

GETTING ALONG WITH YOUR CHILD'S COACH

Some of the knottiest problems that arise in youth sports involve the relationship between parents and coaches. Any time another significant adult enters your child's world, it may require an adjustment on your part. You must also be willing to give up some control and influence in an important area of your youngster's life. Taking a backseat to another adult, even temporarily, isn't always easy. But things can get even more complicated and challenging if you find yourself at odds with coaching decisions that affect your young athlete.

Your responsibility for what happens to your child does not stop when he or she enters a sport program or joins a team. As a parent you have every right to be involved in and to look out for your child's welfare. The tricky part comes in deciding how and to what extent it is appropriate for you to be involved. When does appropriate concern become interference and meddling? At what point must your understandable concern with the happiness and well-being of your child be tempered by respect and understanding for the role of the coach? What should you do if issues like the following crop up?

- Your child isn't getting to play enough during games.
- Your child is not playing the position best suited to his or her talents.
- The coach is mistreating youngsters either verbally or physically.
- The coach is engaging in inappropriate behavior, such as bad language or hazing of officials or opponents.
- The coach is using technically incorrect, questionable, or possibly dangerous coaching methods.
- The coach is demanding too much time or commitment from the youngsters, such that the sport is interfering with other activities.
- The coach is losing perspective of the purpose of youth sports and seems preoccupied with winning, thus putting additional stress on athletes.

Because each situation is somewhat unique, there are no definitive answers that apply to every case. Nonetheless, there are some general principles that can be helpful in approaching and resolving such problems.

When incidents such as those listed above occur, it would be a mistake not to consider them problems. Perhaps the best starting point is to view them as problems that you and the coach must work on together to resolve. The key to doing so is establishing communication and then keeping the lines of exchange open.

Many parents first become aware of problems when their children complain about the coach. If this happens, the first step is to sit down with your youngster and discuss the problem to get his or her point of view. You should listen and express concern, but do not form a judgment or make condemning statements about the coach. After listening, you may decide that the issue does not warrant your involvement and that it might best be worked out by your youngster and the coach. You can help your child by giving suggestions on how to approach the coach and express concerns. If you can help resolve the

issue without your direct involvement, your child may learn some very important interpersonal skills and gain confidence in his or her problem-solving ability.

If the situation seems to warrant it, you should contact the coach and indicate that you would like to have a conference. Such discussions should never occur during practices or games and should not include the child. Having your child there may put the coach on the defensive and create an adversary relationship between you and the coach. What is needed is a mutual problem solving approach.

When you meet with the coach, you can help create a positive atmosphere for exchange by telling the coach that you appreciate his or her interest in the children and contributions to the program. You might also communicate that you understand how demanding the role of a coach is. In other words, try to create an open and receptive atmosphere for discussion.

Next, indicate that there is an issue that you would like to discuss with the coach and that if there is a problem, you would like to work with the coach in resolving it. Here are some examples of ways in which you can introduce the problem:

Jason told me that he would like to get to play more during games. He feels that since he comes to every practice and tries hard, he'd like to get to play more. (Note that the coach is not being directly accused of not playing Jason enough, which might create defensiveness. Whenever possible, frame the problem in terms of a positive goal to be achieved.)

I have been to several of your basketball practices, and I have seen the drill where you have the children practice taking charging fouls and being run over by an offensive player. I am concerned about the possibility of injury. Is there a safer drill that could be substituted?

I've seen some of the kids get very upset after being yelled at and I am concerned. I wonder if there isn't some way of making it more fun for the kids. Sometimes we adults don't realize how easy it can be to hurt feelings.

Sara joined the program because she wanted to have fun and because she enjoys playing softball. There seems to be such an emphasis on winning and so much pressure put on the girls to perform that at least for Sara, it's becoming stressful rather than constructive.

After expressing your concern, you might once again acknowledge what a difficult job coaching is, but that you thought the coach would want to hear about your concern because you believe he or she has the best interests of the children at heart. Then tell the coach that you would like to hear his or her view of the situation. Again, the emphasis should be on resolving the problem together.

Communication is a two-way street. You will need to be prepared to listen honestly and openly to the coach's point of view. For example, his or her opinion of your child's ability and deserved playing time may be somewhat different from your own. And the role of coach requires that he or she make a judgment about playing time.

Parents who voice their concerns are often surprised when they are asked to participate in a solution to the problem. For example, one father who disagreed with the coach's way of teaching a particular skill was asked by the coach to assume the position of assistant coach. The coach acknowledged that he had little experience in that particular area and that he would appreciate the father's assistance. In another instance a mother who expressed concern that her son was not playing enough was asked by the coach to practice with the son so that he would improve enough to play more. Thus, we must sometimes be prepared to contribute time and effort as well as opinion.

In some cases you may find that it isn't possible to correct the situation with the coach. If you feel strongly enough about the issue and are convinced that the coach's actions affect the physical or psychological well-being of the children, you may need to take further action. Several options are available.

- First, you may appeal to a higher authority. If a coach is being abusive to children, for example, this should be brought to the attention of league administrators.
- If the issue concerns only your child and not others, the solution maybe to request a transfer to another team and coach.
- The last, most drastic, and least desirable alternative may be to remove your child from the program. This should always be a last resort, because it may have some negative consequences of its own. For example, the child may be called a quitter.

Fortunately, most coaches are firmly committed to providing the best possible experiences for youngsters. When approached properly, they will usually be open to parents' concerns and motivated to deal effectively with problems.

Up to now, we have been focusing on undesirable things that might come to your attention. But relating to your child's coach goes beyond this. When things are going well, it is important to offer your support, encouragement, and appreciation to the coach. This adult is playing an important role in your child's life. All too often, the only feedback coaches get from parents is negative. It is important to let them know when they are doing a good job. They deserve it.
