



Dealing with parents: promoting dialogue

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For coaches of young sporting teams, interacting with parents comes with the territory. The behaviour of parents at youth sporting events has received increased media scrutiny in the past few years.

Such reports often focus on the disruptive and sometimes abusive behaviours of the sidelined parent watching their child's sporting event. However, this game-day scenario can be influenced by the dynamic of the coach–parent relationship. Specifically, this dynamic is positively affected by open communication between parties as they work together in the best interests of the child.

While the term 'youth sport coach' does not automatically seem to imply that coaches have an additional role 'coaching' the parents, the involvement of mums and dads is important. Most parents provide positive support for their kids, whether it is in terms of transport to and from training and games, or words of support and encouragement. These parents are an asset and should be treated as such. Unfortunately, parents' involvement in their children's sporting endeavours can take forms other than unqualified support. The coach is in a powerful position to influence parents and their behaviours. Indeed, the nature of these interactions can have a great impact on the coaching environment and subsequently the experiences of the participants.

While for some parents it may be necessary to set ground rules (many organisations have devised parent codes of conduct; see ausport.gov.au for an example), it is important to understand the reasoning behind the behaviour in order to foster a harmonious learning environment. Interestingly, qualitative research conducted by Holt, Black and Tamminen (2007) suggests that parents are often unaware of the impact their behaviour has on their children and their subsequent sport participation. For example, when asked to list positive parental behaviours, parents and players alike thought that parents should be 'positive, encouraging and non-critical'. However, when listing negative behaviours, parents thought that they should 'not coach from the sidelines', whereas players thought parents should 'not yell at the referee'. The interesting point here was that players saw yelling at the referee to have a detrimental impact on them during games, whereas parents did not seem to understand that their children suffered the consequences of their behaviour during games. Increasing this understanding of parent behaviour at sporting events has important implications for the dynamics of the coach–parent–child relationship.

One of the biggest challenges to the coach–parent relationship is dealing with parental expectations. Not everyone can be the next Darren Lockyer or Libby Trickett, a fact seemingly lost on some ambitious parents. Indeed, this often unrealistic and high-pressured attitude to sporting development can have the opposite effect to that intended. Research has shown that the nature of the participant's social environment has important links with talent development. Specifically, material and emotional support from parents as well as expertise and emotional support from the coach are crucial ingredients for the cultivation of talent. Thus parental support, rather than pressure, is a more desirable component of the sporting environment.

The precise characteristics of supportive parental roles change as the athlete grows and matures. Understanding these changes is critical, both for the parent and coach. According to the Family Systems Model (Hellstedt 1995), from ages 4–12 parental support involves some early instruction and the selection of the coach to whom their child is entrusted. In addition, maintaining an emphasis on play, fun and family involvement during this phase is vital. However, in the middle years (13–18) as the child begins to specialise and become more committed to training and competition, parental support involves transport and time management, with increased importance placed on the coach. Typically this is the phase where conflict can arise between the parents and coach as transitions between sporting goals are negotiated (Hellstedt 1995). Understanding and valuing the role each person plays in the development of the child is necessary for effective communication and hence the relationships between interested parties.

In addition to parental support, enjoyment of participation has been highlighted as critical for the development of talent (Csikszentmihalyi et al. 1993). Therefore it is important for the coach to sit down with parents and outline the importance of positive support and enjoyment for the participant. In doing so, it is important to spell out their top priority is the welfare of the child, and that the principal goal is that the child is enjoying both the learning and participating/competing aspects of their involvement. Increasing the pressure and demands placed on the participants is not going to create a champion — especially not a happy one.

Pressures such as high expectations for success can also be apparent where parents differ in their beliefs about the direction the coaching should take. It may be necessary for the coach to point out that while they appreciate that the parent has a background in the sport themselves, criticising or over-ruling coaching practices or tactics is not only confusing for the child involved, but can affect their enjoyment of participation. Outlining coaching philosophies or development goals shares information and promotes dialogue aimed at working together to achieve what is best for the child. Mageau and Vallerand (2003) suggest that providing a rationale for coaching decisions makes them more meaningful to the listener, subsequently increasing their endorsement of the values and processes explained.

At the end of the day, everyone wants to see young participants enjoying themselves and their sport. The focus should therefore not be on the conduct of the parent or the coaching practices used, but how these things impact on the children's development and participation. Working to make sure that this common goal is shared by all interested parties is a vital step towards functional and complementary coach–athlete, coach–parent and parent–athlete relationships.

Key points

Develop open lines of communication

- Make it a priority at the start of a year/season to talk to the parents of the children with whom you are working
- Outline your approach, discuss their concerns

Encourage positive parental involvement aligned with the athlete's age and level

- Support at events
- Emphasis on effort not results
- Allow the child to make contributions in decision-making

Work with parents to reduce the detrimental effects of over or under-involvement (Carter and McGoldrick 1980)

- Signs of under-involvement:
 - Little emotional support or attendance
 - Lack of enthusiasm over achievements
 - No help setting goals or giving advice
 - Minimal interest conferencing with the coach
- Signs of over-involvement:
 - Own self-esteem dependent on child's achievements
 - Emphasis on winning
 - Feelings between parent and child somewhat dependent on performance at training/competition
 - Excessive activity and financial involvement

References

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