



The

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of

Parents

in

Athletics

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## The Role of Parents in Athletics

The involvement of parents in the athletic experience of their children is a given. Without question, all parents should be part of this area of growth in their children. Their involvement affects their own child, the coach, the rest of the team, the other parents, and the officials. How they choose to be involved is a choice they have. This booklet focuses on the parent's role from the perspective of the athlete. For more than three decades I frequently asked the players on my teams a series of questions about the role of adults in their experience. In this process, I learned many things that helped me as a coach. I also learned many things that young people would like to tell their parents but probably never will. This booklet is one of my gifts back to three decades of great young people on my teams.

One of the questions I am asked frequently by coaches is, "how much did kids change over the course of your coaching career?" My response is always the same, "the athletes have changed very little, but the parents have changed dramatically". While some current parental reactions can undoubtedly be traced to either the professional model of sport, or the media, most problems with parents and sport are self-generated. As a result, too many households place an overemphasis on sports at the expense of sportsmanship and support. The number of parents who cross the appropriate line of support or encouragement to intolerable interference has increased. In a similar display of misplaced priorities, too many parents seem to be more concerned with attracting the attention of college scouts than just enjoying their child's high school years and letting their child's advancement to college take its own path. With athletes focusing on a single sport year round (many at a very early age), the pressure for success in that sport mounts. Parents are making large financial investments in private tutors, conditioning coaches, and doing whatever is necessary to give their kids the opportunity to participate on "select" out-of-season teams to ensure that their kid gets as much of an advantage as possible.

As the focus has shifted from playing for the school team to being part of an all-star team outside of school, parents have become more and more involved. Even within the school setting, athletes routinely transfer to another school to play with better players or to be part of a specific program where they will be more easily "seen". With loyalty only for their own child, these shortsighted adults have been one of the main

causes of coaching turnover and burnout.

When I have the opportunity to speak at school parent's meetings, I am not there to represent the coaches or the administrators, but rather the athletes. In most instances involving the sports arena, adults are facilitators at best, and at worst, trespassers. I have learned a great deal about my role as a coach and a father from these responses. For example, there are some special things adults can do to help young people enjoy their athletic experience and help them through this age. I have learned that athletes want adults to be part of the inherently fun aspects of sport.

Even today, most parents mean well, but may not be aware of how they can meaningfully help the athletes reach their goals and improve performance. If handled correctly, with both parent and coach working together for the benefit of the athlete, the athletic experience can provide a tremendous positive developmental encounter for the participants. In order to ensure that the athletic experience is, indeed, positive, everyone in the process (coaches and parents alike) must always remember that the kids needs must come first. What I am going to suggest works, benefits them, and most of all, has credibility, because it came from them. So if you find yourself disagreeing with some of this thinking, please give yourself a day or so and think about it from the perspective and age of the athlete.

As a rule, when parents start a young child out athletically, it is a "joint venture." The general feeling among most parents is that they are experiencing their child's athletic experience with them. In turn they have a requirement to be involved. In the process, athletics becomes a link with their children...an enhanced level of communication... something that is shared. Another factor that impacts on the situation is the fact that when children are under the age of ten, their main goal is usually to please their parents. The parent is always a credible source of knowledge. Everything the parents say is right, a scenario most parents like. To the dismay (and shock) of many parents, a number of things change as the athlete enters adolescence. As such, learning when and how to diminish the parent's involvement becomes an issue for both parties.

As kids grow older and more independent, parents need to realize that they need to stay close, but focus on their kids needs. Especially in athletics, this is a time for kids. Parents and coaches constantly send powerful messages to athletes, and those messages should not conflict. Since 70% of all young people are done competing in a team sport activ-

ity by the age of twelve, it becomes even more important that a child's parents, as early as possible, do what they can to facilitate his growth, help his performance and keep their own proper perspective. With regard to the role of parents in athletics, the following are some of the things that I learned from having my athletes write answers to questions I posed to them. In over thirty years of coaching, I asked questions of my athletes and heard the same responses, regardless of age, gender or sport.

These suggestions reflect the athlete's point of view. The issues covered focus on three important times, before, during and after competition.

### Before the First Game

As the season begins, parents are encouraged to ask themselves the following questions:

- Do you want them to play? If so, why?
- What will be a successful season for you as a parent?
- What are your goals for them?
- What do you hope they gain from the experience?
- What do you think their role will be on this team?

After the parents have answered these questions for themselves, they should remember their answers, and then when they have some quiet, uninterrupted time, ask their son or daughter the following questions:

- Why are you playing?
- What is a successful season?
- What goals do you have?
- What do you think your role will be on the team?

When their child responds, the parents should just listen without talking. Once the parents have heard their kid's answers and compared them to their own responses, if both sets of expectations are the same, great. On the other hand, if the parent's responses are different from their children's, the kids need their parents to change their attitudes and accept theirs. No questions.

When differences occur, and the parent does not drop their expectations, this is where trouble can begin for the athlete. For example, if the reason a person's son or daughter gives for playing is as most young

people I have coached, it will usually have something to do with "fun, joy, loving the game." If the parent's goals are something other than that, a conflict will eventually arise. If the parent reasons for why their child is participating in athletics involves the perception that the young athlete will eventually "get a college scholarship," two completely different sets of expectations exist. The resultant pressure that will undoubtedly arise will not help the player's performance or make the season enjoyable for anyone involved (player, parent or coach).

Many athletes consistently relate their feelings that their parents do not understand their roles, and almost always feel that their role is larger than what the athlete knows it to be. This situation often turns into frustration and second-guessing, and frequently puts the athlete in the middle between coach and parent, in a position where the athlete can only lose.

Only one guarantee exists during a normal athletic season; it will not be "perfect". Even without disagreements between parents, players and coaches, problems will always occur with relationships, playing time, individual and team success. Before these times happen, it is essential that both players and parents have a mutual perspective on everyone's expectations concerning the child's athletic experience.

The next step that needs to be undertaken early in the season is for the parent to "release" their son or daughter to the game and to the coach. This recommendation is based on feedback from parents and athletes who have experienced the most athletic success. Parents should always stay close to the situation and get to know their child's coach, especially if their child is young. Parents should be fully aware of who is in their child's life. Once parents are not overly concerned for their child's physical and emotional safety, one of the best gifts they can give their children is to release them to this activity. As such, during the season, parents must share their child with the coach and the team. The earlier in their child's career they are able to do this, the better it is for their children's development and growth. If a parent feels the need to talk to a coach about a problem, he should call and allow the coach to choose an appropriate time and place with regard to such problems; some concerns are appropriate while others are not.

Among the concerns that are appropriate for a parent to discuss with their child's coach are:

- Mental and physical treatment of your child
- Ways to help your child improve

- Concerns about your child's behavior

Inappropriate areas of concern that a parent should not discuss with their child's coaches include:

- Playing time
- Team strategy or play calling
- Other team members

By releasing their young athlete to the game and coach, the parents are telling their children that all successes are theirs, all failures are theirs, and all problems are theirs. There are not many places in a young person's life where their parents can say, "this is your thing." This can't be done with friends, academics, decisions on weekends, or even movies, but it can be done in athletics.

The dilemma for most adults is that it is easy for them to see "solutions" in athletic situations and it is too painful for adults to let their children find their own solutions. On the other hand, it is both necessary and helpful to allow children to work their own way out of troubling dilemmas. Athletics is one of the best places for young people to take risks and to fail. Is there a better place for a kid to take a chance and fail than on the court or field? Understandably, parents do not want their kids to take risks with cars, drugs, or sexually. On the other hand, no downside exists for allowing a young athlete to take a risk and fail in a game or practice. If young athletes are going to develop into intelligent, instinctive individuals, it is critical that they are given the opportunity to solve their own problems during games. It is more fun for them, and they have an enhanced chance to grow in a meaningful way.

Parents should consider the following "red flags" that indicate that they have not released their young athlete to the game:

- A parent who is continuing to live his own personal athletic dream through his child has not released his child to the game. As a child climbs the competitive ladder of athletics, the parent must consciously separate his dreams from the equation.
- If a parent tends to share in the credit when the child has done well in sport or has been victorious, "I taught her how to shoot that three-pointer" and "I showed him that curve-ball" are examples of sharing the credit. When asked who does this the most, athletes typically respond that it is their fathers.
- Another red flag is when a parent finds himself trying to solve all of his child's athletic related problems. (Let's get everyone

together and talk this out" or "I'll just call the coach and solve this.") Young people may laugh and say, "that's my mom." On one hand, it is only natural for a parent to attempt to steer his child through the rough spots in life in order to enhance the child's enjoyment of the athletic experience. But, athletics offers an excellent opportunity to allow kids to learn to solve their own problems. It is alright for parents to teach their child how to talk to teammates or the coach as an authority figure, but they should let their child take responsibility for the actions involved in solving problems.

- If a parent is trying to continue to coach his child when the athlete probably knows more about the game than the parent does, he has not released the young athlete.
- A parent should realize that he is taking everything too seriously and has not released his child to the activity when:
  - He is nervous before his child's game
  - He has a difficult time bouncing back after his child's team suffers a defeat
  - He makes mental notes during a game so he can give his child advice at the conclusion of the game
  - He becomes verbally critical of an official
- Another red flag that is often seen concerning parents with inappropriate expectations occurs when athletes avoid their parents after games or are embarrassed about their parent's involvement. All of these signals indicate that the child's athletic experience is still shared, and the child needs more space.

Parents should understand and accept the fact that there will never be such a thing as a "perfect season" and all parental assistance involves decisions with a very fine line of judgment.

## During the Game

*"Young people need models not critics" - John Wooden*

Athletes ask that their parents only do three things during the game. On one hand, the list is not too long. On the other hand, adhering to the list is very difficult for most parents because of the emotions involved, when their child is "on stage".

In order to help performance (both the athlete's and their teammates), the single most important contribution a parent can make during a game is to model appropriate behavior. What athletes need their parents to model more than anything else is poise and confidence. If parents expect their children to react to the ups and downs involved in a game with poise, then they must model it. It is OK to be excited and encouraging, but if parents want their children to face adversity with self-assurance, then they need to be able to do the same thing. Parents should remember the old maxim: "A child that lives with praise learns to feel good about himself and learns to praise." Children will take their cues from adults (particularly their parents). If an athlete looks at his parents during the game, would he draw confidence, assurance and poise from what he saw? First of all, the athlete should not be looking at his parents during a game, he should be focusing on playing. If he is looking to his parents for either approval or out of fear, it is another red flag that the parents are too involved and have not released their child to the game.

The second responsibility that athletes state that they need their parents to do during the game is to focus on the team and the team's goals. For the coach, a team is like a family, and the players are all "his kids." By focusing on the team, the adults not only get the attention off of their individual child, but also off all the things that are not in the parents control (e.g. the score, the referees, the opponents, coaching, and playing conditions). When parents focus on those things beyond their control, it only provides a crutch and helps to build in excuses, which in reality makes the adult a confidence cutter.

The third thing that kids need during the game is to have only one instructional voice offering advice. That voice should be the coach's. If a parent does not believe unwanted advice is a negative factor, he should go to a ten-year olds soccer game where he does not have emotional

involvement and watch and listen as if he were a player on the field.

There are only four roles during a game: spectator, competitor, official, and coach. Everyone involved in athletics would be wise to choose only one of those roles to try to fulfill. If a parent finds himself having difficulty dealing with officiating, he should remember that the officials are there to be in charge of the game, make subjective judgments, enforce the rules and control play. *Every parent should remember that he does not have the right to interact with a game official.* When a parent criticizes a referee, he is teaching his children that it is OK to challenge authority. Some adults have the false impression that by being in a crowd, they become anonymous. People behaving poorly cannot hide. A ticket to a high school game is not a license to verbally abuse others or be obnoxious.

Every sport requires different skills to play and to be a good encourager. Among the factors that determine the degree of difficulty that a parent may have in acting appropriately when his child engages in a particular sport are the adult's physical distance from the game, and how much subjective judgment is involved by coaches and referees. The closer the parents are in proximity, the more difficult it is to watch and keep everything in perspective. Sitting fifty yards away in the football stands is much easier for example, than being twenty feet away from home plate in softball.

Judgment is involved in every sport, but not nearly as much in an objective sport, like swimming or track, than in basketball where every referee's whistle could go either way and substitutions by coaches are frequent. Each referee's whistle and every coach's substitution can be questioned by anyone in attendance thereby making it more difficult for an adult with emotional ties to the contest to remain poised and encouraging. Almost all parents believe that their child should play more or have a bigger role on the team. As such, it is very difficult for parents to be objective. Coaches, on the other hand, can be objective.

Another factor that makes a parent's task even more difficult, is the soloist or spotlight elements of some sports. Gymnastics and wrestling are sports where the spectators are close to the action. In sports such as these, lots of subjective judgment exists. Because athletes are in a spotlight, some very difficult times are created for the parents. As the adults, parents need to learn to watch whatever sport their children have chosen to play and provide what they need most.

On one hand, if parents are able to act appropriately, players indicate that they love to have them present at their games. On the other hand, if parents cannot adhere to reasonable standards of behavior concerning modeling poise and confidence, many athletes state that all factors considered, they would rather have their parents stay home.

### After the Game

In my coaching career, I always tried to ask my athletes a series of questions when they were leaving my program. For example, they were asked to look back over all the years they played and identify the most enjoyable part of the whole experience (best memory), and the least favorable part of the whole experience (worst memory). For adults, the hardest time of their child's athletic experience often occurs during the game. For athletes, however, games represent reward (practice is over, and they get to play). When it comes to recalling their least-enjoyable memory, many athletes will name "after the game" and often specifically "after the game in the car with parents." This situation is often when the most confidence cutting, confrontation, and confusion occurs for the athlete. Unfortunately, some high school athletes do not want to go home after the game because they do not want to face the questioning or criticism. What they need most at these times is not another coach, but a parent, (i.e. "just be my Dad").

Fortunately, such a situation does not defy a meaningful solution. As such, in order to help establish a more wholesome atmosphere after the game, most athletes desperately want their parents to give them *time and space* at the end of a game.

All parents hope that their children can grow up to have healthy relationships. Athletics is one of the best places in a young person's life to practice relationship building. Given the nature of sports, athletes rely on relationships to succeed in team sports. They need to have confident,

meaningful relationships with their teammates and coaches. Yet in the car after the game, a single comment like, "why does Sally get all the shots?" may mean to the adult, "I think you are a good shooter too," but is interpreted by the athlete to be, "Sally is a ball hog". Questioning remarks like, "Why does coach play a zone?; Why don't you guys throw the ball deep instead of running on first down?; Why does the coach have your first baseman playing so close?" may be intended by a parent to have his son or daughter see him as an ally or sharing interest in the sport, but is often interpreted by that athlete to say "coach doesn't know what he is doing." Athletes do not need adults to question their actions, the actions of other players, or the coach's decisions concerning strategy or playing time.

Parents should ask themselves if they can be a source of confidence and help build relationships on the team under the following conditions:

- When their child played well, but the team lost?
- When their child played poorly?
- When their child played very little or did not play at all?

In each of these scenarios, parents should give their children the space and time they need to recover. The more competitive the athlete and the more competitive the sport, the more time and space players need. Parents should leave them alone until they are receptive to interaction with them. Then when they do come to them, parents should give them quiet understanding, be a reflective listener and bring them back to the bigger perspective. The athlete often resents uninvited conversations that occur after the game. Instead of bringing the parent and athlete closer, players often clam up and send the message, "I don't want to talk about it now." Parents should keep their corrections and criticisms in check and let their child bring the game to them if they want to. Good athletes learn better when they seek their own answers. The only time parents should initiate the conversation in this situation is when their child may have exhibited a behavior in the game that would not be acceptable at home (i.e. profanity, disrespect of authority, etc.). Even then, parents should choose their comments and timing carefully, being aware of the emotions of the moment. When confronting a behavior that would not be acceptable in their home, parents should discuss it as a parent to child, not a parent to athlete. One comment from a parent that can always be sincerely said and received by any athlete is, "I love watching you play".

Many young athletes often indicate that conversations with their parents after a game have somehow made them feel as if their value as a person was somehow tied to playing time or winning or losing athletic contests. Almost without exception, it is unlikely that the parents of those kids had any intention of giving that impression. Yet in a simple conversation following a game, a parent can send that exact message. When asked what was said or done to make the athlete feel that way, many players indicated that their parents responses were often as simple as, "my dad always seems happier when we win," or "my parents are always a lot more quiet when I don't play much," or "when we lose, my dad tells me all the things I did wrong." In reality, these are just perceptions of the words or actions of a probably well-meaning adult who may actually have been trying to support or connect, with his child, but just wasn't sure how to do it.

## Summary Points

### *Players Role:*

- Play the game for fun
- Be gracious when you win and graceful when you lose
- Respect and abide by the rules of the game
- Put the team ahead of yourself in every situation
- Accept decisions made by those in authority
- Demonstrate respect to your opponents, coaches, and teammates
- Be accountable for your own actions
- Develop a teachable spirit that allows you to take correction as a compliment
- Accept and embrace the discipline involved in athletics, because it benefits the team
- Develop the feeling of pride, based upon "shared joy" of the team, and do not have pride that emanates from arrogance or a sense of entitlement.
- Be an athlete of character

### *Coach's Role:*

- Coach for the love of the game and the love of the athlete
- Put the welfare of your athletes above winning
- Accept and abide by the judgment of the officials and rules of the game as "mutual agreements" required to play within the spirit of the game
- Reward effort and behavior and not outcome
- Give dignity to mistakes made with full speed and attention
- Lead with character and by example
- Put the needs of the team ahead of any individual
- Constantly work to improve your knowledge and ability to teach the game and the athletes
- Be willing to confront incorrect behavior or less than an all-out effort
- Encourage multiple-sport participation
- Keep the game simple and fun
- Be willing to work with parents for the benefit of the individual athlete
- Develop a positive-demanding coaching style

*Parents Role:*

- Attend as many games as possible
- Be a model, not a critic; model appropriate behavior, poise, and confidence
- Attend preseason team meetings
- Do everything possible to make the athletic experience positive for your child and others
- View the game with team goals in mind
- Attempt to relieve competitive pressure, not increase it
- Encourage multiple-sport participation
- Release your children to the coach and the team
- Look upon opponents as friends involved in the same experience
- Accept the judgment of the officials and coaches; remain in control
- Accept the results of each game; do not make excuses
- Demonstrate winning and losing with dignity
- Dignify mistakes made by athletes who are giving their best effort and concentration
- Be an encourager - encourage athletes to keep their perspective in both victory and defeat
- Be a good listener
- Accept the goals, roles, and achievements of your child

All adults involved need to do their part and provide the athlete with the help and assistance he really needs to perform well. As such, parents need to address the following critical issues:

- Ask their children questions about why they play, what their goals and roles are, and then accept young athletes' reasons as their own.
- Once parents know their children are safe physically and emotionally, they should release them to the experience (the game, the team and the coach).
- During the game, parents should model poise and confidence and keep their focus on the team.
- After the game, parents should give their children space and time and leave them alone.
- Parents should be a confidence builder by maintaining a consistent perspective and not saying or doing anything that will have their children feel like their self-worth is somehow tied to play-

ing time or outcome of a game.

When parents stop and analyze the athletic experience for their children, the reasons they want our kids to play sports involve providing an opportunity to develop physically, emotionally and to enjoy. The side-benefits of playing sports include that kids are given a good opportunity to learn how to work and get along with others; to take good risks in a public arena and survive, to learn to set and achieve goals by developing positive work habits, to learn how to succeed and fail with dignity, and to develop friendships outside the family unit that can last for a lifetime.

Relatively speaking, being an athlete in school lasts such a short time. Parents need to be the individual who see the big picture and bring their children back to reality when necessary. If young people are making good decisions about drugs, friends and academics, then sports are just dessert. On the other hand, if a child is not making good decisions about those kinds of things, no amount of athletic success by a young athlete will justify a parent to overlook his child's other choices. All a parents' kids are asking them to do is to be part of their positive athletic memories.

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