

Dealing with Over Exuberant Parents

By Kathy Toon



This is a hot topic these days. How do we deal with over exuberant sport parents? In my work as a Positive Coaching Alliance trainer I've noticed a punitive trend among youth sport organizations (YSO's). Many organizations covertly attempt to "hide" or silence the parents. They move them to the other side of the field or arena – away from the athletes and coaches; they hold "Silent Saturdays" – where the parents must remain silent on the sidelines – sometimes with the help of duct tape to help and parents are often required to sign a Code of Conduct.

We expect parents to do the right thing without ever teaching them what it looks like. Do we expect our athletes to perform without any training? Many YSO's think that if parents are handed a Code of Conduct and asked to read it – they will. Further, the believe is that if parents sign the Code, they will remember what it says and adhere to it in the stands. Good Luck!

At Positive Coaching Alliance we believe that parents can be an effective part of their child's youth sport experience. It may take some work – but what doesn't?

The opening exercise of our Sports Parent Workshop is titled "What are YOUR goals for your child in sports?" Parents are given a hypothetical 100 points and asked to divide them among a list of items. The items include "become a good athlete," "gain increased self-confidence," "learn to deal with defeat," "win," "make friends," and "have fun." After a few minutes, parents are encouraged to share how they distributed their points. Invariably their responses highlight the life lesson items. Then I ask the parents to imagine that they are sitting in the stands watching their child compete. It's a tight competition. Their child is in contention. Now I ask the parents what items rises to the top of their list. They sheepishly nod their heads and admit winning rises to the top.

Therein lies the rub. In a calm, theoretical setting, most parents have life lesson oriented goals for their child in sport. Yet in the heat of competition, the sophisticated life lessons often go out the window. We want to win!

So how can YSO leaders help parent's bridge the gap between their value-based goals for their child and their heat of the moment, win-at-all-costs moments of insanity?

I believe it is a three-part process.

1. Prevention – "Setting the Table"

Start with what we call setting the table. If people come to a formal dinner party with nice plates and silverware, they tend not to eat the same way they would at a picnic with plasticware. You want every single person in your organization to understand what is expected of him or her. The goal is total clarity on the norms of behavior in this organization. The way to get to this is through what we call "message bombardment." It's not enough to hear the message once or twice. Parents need to be bombarded with it to combat the power of the larger culture.

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Ways to bombard your parents include:

- Parent letter – a sample is available on the PCA website,
- Host a PCA Sport Parent Workshop,- teach them how to support their child's sport experience,
- E-mail reminders,
- Include a Parent column in your newsletter,
- Post articles on your bulletin boards,
- Hang Honor the Game banners in your rink

2. Enforcement - "Fixing Broken Windows"

The second step is to do what we call "Fixing Broken Windows". We got this term from Malcolm Gladwell's book, "The Tipping Point." He cited criminologists who found that "crime is the inevitable result of disorder." If a window is broken and left un-repaired, people walking by will conclude that no one cares, and no one is in charge. Soon, more windows will be broken, and the epidemic of crime takes off.

The same is likely to happen in your organization – you want to immediately fix any "broken windows," or elements that do not correspond with the positive culture you want to create. You want to make sure that if parents cross the line and behave in ways that are not acceptable to the culture of the organization, someone intervenes and says, in effect, 'That's not okay. That's not the way WE do things HERE.'

3. Reinforcement

People in an organization tend to do what gets rewarded. Most youth sports organizations reward coaches. And there's nothing wrong with that, but you may also want to reward the parents who do a great job of upholding the positive culture you want at your rink.

We've seen YSO leaders across the country implement these ideas and reap the benefits of positive parent behavior.

Kathy Toon is a Senior Trainer at Positive Coaching Alliance.