

Parental Involvement, Influence or Interference in Sports

By Diane Schumacher and Peggy Kellers

Today, there has been an explosion of organized youth sport programs in many communities. The rapidly growing sport of soccer, for example, has developed programs for four-year olds. Softball and baseball have organized teams for five-year olds. Football organizations have started youth programs in full pads as young as eight years of age.

Why such an explosion? Parents desire and demand equal opportunities for their children and believe that involvement in sport has several benefits, actual or perceived. Children make friends, build self-esteem and learn teamwork; can learn to compete successfully; and are in a better position to receive athletic scholarships if they start early and specialize. They also are safe in organized sports, and physical activity is a positive alternative to video games, Internet and television.

Parental Involvement

The so-called benefits and the influence of sport in our culture have increased parental involvement. The days when children would normally go out and play unorganized sports in the neighborhood are gone. Marano in *A Nation of Wimps* feels that organized sports has not only diminished play without adult supervision but also eliminated the opportunity for children to work out their own difficulties that arise during play (Psychology Today, December 2004). Now they have year-round, adult-run leagues, clinics and private lessons. Parents willingly invest their money with the hopes of gaining an advantage for college scholarships and professional contracts for their children.

Involvement can also create a sense of entitlement. If parents are involved in fund-raising, then playing time is not the only issue. The subtle belief that children should be treated equally is put in motion. Parents buy their gear, give them treats before and after games, pay for team photos, and expect their children to receive certificates or trophies for just participating, even if the team comes in last. Getting to play should be the reward, but today's parents think their children are entitled to play and receive a trophy for showing up.

Children experience a greater sense of protectionism by their parents. The product of achievement outweighs the process of experiences. Too often, parents lack the appropriate tools to help their children learn to handle all the various situations athletes face. Parents want to protect children from experiencing hurt and disappointment rather than using certain situations as teachable moments. Isn't this part of life? In *A Nation of Wimps*, Marano states that parents are attempting to stifle failure, errors and risk-taking behavior as if these are detrimental to future success (Psychology Today, December 2004). Parents, at times, cross the line between helping and hurting their child.

Parental Influence

Parents also influence their children's lives through their behavior, both positive and negative. Children often demonstrate behaviors that they observe at home. From the sidelines, parents either encourage their children and other players or berate athletes, coaches, officials and opponents' parents. After a game, the parents' behavior is just as influential. Instead of telling their child what he or she did wrong and making corrections, they can talk about improvements and things that went well. Focusing on effort and trying hard is a positive strategy that keeps athletes motivated for future competitions.

If parents aren't able to attend a game, their influence can still be felt when a child comes home. It's so easy to ask, "Did you win?" followed by "Did you play?" as the first thing out of a

parent's mouth. Not very often do athletes hear the words, "What was fun in the game today?" "What did you learn?" A young athlete can easily misinterpret what is important to his or her parents.

The current model of putting winning and personal achievement first takes away from a focus on athlete development. The Citizenship Through Sports Alliance (CTSA), a national coalition, graded youth sports on parental misbehavior and an overemphasis on winning. A "D" was given for parental behavior, involvement and a child-centered philosophy. Coaching received a "C-" while a "C+" was awarded for health and safety. The highest grade, a "B-", went to officiating.

It is refreshing to watch parents who are wonderful influences on their children whether their role is a coach, an official or behind the scenes. Notice the players with enthusiasm and a passion to play the sport. It often is a result of parents who have strong values and a healthy understanding about handling the highs and lows of competition. They are realistic about the opportunities sport may provide given their child's athletic abilities. This helps their children maintain balance and perspective.

Parental Interference

Parental interference is also on the rise. Playing time is uppermost in their minds. Given the money parents invest in many sport programs they are unwilling to have their children sit on the bench for very long. Equal playing time seems to be the expectation for junior varsity level and younger, and that may be realistic. At the varsity high school level, no coach should ever guarantee playing time. Rather, the coach should guarantee playing opportunity. Opportunity in competition comes when factors including attitudes, abilities and needs of the team are in place and are based on a sound coaching philosophy. What parents don't realize is that their child can have equal opportunity for development in practices. If practices are well run and organized with maximum participation in mind, each athlete should be very active.

Parents also interfere when they cross the line during games and practices. Verbal abuses and even physical assaults are increasing. It is disheartening to watch out-of-control parents. Yelling at their own child does not benefit the athlete or the team. Making sarcastic remarks about a coach is detrimental. Officials usually take the brunt of verbal abuse. They desire to call a fair, consistent game, yet, as humans they miss calls and use judgment that conflicts with people watching from a different vantage point. When spectators are outraged, their comments eventually become personal and attack a person's character. They should be removed from the premises immediately.

There are still parents who attend every game without interfering. Although they may not agree with some of the calls or decisions, they support the athletes, coaches and officials. They are available when needed and find ways to thank the coach for his or her time and effort. If they feel that some serious injustice is done to their child or the team, they will interfere for the purpose of being part of the solution rather than the problem.

What can be done? Educating the parents of your athletes is the first step. Invite all the parents to a preseason gathering to provide materials about your program's philosophy, expectations and sportsmanship. Be upfront and clear about the procedures that you expect to be followed before and after practices and games. Include in the packet information about conduct and sportsmanship at competitions. If you have a zero tolerance policy, make sure that parents understand that it is because you want to protect the coaches, players and officials at all times.

At competitions announce and/or post a Code of Sportsmanship using ideas from this sample: "Our athletic department shares a set of values that reflect the highest possible standards of

conduct. Our coaches build on these values by aspiring to uphold them and instilling them in our athletes. As a parent of an athlete attending (name of institution) you and your guests are asked to uphold these values as well.”

We value:

1. Conduct that is respectful towards all persons while on our premises.
2. Behaviors that reflect a high standard of sportsmanship while attending athletic events. Applaud good play by all athletes during the competition. Physical or verbal abuse toward coaches, opponents, officials or other spectators is prohibited.
3. Adults who model healthy choices in front of our athletes. Avoid using alcohol, tobacco and illegal drugs at the contests.
4. Respect for our coaches as professionals. Avoid confronting coaches before and after the competition. If there is a concern, go through the proper channels to request a meeting with the coach, athlete and parent(s). Playing time will not be discussed under any circumstance because it is between the player and coach.

Parents want the best for their child and, as educators, coaches and administrators have a critical role in explaining their expectations to the parents. In addition, creating a healthy, safe atmosphere and positive environment for everyone is paramount, no matter what the outcome of a competition. Everyone enjoys the competitive experience much more when people – fans, athletes, coaches and officials – value and appreciate good play and effort. The toughest competitions are the close ones when, in reality, no one deserves to lose.

Positive role models are an asset for young people. Encourage parents to begin modeling positive, supportive involvement and influence throughout their children’s sporting experience. It will create fond memories while increasing the enjoyment and fun as the family realizes the benefits of competition and learns valuable lessons. A legacy will be passed on when these same children become parents of their own budding stars. CQ

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