

Curbing Parental Sports Rage

Parental and Coach Conduct at Youth Sporting Events

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A child's world is full of violence. It appears in video games, films, and TV programs, and many parents in the hope of removing their children from some of this violence are encouraging and sometimes pushing their children into participating in organized sports. Unfortunately, this same violence is creeping into Little League, Pee Wee football, soccer, basketball, and hockey, in the form of the parents' and coaches' poor conduct and rage. This violent behavior on the part of parents and coaches must be curbed and we must bring back into the game the learning of the rules and skills of the sport and a sense of good sportsmanship and values.

Some parents are losing sight of why these children are playing--and that to the children is what they are doing: "playing." Many parents come to their child's practice or game with their own agenda of win, win, win at all costs. The team winning, the points scored, who is the big scorer: these are the issues that have replaced fun and sportsmanship in the eyes of these parents. These unreasonable expectations of winning, not messing up, being the star player, and making mom and/or dad proud are everything. "These parents expect perfection from their children, the coaches and the referees" (Sachs, 2000, p.62). It no longer is for the kids. Maybe Mom or Dad were promising athletes in their youth and for one reason or another were robbed of their hopes and are pinning all of their own wants, needs, wishes, and "what ifs" on their child or children (Kehe, 2000). The major problem seems to be that these parents are not considering what the children want. According to a "Kidthink" survey conducted by Jerry

Kirshenbaum (1993) for *Sports Illustrated*, the kids want things like “unlimited free throws until they miss in basketball, everyone having a turn to play, less violence in hockey, using their hands in soccer, and to have fun” (p.12). Perhaps the parents should listen to the children on this issue.

Originally, the purpose of organized sports for young children was to teach them the basics of the game and skills needed to play, to practice good sportsmanship, and to have fun. If we look back to the beginnings of organized sports over 100 years ago, the purpose then was to get the growing numbers of rowdy children off the streets and to teach them values (Nack & Munson, 2000). Joe Fish, director of the Center for Sports Psychology in Philadelphia adds to this stating, “The main purpose of youth sports is to emphasize effort, participation and skill development” (as cited in Nack & Munson, 2000, p. 6). According to Fish, parents and coaches are too worried about the outcome of the game and are getting away from the initial purpose. In addition, Thomas Tutko, Professor Emeritus of sports psychology at San Jose State University and a member of the National Alliance for Youth Sports (NAYS) board says, “Kids rank winning about seventh or eighth down on the list. [...] Children’s sports are supposed to teach skills and values – such as fair play, working with others and dealing well with adversity- that kids can draw upon throughout their lives” (as cited in Nack & Munson, 2000, p. 6). What has gone wrong with that purpose? Where has this sense of sportsmanship, learning, and fun gone?

The incidence of violent behavior (sports rage) among sports parents is increasing throughout the United States and Canada and it needs to be curtailed. The epidemic of verbal harassment and physical violence by parents at youth sports events is increasing

far too rapidly. These incidents range from a heated and profane 15-minute argument, to brawls involving two, ten, even fifty or a hundred parents, to striking and beating up coaches and referees, and even to murder (Nack & Munson, 2000). The age range of the children observing these incidents is 6 to 12 year olds, and some as young as 4 and 5 see these outbursts. Where is the role modeling and focus of assisting children to develop:

[...] an enjoyment of sports and fitness that will last a lifetime; physical fitness, basic motor skills, a positive self-image, a balanced perspective on sports in relation to the child's school and community life, and a commitment to the values of teamwork, fair play, and sportsmanship. (Organized Athletics for Preadolescent Children, 2001, p. 583)

Athletic associations and organizers of youth sports, Fred Engh, President of NAYS, and the organization's 2,200 chapters in the United States are attempting to educate parents and coaches on the needs of young athletes, but this effort needs to be expanded to all organized youth sports (Nack & Muson, 2000; Gardner, 1999; Axtman, 2000; Reilly, 2000). Engh and his cohorts Jim Thompson, director of Positive Coaching Alliance at Stanford, The Cedar Rapids Recreation Department, Jupiter Florida Athletic Association, Port St Lucie Youth Soccer Association, and many other organized athletic associations are now requiring parents to attend sportsmanship classes, adhere to parental conduct handbooks, sign codes of conduct, and observe Silent Saturdays. Parents who refuse to attend class, adhere to the handbook, or do not comply with the code of conduct are ejected from the sporting event and their child is removed from the team. In order to reduce this parental "sports rage," all organized youth sports associations across the

United States need to adopt these stricter policies and return youth sports to the original focus and goal - youth having fun while learning all aspects of a sport.

Many groups are working to return youth sports to a time of teaching fundamental skills, developing fitness and promoting the development of positive attitudes, values, and self-esteem. The American Academy of Pediatrics, Committee on Sports Medicine and Committee on School Health (2001) are concerned for the preadolescent children who participate in sports and have outlined “[...] important objectives for parents, coaches and officials” (p. 583). They are “[...] to enhance the child’s self-image, mastery of the sport with emphasis on performance, setting realistic goals, effort should be met with praise and mistakes met with encouragement and corrective instruction” (p. 583). In addition, they recommend that parents show that the child’s worth is unrelated to the outcome of the game and give unconditional approval for participating and having fun.

Even Peggy Post (2004) of *Modern Manners in Good Housekeeping* had a “Good Sport Guide for Parents.” Post had five simple rules for parents:

1. Leave refereeing to the referee. No yelling, rehashing, or insulting when you don’t agree with the call.
2. Be considerate of parents and players, even those affiliated with the other team.
3. Show your kid how to be respectful: Winners don’t gloat; losers don’t sulk.
4. Value integrity above victory and teach your child to do the same. That means expecting him or her to follow the rules and not to cheat.

5. Take a pledge. Many teams have children and parents sign a code of conduct that applies on and off the field. (Post, 2004, p. 32).

Parents across the United States and into Canada need to let go of their own agendas, and athletic associations need to enforce parental and coaching codes of conduct through classes and training. As a result, the world of youth sports can be returned to the children where they can all learn to enjoy a sport, learn the skills of a sport, play, and most of all have fun.

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