

Advice For Parents, From Their Athlete

Tom Doyle

My last few years as an athletic director, I began asking our athletes about their experience of high school athletics. Specifically, I questioned them about the role of their parents in their athletic experience. One day, I had a brainstorm to get feedback from them and share it with their parents. I asked three simple questions. First, "What do your parents do in your athletic experience that embarrasses you?" Secondly, "What are the things that you really appreciate your parents doing in your athletic experience?" Finally, "If you knew I were talking with your parents tonight at a Parent Night, what would you like me to tell them about your athletic experience?"

The responses were fascinating and honest. Most parent groups are shocked and, at the same time, pleased to hear this information. It might be interesting for coaches to ask their own athletes the same questions, compile the answers, and share them with parents. Be careful, of course, to protect the anonymity of specific athletes. They need to know that they are protected if they are to share safely.

Imagine collecting the answers to these three simple questions, then going to a Parent's Night and telling the parents what their kids told you. Coming from you, they ignore the information. Coming from their kids, it can have a powerful impact. Take a look at the following responses:

Things parents do that embarrass their kids!

- Trying to teach me how to do something "correctly" after a game
- Coaching during games even though you aren't the coach
- Telling me what I was doing wrong after every game
- Being asked to leave a field by an official
- Going crazy at the refs – because that is not your job. It is the coach's job to question bad calls
- Taunting other players, opponents, refs
- Yelling things at coaches and getting involved with something that was between the coach and me and was none of their business
- Coming to a game drunk or after drinking
- Acting disappointed with what I am doing instead of reassuring me that I will do better next time
- Getting a technical foul against our team
- Don't say, "(nickname), you really look cute in your uniform, honey", and hug me!

Some of these scenarios are mind-boggling. We all know about parents who come to contests after drinking, but we sometimes forget how humiliating it can be for their son or daughter. The same could be said for parents who are asked to leave the field by an official because they were so out of control.

I have several times, including two times in one night, one at a girls' game, one in a boys' game, seen athletes running down the basketball court, looking into the stands, and either shouting or mouthing the words, "Shut up", to one of their out of control parents in the stands.

We all know how difficult it is for a coach to have parents "coaching" their athlete to do something differently than the coach is teaching it at practice. For a coach to ask a kid to pass the ball and for the parent to scream - "Shoot!" - all the time, causes conflict in the athlete. For a parent to question the coach's ability or knowledge at the dinner table puts the athlete in the position of siding with the parent or with the coach. What a difficult position this is for a teenager! Do we really want to do that?

Things parents do that their kids really appreciate!

- Taking time out of your busy schedules to come to games and support what they do
- Bringing snacks after a game
- Supporting the whole team, not just me
- Cheering the team even when losing badly
- Telling them they did a good job
- Being proud of them even when they didn't win
- Being quiet unless cheering with everyone else
- Never yelling at a coach or ref

- Making friends with the other parents
- Telling a “negative” parent to be quiet – Tootsie Roll Pop!

We had one girl’s basketball parent who will go down in “Awesome Parent History” for coming up with the Tootsie Roll Pop routine. She would bring a box of the candies into the gym. I never allowed food in the gym, but made an important exception for this mom. Whenever a parent got too loud or too out of control, whenever they shouted at the officials or at the opponents, mom would reach into her cache and hand the parent a Tootsie Roll Pop. The first time or two, she had to make the obvious suggestion to the parent to put the Pop into his or her mouth. Within a very short time, parents understood clearly that they were out of line if handed a Tootsie Roll Pop. Before long, parents would catch themselves and suggest out loud to themselves that they might be better off calming down before they were handed one. No one ever took offense to being handed one and, before long, our parent crowd became very aware of the impact of their behavior and cheered more and more positively for our team, not against the other team.

We ought to encourage parents to get to know the parents of the other athletes on the team. Kids appreciate that. More importantly, it gives parents the very important knowledge needed to be a responsible parent. If we know the other parents in the stands, we can call them up and ask them if there really is a party at their house this week or if someone is going to be home when the kids are over. It is difficult enough parenting today; we must take advantage of the help we can get by knowing the other parents.

Advice from the kids to you, the parents!

- Don’t get frustrated if your kid isn’t playing well or the team is losing
- Don’t become too involved in our sports lives
- Stay in the stands and know your role
- Encourage regardless of performance
- Kids don’t tolerate parents trying to get their kid to play. It should be between the player and the coach
- If I don’t play, don’t be angry at me or the coach
- Tell your kid not to steal
- Relax and let kids have fun
- Don’t make a scene
- Remember it is your child’s team
- It is not a life or death situation; it is just a game

This is a very powerful set of suggestions. Everyone can take something away from this advice. Kids want parents to treat them with some respect. They want the parents to realize that this is the athlete’s experience, not the parents’. They want to be loved whether they played well or played poorly. They want to have FUN.

Kids love it when their parents come and watch them play. They also seem to love it when they bring snacks and allow the athlete to enjoy the experience.

Parents ought to have conversation with their sons/daughters to find out exactly why they are playing a sport before they start. During the season, the parents ought to remember that it is the athlete’s experience, not theirs. After contests, parents should allow some time to pass before talking with their son or daughter about the contest. Kids need time to unwind, to move past the competition, to evaluate themselves, and to “come down” after the excitement of competition. Give them that time.

Your athletes’ responses will be very similar to the ones here. Collect them and share them with parents. You will find this to be a very powerful resource for working with parents. Send out the list in a newsletter...put it in your game program. Constant reminders help parents to remember their role in their kid’s athletic experience. Refer to it when a parent comes into your office to complain about how a coach is treating their kid. Keep it in front of parents and you will cut down on some of the issues that cause conflict between your parents and the coaches. It will make a difference!

Tom Doyle, a retired athletic director from Seattle Prep, is the business manager of Personal Perceptions Northwest and author of “True Coaching and the Sports Parent Manual”. tkdoyle@speakeasy.net