ATHLETICS: Parents must 'release child to the game'

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Little Leaguers to NCAA volleyball stars reported that they came to dread the post-game post-mortem with their parents. For some, the problem was so big that it damaged their relationship with their parent.

Parents who impose their own goals, desires and needs on their children can turn what should be a positive experience into a fraught, stressful one.

Often parents have visions of athletic achievement and scholarships when all their child really wants is to enjoy the game and be with his or her friends.

Difficult relations with parents can put a lot of stress on coaches, too. Parents who coach from the stands or second-guess their child's coach can undermine an athlete's morale, put them in a position of conflicting loyalties and degrade the whole experience. And coaches who have that to look forward to every season start to question whether they want to continue coaching — and many quit.

Brown and other specialists in youth sports urge parents to "release their child to the game." That means stepping back, becoming an encouraging supporter — and that's all. The game needs to belong to the athlete, not to the parent. Support is critical, but pressure and over-involvement is counterproductive.

Releasing your child to the game includes allowing your child to work through problems with a coach on their own.

"It's important that a child learns to speak to their coach and have a direct relationship," says John O'Sullivan, founder of Changing the Game Project, which is committed to restoring the sense of fun and "play" in youth sports.

"I think a lot of times parents jump in and take that action away from their kids… That kind of 'helicopter parenting' leads to long-term detrimental effects — because you aren't always gong to be there."

Both O'Sullivan and Brown note that athletics is a great place to let your kids fail — and learn to recover from mistakes and persevere in the face of adversity.

Of course there may be times when there are concerns with a coach that a parent should address. Those include mental and physical treatment of your child; ways to help the child improve; and concerns about the child's behavior.

In such a case, setting a meeting with a coach at an appropriate time (not accosting him or her immediately before or after a game) is the right first step. The Sisters School District (SSD) recommends giving a 48-hour window after an event to raise an issue. If the meeting with the coach is unsatisfactory, then the parent is asked to contact the athletic director.

Sisters High School has adopted many of the principles and protocols Brown developed in the Positive Coaching Alliance (and Sisters Park & Recreation District follows the SSD's lead). That includes some specific guidelines for parents.

"The single most important contribution a parent can make during a game is to model appropriate behavior," the guidelines state. "What parents need to model more than anything is poise and confidence. If parents expect their children to react to the ups and downs involved in a game with poise, then they must model it."

Clear communication is key to a successful relationship among student-athletes, parents and coaches. Coaches should lay out their philosophy and expectations clearly in a pre-season meeting and provide ongoing feedback on how a player is doing.

Perhaps most important is clear communication — and congruent expectations — between a parent and child. O'Sullivan notes that a parent may be frustrated and angry that his kid isn't playing a bigger role on a team — when the athlete understands her role and is satisfied with it.

It is important that parents and their children share expectations and goals for their participation in sports. A parent should ask: Why do you want to play? What will make a successful season? What role should the child play on her team?

If the answers to those questions align, great. If they differ, Brown says, "Drop your expectations and accept theirs."

The stark reality is that kids have very limited athletic careers.

Facing the high cost of a college education, it's perhaps understandable that parents have dreams of scholarships dancing in their heads. That can create unreasonable expectations that make their relationships with both coaches and their kids more tense and complicated than they need to be.

O'Sullivan states, "Youth sports is an investment in many things, such as character development, athletic improvement, and becoming a healthy, well-rounded human being. It is not, however, an investment in a future scholarship.

"…A look at the numbers demonstrates that scholarships and pro contracts are reserved for an elite few athletes whose time, effort, and dedication, combined with their talent and a good dose of luck, led them to the higher ground. Less than 3 percent of all high school athletes play their sport in college. Only 1 in 10,000 high school athletes gets a partial athletic scholarship. The average award is $11,000 per year. Yet a huge number of parents THINK their kid is going to get a sports scholarship."

What youth sports is really good for is creating an arena where students can learn some key life lessons: the value of hard work and preparation; teamwork; sportsmanship; facing and overcoming challenges and developing a "never-quit" ethic. Those are qualities most every parent hopes to instill in their children. And every expert in the field will tell parents that the best way they can do that is to step back, let go — and show up and cheer.

More information is available at: https://www.positivecoach.org and http://changingthegameproject.com.