

The Coach-Parent Partnership

Research is clear that when parents and teachers work together a child tends to do better in school. There is no reason to think that it is any different in youth sports. The following are some guidelines for how parents can contribute to a Coach/Parent Partnership that can help the athlete have the best possible experience.

1. **Recognize the Commitment the Coach Has Made:** The coach has made a commitment that involves many, many hours of preparation beyond the hours spent at practices and games. Recognize his commitment and the fact that he is not doing it because of the pay! Try to remember this whenever something goes awry during the season.
2. **Make Early, Positive Contact with the Coach:** As soon as you know who your child's coach is going to be, contact her to introduce yourself and let her know you want to help your child have the best experience he can have this season. To the extent that you can do so, ask if there is any way you can help. By getting to know the coach early and establishing a positive relationship, it will be much easier to talk with him or her later if a problem arises.
3. **Fill the Coach's Emotional Tank:** When the coach is doing something you like, let him know about it. Coaching is a difficult job and most coaches only hear from parents when they want to complain about something. This will help fill the coach's emotional tank and contribute to his doing a better job. It also makes it easier to raise problems later when you have shown support for the good things he is doing. And just about every coach does a lot of things well. Take the time to look for them.
4. **Don't Put the Player in the Middle:** Imagine a situation around the dinner table, in which a child's parents complain in front of them about how poorly their math teacher is teaching fractions. How would this impact this student's motivation to work hard to learn fractions? How would it affect her love of mathematics? While this may seem farfetched, when we move away from school to youth sports, it is all too common for parents to share their disapproval of a coach with their children. This puts a young athlete in a bind. Divided loyalties do not make it easy for a child to do her best. Conversely, when parents support a coach, it is that much easier for the child to put her wholehearted effort into learning to play well. If you think your child's coach is not handling a situation well, do not tell that to the player. Rather, seek a meeting with the coach in which you can talk with them about it.
5. **Don't Give Instructions During a Game or Practice:** You are not one of the coaches, so do not give your child instructions about how to play. It can be very confusing for a child to hear someone other than the coach yelling out instructions during a game. As in #4 above, if you have an idea for a tactic, go to the coach and offer it to him. Then let him decide whether he is going to use it or not. If he decides not to use it, let it be. Getting to decide those things is one of the privileges he has earned by making the commitment to coach.
6. **Fill Your Child's Emotional Tank:** Perhaps the most important thing you can do is to be there for your child. Competitive sports are stressful to players and the last thing they need is a critic at home. Be a cheerleader for your child. Focus on the positive things he is doing and leave the correcting of mistakes to the coach. Let her know you support her without reservation regardless of how well he plays.
7. **Fill the Emotional Tanks of the Entire Team:** Cheer for all of the players on the team. Tell each of them when you see them doing something well.
8. **Encourage Other Parents to Honor the Game:** Don't show disrespect for the other team or the officials. But more than that encourage other parents to also Honor the Game. If a parent of a player on your team begins to berate the official, gently say to them, "Hey, that's not honoring the Game. That's not the way we do things here."

Note: These guidelines are adapted from **Positive Coaching: Building Character and Self-Esteem Through Sports** by Jim Thompson, the founder and leader of the Positive Coaching Alliance.

Empowering Conversations with Your Child

When we think about what makes people friends with each other, a number of things come to mind. For example, our friends like us and enjoy spending time with us, as we enjoy them. And what is it we mostly do when we are together with our friends? Mostly we talk and listen to each other.

Conversations are the glue between people, the essential element in a strong relationship. Relationships wither without communication, and the very best form of communication is the conversation. Many parents fall into the trap of thinking that it is their job to talk and their child's to listen. Actually that's only half-right. It is also our job to listen and the child's job to talk. It's a wonderful thing when a parent and child can really talk to and hear each other.

It is important that parents intentionally seek out conversations about sports with their athletes. Here are some suggestions for how to engage your child in a conversation about sports.

- 1. Establish Your Goal—A Conversation Among Equals:** A conversation is something between equals. Kings didn't have conversations with their subjects. They told them what to do. Prepare yourself for a conversation with your child by reminding yourself that sports is his thing, not yours. Remember that you want to support her, to let her know that you are on his side. Your goal is not to give advice on how to become a better athlete. It should be to engage your child in a conversation among equals, one of whom (you!) is on the side of the other (her!).

- 2. Adopt a Tell-Me-More Attitude:** Brenda Ueland penned one of the most important essays on relationships ever written, *Tell Me More*: "When we are listened to, it creates us, makes us unfold and expand. Ideas actually begin to grow within us and come to life."

Adopt the attitude that you want your child to tell-you-more ("I really want to hear what you have to say."), and then listen to what he has to say—even if you don't agree with it or like it—and you will begin to tap into what Ueland calls the "little creative fountain" in your child.

"If you are very tired, strained...this little fountain is muddied over and covered with a lot of debris...it is when people really listen to us, with quiet fascinated attention, that the little fountain begins to work again, to accelerate in the most surprising way."

Think of your conversation with your child as an Olympic event with judges. A conversation that rates a 9 or a 10 is one in which the child does more talking and the parent more listening. Set your goal before you start, and go for it.

- 3. Listen!** In many instances you may know exactly what your child can do to improve. However, this is a conversation, remember? Your goal is to get your child to talk about her sports experience, **so ask rather than tell**. Save your tellings for another time.
- 4. Use Open-Ended Questions:** Some questions lend themselves to one-word responses. "How was school today?" "Fine." Your goal is to get your child to talk at length, so ask questions that will tend to elicit longer, more thoughtful responses.
 - "What was the most enjoyable part of today's practice/game?"
 - "What worked well?"
 - "What didn't turn out so well?"
 - "What did you learn that can help you in the future?"
 - "Any thoughts on what you'd like to work on before the next game?"
- 5. Also ask about life-lesson and character issues:** "Any thoughts on what you've learned in practice this week that might help you with other parts of your life?" Even if you saw the entire game, the goal is to get your child to talk about the game the way he saw it, not for you to tell her what he could have done better.
- 6. Show You Are Listening.** Make it obvious to your child that you are paying attention through use of nonverbal actions such as making eye contact as he talks, nodding your head and making "listening noises" ("uh-huh," "hmmm," "interesting," etc.).

Listening is one of the greatest gifts you can give your child! Ueland again:

"Who are the people, for example, to whom you go for advice? Not to the hard, practical ones who can tell you exactly what to do, but to the listeners; that is, the kindest, least censorious, least bossy people that you know. It is because by pouring

out your problem to them, you then know what to do about it yourself."

7. **Let Your Child Set the Terms:** William Pollack, MD, author of *Real Boys: Rescuing Our Sons from the Myths of Boyhood*, notes that children have different "**emotional schedules**" that determine when they are ready to talk about an experience. Forcing a conversation right after a competition (when there may be a lot of emotion) is often less successful than waiting until the child gives an indication that he is ready to talk. Boys may take longer than girls to talk about an experience, so look for prompts that a child is ready. And conversations don't have to be lengthy to be effective. If your child wants a brief discussion, defer to his wishes. If he feels like every discussion about sports is going to be long, he'll likely begin to avoid them. And don't be afraid of silence. Stick with it and your child will open up to you.
8. **Connect through activity.** Sometimes the best way to spark a conversation is through an activity that your child enjoys. Playing a board game or putting a puzzle together can allow space for a child to volunteer thoughts and feelings about the game and how he performed. This is especially important for boys, who often resist a direct adult-style of conversation.
9. **Enjoy:** The most important reason why you should listen to your child with a tell-me-more attitude: Because then **he will want to talk to you**, and as she (and you) get older, you will find there is no greater gift than a child who enjoys conversations with you.

Guidelines for Honoring the Game

The key to preventing adult misbehavior in youth sports is a youth sports culture in which all involved "Honor the Game." Honoring the Game gets to the ROOTS of the matter and involves respect for the Rules, Opponents, Officials, Teammates and one's Self. You don't bend the rules to win. You understand that a worthy opponent is a gift that forces you to play to your highest potential. You show respect for officials even when you disagree. You refuse to do anything that embarrasses your team. You live up to your own standards even if others don't. Here are ways that **parents** can create a positive youth sports culture so that children will have fun and learn positive character traits to last a lifetime.

Before the Game:

1. Make a commitment to Honor the Game in action and language no matter what others may do.
2. Tell your child before each game that you are proud of him or her regardless of how well he or she plays.

During the Game:

1. Fill your children's "Emotional Tank" through praise and positive recognition so they can play their very best.
2. Don't give instructions to your child during the game. Let the coach correct player mistakes.
3. Cheer good plays by both teams (this is advanced behavior!)
4. Mention good calls by the official to other parents.
5. If an official makes a "bad" call against your team? Honor the Game—BE SILENT!
6. If another parent on your team yells at an official? Gently remind him or her to Honor the Game.
7. Don't do anything in the heat of the moment that you will regret after the game. Ask yourself, "Will this embarrass my child or the team?"
8. Remember to have fun! Enjoy the game.

After the Game:

1. Thank the officials for doing a difficult job for little or no pay.
2. Thank the coaches for their commitment and effort.
3. Don't give advice. Instead ask your child what he or she thought about the game and then LISTEN. Listening fills Emotional Tanks.
4. Tell your child again that you are proud of him or her, whether the team won or lost.