

## Training the Parent for Sport

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Imagine a beautiful spring afternoon at a community soccer match for young children in the area. The game begins with an enjoyable and exciting atmosphere. The kids are running their hearts out chasing down the ball and the parents watching seem so incredibly proud of their little Johnny or little Suzy. Everyone seems to be having fun. Then, simply by accident, one of the players trips and falls on the field. He or she gets up unhurt but the player's parent is sent into a torrent yelling and screaming that their child's fall was a result of foul play. The parent becomes louder and when the coach tries to calm the parent down, the parent throws a punch at the coach. A fight ensues, the game is halted, and everyone goes home disappointed and discouraged by the day's events.

As coaches I realize many of you may not have seen with your own eyes a parent's obnoxious behavior escalate to such irrational violence, but you have seen disruptive and rude behavior in parents attending your games. This is a serious problem and is becoming more and more prevalent. While there are no official statistics on the amount of violence involving parents at youth sporting events, the examples are numerous. A Sarasota father was arrested after storming the field and punching the referee during his son's flag football game (Elvin 3). Other incidents reported last year include "a soccer mother in Greensboro, NC was charged with assault after hitting a referee after a game. A father in Cleveland punched a 15-year-old boy during a soccer game because he felt the player had pushed his son" (Stewart 1) and, probably the most familiar case, Thomas Junta was charged with manslaughter after beating to death another parent at their children's hockey practice.

Bad parental behavior is such a severe problem because it creates a pressure-filled, unhappy situation for all concerned. Instead of being in the supportive position that parents should be, they get so wrapped up in their child's play that they yell and scream verbal abuse and sometimes get physically abusive. So in response to this problem I propose to the coaches that they should require all parents to attend mandatory training classes about proper behavior at sporting events, after which they should sign a binding Code of Conduct that if violated would result in a suspension from any sporting event.

When parents sign up their children for their respective sport each parent should be required to attend mandatory training classes before being allowed to attend an event. The class would encourage good sportsmanship, positive reinforcement, and keeping youth sports in its proper perspective. It would teach parents that they should place the emotional and physical well being of their children ahead of their own personal desire to win, teach them how to be a respectful fan, and to refrain from using vulgar language. It would also urge parents to be helpful to the team in other ways like assisting the coach in organizing events, providing transportation, or helping out at a concession stand.

These mandatory training classes would include a video, role-play, discussion with other parents, and other techniques teaching proper behavior at youth sport functions and practices. An example of a role-play would be: a referee makes an obvious bad call and the parents must practice remaining calm. Parents would participate in discussions over a numerous array of issues relating to parental behavior such as specific instances where they have seen an obnoxious parent. They would then discuss what they should do to try to stop and prevent such an incident.

At the completion of the class all parents would be required to sign a binding code of conduct. This code of conduct would list the behaviors and actions that they will be held accountable for in attendance at a sporting event. For instance: "I will not use any offensive language. I will support coaches and officials working with my child in order to encourage a positive and enjoyable atmosphere for all. I will not engage in any sort of violent activity." If parents refused to sign up for the class, do not attend the class, or do not sign the code of conduct, their child would not be allowed to participate.

These training classes would make it clear that unacceptable behavior will not be allowed. A zero-tolerance policy would be applied meaning that if a parent violated the code of conduct (i.e. be verbally abusive, threaten others, interfere with the game) their child would be removed from the game, and they would have to leave the event. The President of the National alliance for youth Sports, Fred Engh, said that, If they [problem parents] can't see the value of sports to their children, then they should not be allowed at the games. We can't condone trash-talking, criticizing officials, and so on, it's unacceptable. And those who don't adhere to codes of conduct should be banned (Robinson 2).

In addition to learning proper conduct at sporting events in the class, parents will also be trained to take an active role in looking for warning signs, such as someone who frequently uses offensive language, for problematic parents who exhibit bad behaviors. Parents would report disturbances or potential disturbances, which will help further curb the possibility of an incident occurring or reoccurring.

It will be the coach's job to provide and oversee these training classes. Coaches can either administer the training themselves or assign someone else to give them. The National

Alliance for Youth Sports has recently teamed with the National Recreational and Park Association in a national program aimed at curbing this type of violence. Together they are putting together a video that will be offered to coaches for these classes. The video is similar to the training video volunteer coaches are required to watch before they can run a team. The video includes such important topics like positive coaching philosophy, how to conduct fun, effective practices, and the importance of role modeling for children. The cost for this video, the class materials and the place where the class will be held can either come from community tax dollars, which is what most athletic programs are funded by already, or from the fees that parents must pay in order for their child to participate. An additional cost would be the time spent attending the class, but a cost that is worthwhile.

This solution should be accepted because it is almost identical to a program in New Castle County Football League in Delaware that has seen immensely positive results. Last year this football league required parents to attend a training class before being allowed at games and practices. In previous years the class was not mandatory, but as coaches and officials found that incidents of disruptive behavior was increasing they decided to make it mandatory. "If parents did not attend the class and did not show a parent awareness card that proved their attendance, their children could not receive their football equipment" (Robinson 2). They also implemented a no-tolerance policy.

Before the class became mandatory there was an average of 10-15 incidents of parental sport rage, but since then there were only one or two incidents. The classes also did not discourage children and parents from signing up for athletics; there were over 1,300 children in the league, an increase in participants. Jill Gattinella, a member of the Executive Board of the New Castle County Football League, said, "We got thanks and positive feedback from parents

who were not problems to being with. The only hesitance we received was from parents who were problem parents” (Robinson 2). The results of this program strongly show the benefits that would be seen from implementing the solution.

Other solutions that have been offered are that police be required at any sporting event to arrest anyone who creates a serious disturbance. Some organizations representing officials are pushing for more legislative protections. “What might have been a wrist-slapping misdemeanor is now serious stuff, with violators of new laws facing as many as three years in jail and stiff fines” (Elvin 2).

While these solutions seem reasonable, they still lack the most important thing: parents need to know what the proper behavior at sporting events is. Police and laws that have harsher punishments may be able to put an end to an incident after it has happened, but they will never be able to prevent it from occurring. Parents will never understand that a certain behavior is unacceptable and will not be tolerated. A training class will make it perfectly clear how parents are supposed to behave at their children’s sporting event and they will know the consequences if they act up. These classes will make it so police won’t have to be there and new laws won’t need to be passed.

So I urge coaches of all sports and of all ages to accept this proposal. It is important for parents to learn how to conduct themselves properly at sporting events so that more incidents of violence do not occur. Parents and children should not be hesitant to join youth sports because of bad parental behavior. This training class is the best possible way to fix this problem. Sports are supposed to encompass learning to work together as a team, sportsmanship, and trying your hardest, not the pressure that an obnoxious parent can put on a game. Engh highlights the

importance of the training program so as to “ensure that all children have fun and rewarding experiences. After all, that’s what sports are all about!” (Sachs 3).

#### Works Cited

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