example for the young athletes. Coaches can ask other people to help out by working with this person during games. Also, coaches can give the disruptive parent a job that will help the team (scouting opponents, keeping stats, looking after equipment, etc.). This may provide a greater sense of responsibility and help the screamer to keep quiet. If the screaming persists, coaches should seek assistance from league administrators.

What Coaches Can Say. “I know it’s easy to get excited, but these kids are out here to have a good time. Try not to take the game so seriously, okay?” *Or* “Listen, why don’t we get together after the game and you can give me some of your ideas on coaching. I’d rather have them afterward because during the game, they’re very confusing.”

SIDELINE COACHES

Distinguishing Characteristics. Parents who assume the role of sideline coaches are often found leaning over the bench making suggestions to athletes. They may contradict the coach’s instructions and disrupt the team.

What Coaches Should Do. Again, coaches should not confront such a parent right away. Coaches should advise their athletes that during practices and games they are the coach and they want the athletes’ full attention. Listening to instructions from others may become confusing. Coaches should tell the parent privately how confusing it is for the athletes when two or more people are telling them what to do. Coaches might ask the parent to be either a full-time assistant coach or a full-time spectator.

What Coaches Can Say. “Ms. Slavin, I appreciate your concern and enthusiasm for the team. But when you are coaching Isla from the sidelines, it becomes confusing and distracting to her. I know you’ve got some good ideas, and I want to hear them. But please, after the game.”

OVERPROTECTIVE PARENTS

Distinguishing Characteristics. Most often, over-protective parents are the mothers of the athletes. Such parents are characterized by their worried looks and comments whenever their son or daughter is playing. Overprotective parents frequently threaten to remove their child because of the dangers involved in the sport.

What Coaches Should Do. Coaches must try to eliminate the fear of injury by reassuring

the parent that the event is fairly safe. They can explain the rules and equipment that protect the athlete. Point out how good coaching, program administration, and officiating add to the safety of the sport.

What Coaches Can Say. “Ms. Smith, we try to make the game as safe as possible for the athletes. You’ve got to remember that I wouldn’t be coaching kids if I didn’t care about them or if I thought the sport was dangerous for them.” *Or* “Ms. Smith, I care about each one of these kids, and I would never let any of them do anything that I thought would endanger them.”

THE COACH-PARENT MEETING

Coaches unselfishly devote a tremendous amount of time and effort to providing a worthwhile experience for youngsters. All too often they are asked to do “just one more thing.” However, successful coaches are aware of the importance of securing the aid and support of well-informed parents. Rather than facing the task of dealing with problem parents, a pre-season meeting is the *key* to reducing the chance of unpleasant experiences. In other words, having a coach-parent meeting is well worth the additional time and effort!

This part of the article is a *guide* for planning and conducting effective coach-parent meetings. Because each coach is unique, coaches should evaluate the information and suggestions and make modifications to suit their personal situation.

PURPOSES OF THE MEETING

The objectives of a coach-parent meeting are to: a) improve parents’ understanding of youth sports, and b) gain their cooperation and support. Their input can then increase the value of sport participation for their children’s physical, psychological, and social development.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

It is not unusual for coaches to be hesitant about conducting a coach-parent meeting because they feel insecure about leading a group of adults. People are often unwilling to do things for which they have had little training or previous experience. Coaches who have held meetings with parents indicate that it is not an overtaxing experience, and the benefits make the meeting a good investment.

It will take approximately 75-minutes to cover the necessary topics. The meeting does not have to be elaborate to be successful. However, the importance of being well prepared and organized cannot be overemphasized. To improve organizational quality, develop and follow a written program outline.

The coach should schedule the meeting as early in the season as possible, and be sure that the facility selected is easily accessible and has a meeting room of adequate size, with appropriate seating, lighting, and other amenities. Should athletes attend the meeting? Some coaches have no objections and believe it helps improve communication among all those involved. Other coaches find it more productive to conduct the meeting without the athletes present. The coach’s personal preference will determine the policy adopted. However, if the athletes are excluded, the coach should make special arrangements for parents who might not be able to attend without their children. For example, obtain an additional room in which the athletes can be shown an educational sport video under the supervision of an assistant coach.

Parents should be sent a personal letter of invitation, including brief statements about the objective of the meeting, its importance, and information about the date, time, location, directions, and attendance by youngsters. A team roster with home addresses, telephone numbers, and e-mail addresses should accompany the letter. Follow-up e-mails are recommended to remind parents about the meeting.

CONTENT AND CONDUCT OF THE MEETING

As stated earlier, effective communication is based on two-way sharing. Therefore, in conducting the meeting, the coach should draw parents into the discussion instead of lecturing to them. The coach can do this by: a) encouraging parents to ask questions, and b) directing questions to them from time to time. Also, in creating an open atmosphere for exchange, it is very important to show respect for the parents. They should feel that they are a contributing part of the meeting, rather than a mere audience.

Opening (5 minutes). The coach begins the meeting by introducing himself or herself and the assistant coach(es). In welcoming the parents, it is important to let them know that their interest and concern are appreciated. In praising their attendance, the coach can point out that they are taking an important step toward assuring a quality sport experience for their children. Next, the coach establishes credibility by giving pertinent background information. The coach tells parents about his or her experience in the sport, experience as a coach, and special training that he or she has had (e.g., workshops, clinics). Finally, the coach points out the purposes of the meeting and tells parents how he or she will provide information about fundamentals of the sport (invite them to attend a practice session).

A note of caution is in order. Coaches who have little experience, or are conducting a coach-parent meeting for the first time, should not begin the meeting by announcing this as a personal shortcoming or by asking for the parents' tolerance. Such statements may reduce parents' trust and support. Self-degrading remarks may also cause parents to question the coach's ability to conduct the meeting. To gain respect, coaches must show confidence in leading the session.

Objectives of Youth Sports (10 minutes). A discussion of the objectives of children's athletics, including a mastery-oriented philosophy of winning, should follow the opening remarks. The coach should focus on those goals and values that are a major part of his or her coaching. Also, the coach should find out which objectives the parents would like to have emphasized. As pointed out earlier, if coaches and parents work together to reduce misunderstandings, the objectives can be achieved.

Details of the Sport Program (10 minutes). Presenting details about the operation of the sport program is another valuable part of the session. In so doing, consideration should be given to the following: a) equipment needed and where it can be purchased, b) sites and schedules for practices and contests, c) length of practices and contests, d) team travel plans, e) major team rules and guidelines, f) special rule modifications to be used at this level of competition, g) medical examinations, h) insurance, i) fund-raising projects, j) communication system for cancellations and so on, and k) midseason and postseason events.

The coach should also provide information about what is expected of the athletes and parents relative to the program details. Some coaches find it useful to organize a parent committee, giving this committee the task of coordinating parent involvement in many activities of the season.

Coaching Roles and Relationships (10 minutes). Parents will benefit from knowing about the coach's leadership style. In addition to describing the *mastery approach* that he or she will be using¹⁸, the coach should encourage parents to reinforce this approach in interactions with their children.

Parents' Responsibilities and Challenges (20 minutes). Informing parents about the responsibilities the coach expects them to fulfill is the most important part of the meeting. The coach should discuss the following topics, which were covered earlier in this article:

1. Dangers of the reversed-dependency phenomenon—the negative impact of this process.
2. Parent commitments and affirmations—the five important questions to which parents must be able to honestly answer “Yes.”
3. Rules of conduct at sports events—the coach is responsible for the team, and the parents are responsible for their own behavior.

Coach-Parent Relations (5 minutes). The coach should tell parents of his or her willingness to discuss any problems that might arise—that all-important two-way communication! He or she should let parents know what times and places are best suited for discussions.

Closing (20-30 minutes). The coach-parent meeting should be concluded with a question-and-answer session. For this to be worthwhile, a coach must be ready to cover a wide range of parents’ concerns. To prepare for the kinds of questions that might be asked, the previously mentioned sport-parent DVD is an excellent resource²⁶.

An effective technique for starting a question-and-answer period is for the coach to take the lead in raising questions. He or she can stimulate parent involvement by asking the first few questions, and then guide the discussion. If the coach does not know the answer to a question, he or she should not be ashamed to admit it. The parents will appreciate the honesty. Rather than giving a weak or incorrect response, the coach can offer to seek the answer along with the parent, or perhaps someone in the group will be able to provide the answer. The coach should not give the impression that he or she must address every question. Finally, at the end of the meeting, the coach should thank the parents again for attending.

The coach-parent meeting is a vitally important tool for developing parent involvement and support. A successful meeting will help solidify the athletic triangle (the coach-parent-athlete triad) and lead to positive youth sport experiences.

FOLLOW-UP MEETINGS

If possible, it is highly desirable to schedule a mid-season meeting with parents. This will provide an opportunity to present refresher points, discuss the athletes’ progress, and cooperatively seek solutions to existing problems.

A post-season celebration is an excellent way to end the season. This could take the form of a family dinner planned by the parents. In addition to having good fellowship and fun, coaches could take some time to obtain parents’ evaluations of the program and their coaching. In such conversations, the coach asks parents to point out things that went well and gets their suggestions for making improvements.

CONCLUSION

This article has dealt with a frequently neglected aspect of youth sports, namely, interactions between coaches and parents. Consideration was given to promoting effective coach-parent relationships to improve the quality of the athletes’ sport experiences. In so doing, the following major points were emphasized:

1. Coaches and parents play important roles in determining the outcomes of participation in youth sports.
2. In a developmental model, sports provide an arena for learning, where success is measured in terms of personal growth and development.
3. Participation in youth sports can improve physical skills and fitness, build

- character, promote social competence, bring families closer together, and provide enjoyable recreational experiences for young people.
4. Fun is the essence of play, and it constitutes the core of successful youth sport experiences.
 5. Young athletes should be taught that they are never “losers” if they give maximum effort in striving for excellence.
 6. *Mastery Approach* programs [18, 26] are designed to teach parents and coaches how to create a mastery motivational climate—a learning emphasizes skill development, personal and team success, maximum effort, and fun.
 7. Youngsters participate in sports to have fun, to improve skills, for thrills and excitement, and to make friends. The goal of winning is relatively unimportant to them as compared with these other objectives.
 8. Parents should not pressure, intimidate, or bribe their children into playing a sport.
 9. Parents should learn basic sport rules, skills, and strategies.
 10. Coaches should serve as valuable resources and answer parents’ questions as best as possible.
 11. A key to reducing parent-produced stress is to impress on them that youth sports are for the young athletes.
 12. Parents must be able to endorse their child’s participation in youth sports and support the coach’s program.
 13. Parents must conform to acceptable standards of behavior at practices and games.
 14. In working with parents, it is essential to develop and maintain open, healthy communication with them.
 15. Effective communication is a two-way street requiring both speaking and listening skills.
 16. Holding a pre-season coach-parent meeting is the key to avoiding unpleasant experiences.
 17. The main objectives of a coach-parent meeting are to improve parents’ understanding of youth sports and to gain their cooperation and support.

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