

# **The Role of Parents in Athletics**

Parents should be a part of their children's athletic experience. Parent involvement affects their own child, the coach, and the rest of the team, the other parents, and the officials. How a parent chooses to be involved is a choice they have.

In order to ensure that the athletic experience is positive everyone in the process (coaches and parents) must always remember that the kid's needs must come first.

In general, when a young child starts playing sports it is a joint venture with the parent...a shared experience. The main goal of children under the age of 10 is to please their parents. Everything the parents say is right, a scenario most parents like.

As kids grow older and more independent things change and learning when and how to diminish the parent's involvement becomes an issue for both child and parent. Parents should stay close to their children but focus on their child's needs. Parents and coaches constantly send powerful messages to athletes, and those messages should not conflict. It is important that a child's parents do what they can to facilitate their child's growth, help their child's performance, and keep the proper perspective.

## **What is the Role of Parents in Athletics?**

*(Summarized from "The Role of Parents in Athletics" by Bruce Brown.)*

Bio for Bruce Brown

- \* 35 years as a teacher, coach, athletic administrator at the junior high, high school, junior college and collegiate level
- \* National presenter for the NAIA's Champions of Character Program

Recent Awards:

- \* 2004 College of the Ozarks and Coach Krzyzewski Leadership/Service Award
- \* 2005 American Baseball Coaches "Honor" Award with Cal Ripken Jr.
- \* 2008 Pro Athletes Outreach, John R. Wooden Coaches Wall of Fame

## **Before the First Game**

Before the season begins, parents should ask themselves the following questions:

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

Remember your answers and then ask your son or daughter the following questions. Listen to their answers without talking.

- 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?

If both sets of expectations are the same, great. If the parents' responses are different from their children's then the parent needs to change theirs and accept their child's. No questions asked. When the parent does not drop his/her expectations it generally results in pressure that will not help the athlete's performance or make the season fun for anyone involved (player, parent, or coach).

Many athletes feel that their parents do not understand their role as an athlete, and almost always feel that their role is larger than what the athlete knows it to be. This situation can be frustrating and often puts the athlete in the middle between the coach and parent; a position that the athlete can only lose.

The next step that needs to occur is for parents to "release" their son or daughter to the game and to the coach. As such, during the season, parents must share their child with the coach and team. If a parent feels the need to talk to a coach about a problem, he/she should call and allow the coach choose an appropriate time or place. By releasing their child to the game and coach, parents are telling their children that all successes are theirs, all failures are theirs, and all problems are theirs. If young athletes are going to develop into intelligent, responsible individuals, it is critical that they are given the opportunity to solve their own problems during practices and games. Athletics is a safe place for young people to take risks even though they might fail.

The following are "red flags" that indicate a parent has not released their young athlete to the game:

- A parent who is living his own athletic dream through his child.
- A parent who tends to share in the credit when the athlete does well or wins.
- A parent who finds himself/herself trying to solve his/her child's athletic related problems. It is all right 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.
- A parent who is nervous before his child's game.
- A parent who has a difficult time bouncing back after his child's team suffers a defeat.
- A parent who makes written or mental notes during a game so he/she can give his child advice after the game.
- A parent who is verbally critical of an official.
- A parent who is avoided by their child after games or who causes their child to be embarrassed by their parent's involvement.

### **During the Game**

The first and 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 appropriately 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 you want your children to face adversity with self-assurance, then you need to be able to do the same thing.

The second contribution a parent can make during a game is to focus on the team and the team's goals. This takes the attention off the individual athlete and off the things that are not in the parent's control (e.g., the score, the referees, the opponents, coaching, and playing conditions). When parents focus on things beyond their control it contributes to excuses and reduces confidence.

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.

## **After the Game**

When it comes to recalling their least enjoyable memory about sports, many athletes will name “after the game” and often specifically “after the game in the car with my parents.” This situation is sometimes when the most confidence cutting, confrontation, and confusion occurs for the athlete. What the athlete needs most at these times is not another coach, but a parent (i.e., “just be my Dad or Mom”). Most athletes just want their parents to give them time and space at the end of a game.

In the car after the game, a single comment like, “Why does Susie get all the shots?” or “Why don’t you guys throw the ball deep instead of running on first down?” can unintentionally undermine the coach’s authority. 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 be a source of confidence and help build relationships on the team in each of the following situations.

- 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 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 a player needs. Parents should leave their children alone until they are receptive to interaction with them. When they do come to them, parents should give them quiet understanding, be a reflective listener, and help them realize their bigger perspective.

The only time parents should initiate the conversation is when their children may have exhibited a behavior that would not be acceptable at home (e.g., profanity, disrespect of authority, etc.). Even then, parents should choose their comments and timing carefully, being aware of the emotions of the moment.

Many young athletes often indicate that conversations with their parents after a game have somehow made them feel that their value as a person was somehow tied to playing time or winning or losing contests. It is unlikely that the parents had any intention of giving that impression. Yet in a simple conversation following a game, a parent can send that exact message when actually they were trying to support or connect with their child, but just weren’t sure how to do it.