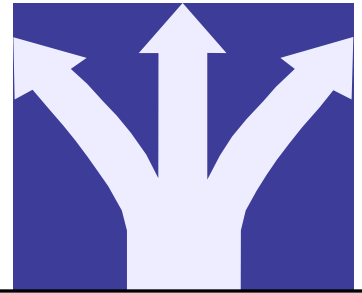


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Sports and Parents: Like Oil and Water?

- In July 2000 in Reading, MA, Thomas Junta beat Michael Costin to unconsciousness in front of several young players. Mr. Costin died two days later from his injuries. Mr. Junta was unhappy with the on-ice rough-housing that was occurring and asked Mr. Costin, who was the referee, to stop it. After the game, the two men argued. Mr. Junta was asked to leave the arena but returned a few minutes later and he and Mr. Costin got into a physical altercation that led to Mr. Costin's injuries.
- In Wakefield, MA a little league controversy was rekindled after Valerie Yianacopolus, who was found guilty of attacking an 11-year-old boy at her son's game was allowed by the Little League board to return to games as a spectator.
- In June 2005, a coach of a youth T-Ball team in Pennsylvania allegedly offered one of his players \$25 to throw a baseball at the head of a 9-year-old disabled teammate so the injured boy wouldn't be able to play in the upcoming game. League rules mandated every health child to play at least 3 innings. According to a state trooper familiar with the case, "The coach was very competitive. He wanted to win."

While these incidents might be considered isolated events, national youth sports associations have reported weekly incidents of fights or abusive behavior involving parents and coaches. In response to the violence, the National Association of Sports Officials was offering "assault insurance" to its 19,000 members to cover some of the medical expenses resulting from assaults.

Causes of Parental Violence

The severity and frequency of violence in youth sports may be a reflection of what is occurring in our communities more generally. Leonard Zaichowsky, PhD a professor of Sports Psychology At Boston University has noted, "So much in sports mimics what goes on in society...and there is no question that we are seeing an increase in violence in society."

Dr. Zaichowsky also points out that parents tend to be overinvolved in youth sports. He has commented, "There are high stakes. They are investing a lot of money and time so their children may have the chance to win athletic scholarships. Parents may try to maneuver things so that their child gets every possible advantage."

Dan Wann, an associate professor of psychology at Murray State University in Kentucky and co-author of *Sports Fans: the Psychiatry of and Social Impact of Spectators* has studied the phenomena of fan violence extensively. He has found that the most important element in precipitating fan violence is whether the fan identifies with the team or player.

Wann explains, "If he [the fan] sees the team's, or the player's performance as an extension of his own self-worth, then he will identify with their successes and failures. For parents, this equation is even more true: A person can't be more identified with a player than a parent is with his child."

Other factors can also help tip an "over-identified parent" into aggression. For example, if the sport that the parent is viewing is violent, then parents can get increasingly agitated while viewing the action. As Wann notes, "A parent watching his child get slammed into the boards, or hip-checked and knocked down, gets wound up."

(Continued)

Self Evaluation

There are a number of points for parents to consider to determine whether their children's sports activities have become too big and important a part of family life. Some of the considerations are as follows:

- ◆ Your family's life revolves around your children's sports activities;
- ◆ Your mood swings are often directly linked with the outcome of your children's competitions;
- ◆ You give more time and attention to your children's sports than their academic endeavors;
- ◆ You "push your children to train harder all the time and encourage them not to be "lazy";
- ◆ When your children lose, you label the coach as inept, incompetent or weak;
- ◆ You will brag about and discuss your kid's sports abilities and accomplishments all the time;
- ◆ You will say: "WE are playing against..."not, My son or daughter is playing against..."
- ◆ You have verbally abused other parents, referees or coaches during sports activities;
- ◆ You felt like getting into a physical fight with parents from the other team, after a loss;
- ◆ Before your children's competitions, you are cranky, nervous and anxious.

If a parent answers yes to more than a couple of these points, he/she may be putting too much emphasis on their children's activities and need to readjust their perspective.

Solutions to Parents' Aggressiveness

In September 2000, over 30 heads of Massachusetts' chapters of national sports and medical associations, educational organizations and professional associations met in Boston, MA to develop a parent code of conduction for the state. Some of the guidelines of the code of conduct included:

- * "I will remember that children participate to have fun and that the game is for youth, not adults."
- * "I (and my guests) will not engage in any kind of unsportsmanlike conduct such as booing and taunting; refusing to shake hands; or using profane language or gestures."
- * "I will teach my child to play by the rules and to resolve conflicts without resorting to violence."
- * "I will never ridicule a child or yell at my child or other participant for making a mistake or losing a competition."

If a parent fails to abide by the code of conduct, they may be subject to disciplinary action that could include verbal or written warning, parental game suspension or parental season suspension.

In addition, parents can develop specific attitudes and behavior that can promote a healthier perspective with regard to their children's participation in sports. They can include:

- Encourage your child, regardless of his or her degree of success or level of skill.
- Ensure a balance in your student athlete's life, encouraging participation in multiple sports and activities while placing academics first.
- Emphasize enjoyment, development of skills and team play as the cornerstones of your child's early sports experiences while reserving serious competition for the varsity level.
- Leave coaching to coaches and avoid placing too much pressure on your youngster about playing time and performance.

FROM OUR FILES:

"Revenge is Sweet"

Planning revenge sparks enough satisfaction to motivate getting even-and the amount of satisfaction actually predicts who will go to greater lengths to do so according to a report from Swiss researchers who monitored people's brain activity during an elaborate game of double-cross.

People are often eager to punish wrongdoers even if revenge brings them no personal gain or actually costs them something. From a practical standpoint that may seem irrational. In research reported in August 2004 edition of the journal *Science*, University of Zurich scientists used PET scans to monitor the brain activity of game players to determine what motivates that type of revenge.

The PET scan showed a brain region known to be important for enjoyment and satisfaction-the dorsal striatum-became active in those players who decided to retaliate. It wasn't an afterglow from revenge, but satisfaction from anticipating it. When the retaliation cost them money, a second brain region that helps weigh costs and benefits got involved, too, but the striatum remained key. The level of activity actually predicted which players would spend more money to get revenge.

(AP via Yahoo! News, August 26, 2004)