

ASEP Successful Webinar Series: Making Parents Part of Your Team
Q&A

As a youth coach (basketball), how do you best handle an over the top parent? Better yet, a parent-coach who centers his team around his son/daughter who is below the average skilled athlete?

Over the top? Meaning sport is all about their kid; it's very serious business, etc.? These folks have lots of energy, so revealing to them stories like Todd Marinovich and how the parents overdid it and then it really had negative effects is important. Also, our research on professional tennis players retrospectively looking back at their parents during the junior years and what players were saying about their parents can be eye-opening. This can be found on our website www.youthsports.msu.edu on the "Past Projects" page and entitled Role of Parents in Junior Tennis.

For the parent-coach who is all about their kid, really any kind of change is going to come from the league director/coaching director/administration. While you should respectfully voice your concerns in private, and at the right time, to the coach, understand that you may not be able to have any ability to change the situation without the support of administration. Please, this is not a recommendation to jump above the coach to the AD/administrator, only to be realistic. Try to work it out with the coach. You may also find that if you are a coach as well addressing the situation by talking about the frustrations of the athletes might help.

How do you deal with a parent who doesn't voice their opinion/second guesses me (the coach) but sits in the stands and bad mouths the coach to the other parents?

I think you have a positive confrontation with them. Invite them to meet with you and air the concerns (and that you know about some of them already). If they are unwilling to divulge, you can talk about what you are hearing and stress the importance of open communication and working together so the team benefits. Also, talking about how the behavior is distracting to the team and doesn't look good on the program's reputation may sway them. Finally, during the game you may have another supportive parent help you deal with it at the time, or have the AD/Administrator go and pull aside the parent 1-on-1 and ask for their compliance.

The more you talk about these bad situations at the front end, you can make your expectations clear and then reminding them of that is a lot easier versus never having discussed it.

Do you recommend starting every season with a parent meeting to set expectations and open lines of communication?

Absolutely. The message has to be given all the time. I know parents get tired of the parent meeting, so the more you can do yours differently, have it with a dinner, make it a discussion, etc. have some new information, they will want to be there.

How old should kids be before they start telling parents what they want?

Obviously younger kids 3, 4, 5, 6 have a hard time understanding the consequences of the choices they make. I do like to give choices to young children; yes/no questions like do you want to try hockey class? And, then just make it a part of the routine if they say "yes". For older kids, 10, 11, 12 they should be given more control but understand they aren't as effective at thinking abstractly or about long-term consequences. Work them through the consequences of the decisions if you want to give them a choice. Certainly, over time you give them more choice so by the time they are 15, 16 the parent is more or less facilitating the conversation, and not always making the decision.

Is there any particular challenge that you have faced and had difficulty addressing?

Yeah, the 1% of parents that have their own agenda and don't care about what anyone else wants or needs. I think of these folks as very self-centered and often narcissistic – their agenda is far more important than anyone's needs. They will tell you what you want to hear, because they are smart enough to know what they are doing is not necessarily accepted, they will do what they want behind the scenes. Manipulative and political parents are difficult. In these toughest scenarios it is important for all leaders in the program/school to be on the same page about how you want to deal with it. Providing warnings and explanations as to why their behavior is counterproductive is important. Also is asking for specific behavior changes to remain a part of the team. Reminding them that sport is a privilege not a right is a part of the process. Ultimately, you have to be willing to remove them from the team (which means removing the child, which is totally unfortunate).

Are there different ways to deal with parent dynamics when the sport in question is a team sport vs. an individual sport?

This is a good question for sure. While many of the principles hold true for either situation, in a team sport environment things can be diffused across a team versus individual sport all of the attention is going to one particular athlete. In individual sports parents must understand that the pressure to perform can be great and being critical is very individual and can create resentment. In individual sports the parent's role is often greater because of the nature of training so parents need to back off at times, talk about other things, and try to keep sport fun. In a sport like track and field getting the parents to know each other and each of the kids so they have a connection not just with their child but all the children will aid in them focusing a little less on their child, and supporting everyone.

In team situations the competitive thing between kids wanting playing time and starting positions is an inherent dynamic. Again many of the same things apply in team situations as do in individual... Have the parents think about the "we" and what is best for the team first. Also, play up the parents being a team angle, including having them do dinners together, etc. Without a united parent group how do we expect our youth to unite and work together?

What do you say to a parent who competes in a sport with a child, knows the difficulty of the sport, and yet STILL constantly critiques the child? Shouldn't parents who know how tough a sport is be more sympathetic to it?

They should know better, but having a lot of knowledge makes us sometimes feel like we need to provide it all the time. I suggest having the parent reflect on how their parents' involvement influenced them good and bad, and also do a perspective-taking exercise and think about what their child is thinking when they are critiquing them. One thing I tell parents is that if your child gets a blank stare when you are talking to them or argues with you at the slightest thing, then maybe you need to take a look at yourself and how negative/critical/controlling you are.

We just ended a season in which we had major problems with an over-involved parent. Can I speak indirectly about these problems at our parents' meeting next year?

Yes, but be careful. Certainly you don't "name names" but everybody will know who you are speaking about. My recommendation is to communicate with the over involved parent and discuss what needs to happen next season, and how you are going to talk about these things in the meeting. Not in a way to embarrass them but to make the expectation clear that it is not appropriate and sets a bad norm for the team. Hopefully you can get the parent to understand the effect of their behaviors and come to a resolution.

How do you deal with parents who don't show up to parent meetings?

Would like to make it mandatory and if you don't show your child doesn't play, but most organizations can't/won't enforce it. For those that don't show I would make the effort to get them the notes/agenda/code of conduct from the meeting and sign off that they agree and will abide by the

team's expectations. If you anticipate real issues with one of the parents go and speak to them. Get to them know. Try to build some trust and get them involved in doing statistics for example.

How do you feel about having closed tryouts for MS/HS sports?

Not a big fan of it, especially at the MS level. We need to keep the base of participation and opportunity very wide so kids stay involved. Plus!!!! Our talent identification expertise is definitely in question. Research has revealed that coaches may not be as good at id'ing as they would like to think. Also, closed tryouts can often eliminate the late bloomer. Not a fan of it, but understand why it happens. Some camps/tryouts need to be by invite but I think in schools that is a real concern.

During your seminar, you said that it's best to keep open communication. Do you believe that a coach should chat with parents about playing time and position?

Hmmm... Great question. To be honest I am mixed on this. I know some excellent coaches who say you never talk about these things. However, I wonder sometimes if we just talked about their child (not other children) and addressed the reasons why we are making our decisions that it would alleviate issues. I would make it clear that this is not a negotiation for PT or position. I will listen to you and clarify why your child is getting the playing time that they are. I also wouldn't have these conversations more than once with the same parent.

How do you deal with the idea that athletes are not put on the field by their birth date? That playing time is not a right by grades, etc.?

Yeah, another tough one. This becomes an entitlement issue. I did my time, now I'm a senior I should start. This all depends on your level of competition. If you are youth sport, little kids, junior high team that kind of competitive levels where development is obviously most important then everyone should be getting opportunity. At the more competitive levels where winning does matter a lot more, then it is a high performance environment where the athletes that perform get the bulk of the time. It is based on objective things like statistics and work ethic in practice. Not on status. Being totally honest sometimes the best thing that can happen is to not have an entitled senior play because they can become a great distraction to the team. Also, play up the team aspect and how cool it will be if the team performs versus individual accolades. You have to make the expectation clear at the beginning of the season and then deal with what comes. Not everyone is going to be on board unfortunately.

How do you reinforce to parents that kids need to practice on their own?

I give examples of how great athletes practiced at home. I'm sure you can find these stories on the web or in biographies. I also give them a clear plan of action so there is no confusion as to what they should be doing.

Parents are usually quite unrealistic in their assessment of their own child's abilities. How do you help them see more realistically without totally crushing them?

Very carefully!

Ok, I will answer this. As I mentioned on the webinar I like the idea of a report card on the progress each player is making. This evaluation comes off as what we are all doing to get better and not me, the coach, coming to you to knock down your child. At the same time, help them refocus on the steps to becoming great; so you make it clear it is difficult but at the same time not dashing their dreams. Deliberate practice. 10,000 hours and 10 years. That many things are involved in becoming a great athlete that may be out of your control like injuries or your child playing great that one night a scout is in the gym. As Jim Schmutz said, put the focus on what other things can be gained from the experience and remind them that while very few play at the D1 or pro level all youth can benefit greatly from sport.

How do you go about preventing the parent from "badmouthing" the coach behind the coach's back after the big game to their child?

Muzzles – just joking. Got to have a sense of humor when it comes to coaching. Maybe I'm just getting tired now.

From the start of the season educate the parents as to how second-guessing, bad-mouthing confuse their children and hurt their performance. Really by doing this they are undermining their own children. With older teams you can have the players address this in the parent meeting. Then, ask the parents to speak with you with any concerns. Once they get it that bad-mouthing really hurts everyone then maybe they will stop. Also, ask them to just stay silent when they are emotional and write down their frustrations or air them to their spouse. Usually by the next day they will look at these concerns and realize that they are the thoughts of an emotional parent, not their normal rationale self.

Any comment on how to deal with parents that pay for private instructors and are not willing to be coached by anyone else?

So, they won't allow you to coach them? I would think about not having them on the team. Sounds cruel, but there needs to be a level of respect for teaching and authority that comes with being the coach and this undermines the credibility of the coach with the entire team. I would of course try to work it out and reason with them as to why this is not good, but you may have to ask them to play elsewhere. The real issue is that often the child will listen to you and it is a shame that they won't allow the child the benefit from learning from multiple people.

The other option is try to bring the coach on the staff! Especially if it's your star athlete. Joking to an extent, but if you can work with that coach and show the parent how the coaches are on the same page then maybe they will relent.

Thanks for your great questions.

Larry