

Improving Parent-Coach Relationships: Strategies for Coaches

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For many coaches, working with parents is one of the most challenging parts of the job. In fact, the mere mention of the word parents can often lead to coaches unleashing a tyraid of horror stories or negative feelings. Nevertheless, given the absolutely critical role parents play in youth sport it is extremely important that coaches develop strategies to work with parents. The first step in enhancing parent-coach relationships is reflecting upon some of the issues coaches encounter with parents and taking time to develop strategies to prevent such issues from arising. Although this might require a greater time commitment at the outset, it will hopefully result in a more informed, proactive, and positive relationship.

In reviewing the literature relating to parents and coaches it is clear that issues can arise across a variety of contexts and result in a variety of negative consequences for coaches, parents, and children. The issues coaches encounter with parents have been broadly classified into three main categories: (1) Direct coaching stressors – problems that coaches encounter as a direct result of parents' involvement and behaviours.

These stressors relate to attitudes, expectations or behaviours parents exhibit directly towards the coach; (2) Child-related stressors – these are issues coaches encounter due to the influence parents had upon children. For example, seeing a parent shout at a child, control their participation in sport, or behave inappropriately during/after matches can be stressful for coaches; (3) External and system-based stressors – these are stressors coaches encounter with parents that are the result of the culture or organisation they are working in. For example, issues associated with funding, selection, and competitions can all lead to issues for parents and coaches.

Although some of these issues are likely out of your hands, it is possible to develop strategies to manage some of the issues that coaches encounter directly with parents. Below are some suggestions that might be useful.

Parents' behaviours at competitions and training

Many coaches highlight concerns regarding parents' emotional reactions to competitions, particularly if parents blame outcomes on coaches or react negatively or aggressively towards coaches. Similarly, it can be challenging for coaches if parents are overly interested in their child's training and attempt to take an active role in training sessions. Educating parents regarding appropriate and inappropriate involvement in these environments and how to interact with you could help to reduce some of these concerns. Some strategies that might be useful are:

a) Develop rules regarding interactions:

When parents are emotional, for example following a competition, there is more chance they will approach you in a negative or aggressive way. Developing agreed rules regarding when parents can

approach you (e.g., not within 24 hours but before 48 hours have passed) and how they should address issues (e.g., by e-mail rather than over the phone) could help to reduce emotional interactions. Having a meeting at the beginning of the season to discuss and agree upon these rules will likely be beneficial.

b) Make time for parents:

Rushed conversations are likely to result in miscommunication and misunderstanding. Allocating set times when parents are able to contact you will help to ensure you can provide the parents with your full attention and, hopefully, more adequately address their concerns. Scheduling time early in the season to review and plan sessions with parents might also help to limit the need for later conversations.

c) Provide clear expectations for parents:

If there are certain things you like or dislike from parents, take the time to tell them. Most parents are likely to appreciate honesty, integrity and transparency. Clearly identifying what you expect from parents and what behaviours you find helpful at the beginning of the relationship is likely to reduce future conflict.

Understanding talent development and the sport structure

All sports have different structures and systems. Further, views regarding the “best” or “right” ways to develop talented athletes are often changing and can be quite complicated. As such, it can be a difficult environment for parents to navigate, even if they have played sport themselves. All parents (hopefully) want the best for their children and attempt to give them the right types of support but often parents do not know what this is. As the expert in this area it is important you inform parents and educate them regarding the systems and structures so they know what to expect as their children progress. Although it may take time to educate parents and add to your already busy schedule it will save time in the future.

The following strategies may help you to enhance parents’ understanding and limit any conflict that could arise:

a) Constantly communication about plans, goals, and expectations:

Many parents think their child is going to be ‘the one who makes it,’ but as we all know, very few do. By taking the time to inform parents about current training and competition goals you have developed with their child, you are likely to receive more parental support. Similarly, communication regarding realistic expectations and anticipating any potential problems will help to keep parents on track and supporting your work.

b) Provide parents with resources:

The majority of parents want to learn about their child’s sport and become as educated as possible. Share resources with them. By providing parents with resources you have approved and learnt from

you can ensure parents are becoming educated on what you want them to know (rather than pulling information from unregulated internet sources).

c) Recognise that parents are trying to learn and help to get them started:

When children start in a new sport there is a huge amount to learn and this learning never stops. Each time parents encounter a new situation they are likely to have questions, concerns, or issues. By anticipating what parents might need to know, you can educate them about what to expect and hopefully reduce subsequent questions.

Perceptions of Coaches

One of the main frustrations coaches have highlighted is a lack of trust or respect parents have for them. For example, coaches discuss a perception that parents do not respect their role in children's development or trust that they have sufficient knowledge or expertise to help players' progress. Rather, coaches feel that parents often try to tell them what to do or question their plans. Changing parents' perceptions of coaches might be a difficult and lengthy challenge. However, there are a number of steps that you could take to address this issue:

a) Maintain a high level of sport education:

As information becomes more readily available on the internet, ensuring that you have all the latest technical, tactical, physical, and psychological information is necessary. If parents can see that you are really committed to developing as a professional, they are more likely to respect your knowledge. Experience tells us that whilst tech/tact/physical knowledge is central, the adolescent players' psychological and coping-related skills become tested more and more as they progress. Parents often want solutions and indeed may be the problem, but as a coach you are challenged to have the psychological knowledge to tell them exactly what is going on and how they can help not hinder. Assertiveness is key here.

b) Be professional:

Unfortunately, not all coaches work in a professional manner. For example, some coaches are late to training and use mobile phones when coaching, while others select favourites and provide limited feedback to other players. While unprofessional coaches may be in the minority, they can cause a lack of respect for all coaches. Ensuring you are always professional in your interactions with children and parents will help to reduce the negative image parents can have of coaches.

c) Deploy a clear teaching and learning climate:

Sport psychological and pedagogical advancements since the Millenium have helped coaches to improve their professionalism around the use of goal setting, match analysis, debriefs with players, and the use of video. Parents see how coaches can use these strategies to help their son/daughter develop tactically or mature psychologically etc. Your investment in creating this type of climate for athlete development will build confidence in parents.

d) Explain your coaching philosophy and approach:

Although parents may not always know what is best to help their children succeed, their desire to provide for their children and ensure they have the most opportunities possible usually underpins their questioning of coaches. Linked to the points above, take some time to sit down and explain your coaching philosophy and approach to parents. By addressing parents concerns early on, it is less likely that parents will seek out advice from others. The starting point here is being clear on what your coaching philosophy and values are. Most coaches might subscribe to the philosophy of developing the 'player' and the 'young person'. If so, explain to parents how you as a coach would go about contributing to both goals.

Concluding Remarks

Many of the issues that coaches raised, and the points of advice we have offered, relate to **expectations of roles, professional behaviours and quality/timing of communication**. By reflecting on these three core areas, you may develop strategies that help you to **initiate** the start of more effective and smooth coach-parent interactions. Indeed a final stressor that all coaches talk about vociferously is:

Demands parents' place on coaches

There are no prescribed times that coaches must work, nor are there set requirements regarding the time and energy that is committed to children and parents. Unfortunately, this often means that parents think they can contact coaches at any time and as often as they need to. While constant communication is something we would recommend, coaches need some time off!

Our final point to hammer home therefore is to develop and implement consistent guidelines regarding parental interactions and expectations:

a) Outline what parents can expect from you:

If parents are unaware of what they can expect from you as a coach, it is possible that they will expect too much. As a coach it is up to you how much time you commit to children and parents, but you need to make sure parents know what they can expect.

b) Create a schedule and stick to it:

Obviously the requirements of coaches are likely to change at different times in the season, particularly during important competitions. However, if you can develop a schedule that outlines times that parents can contact you and highlights times that parents should not contact you, you will be better able to cope with parents' demands. Similarly, if you specify times that you may be contacting parents they can be prepared for conversations, leading to more effective and efficient communications.

Overall, we believe that continually educating parents and engaging in open and honest communication can reduce a number of the issues that coaches encounter with parents. We are sure that many of you have developed your own strategies for working with parents, but we hope the above ideas provide further means

to enhance parent-coach relationships. While we acknowledge parents can be difficult to work with, they are a crucial part of children's support systems. Taking additional time to really enhance the relationship you have with parents will not only reduce the stress you encounter, but also enhance the overall experience of both you and the children you coach.

Further Information

The information in this article is drawn from a number of sources, including the following:

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Strachen, L. (2011). Enhancing coach-parent relationships in youth sport: Increasing harmony and minimizing hassle. A commentary. *International Journal of Sport Science and Coaching*, 6, 47-48.

This list is not exhaustive; if you want any further information please contact Camilla at **c.j.knight@swansea.ac.uk**.