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Parents: Build Partnership with Coaches

by Jim Thompson

Research shows that when parents and teachers work together children tend to do better in school. There is no reason to think it's any different in youth sports. Parents who want their child to do well in sports should develop a partnership with the coach. The following are some tips (for parents who are not coaching their child) to create a Coach/Parent Partnership that will enable their children to get the most out of their skating experience.

Recognize Coaches' Commitment

For whatever reason, you have chosen not to coach. The coaches have made a commitment that involves many, many hours of preparation beyond the hours spent at practices and competitions. Recognize their commitment.

Make Early, Positive Contact

As soon as you know who your child's coaches are going to be, contact them to introduce yourself. To the extent that you can do so, ask if there is any way you can help. By getting to know the coaches early and establishing a positive relationship, it will be much easier to talk with them later if a problem arises.

Fill Coaches' Emotional Tanks

Coaching is a difficult job, and most coaches only hear from parents when they're upset. When the coaches do something you like, make a concerted effort to let them know about it. This will help fill the coaches' Emotional Tanks and will motivate them to do an even better job. Having recognized these positives will also make it easier to discuss problems later (because you have shown support for the good things).

Avoid Putting Athletes in the Middle

Imagine a situation around the dinner table in which a child's parents complain in front of her about how poorly her math teacher is teaching fractions. How would this impact this student's motivation to work hard to learn fractions? How would it affect her love of mathematics?

While this scenario may seem farfetched, when we move away from school to youth sports, it is all too common for parents to share their disapproval of a coach with their children, whether it is about coaching a given form, given tactics or playing time. This puts a young athlete in a bind. Divided loyalties do not make it easy for a child to do her best. Conversely, when parents support a coach, it is that much easier for the child to put her wholehearted effort into learning.

If you think your child's coaches are not handling a situation well, DO NOT tell that to your child. Rather, seek a meeting with the coaches where you can talk about it. It is important to talk with the coaches first, before going over their heads to an organization leader. Most coaches want to do the best job possible, and you owe them the opportunity to respond to your concerns before moving up the ladder.

Allow Coaches to Do the Coaching

It can be very confusing for a player to hear someone other than the coach yelling out instructions

during a competition or practice. You are not one of the coaches, so avoid giving your child instructions. If you have an idea, go to the coaches and offer it to them. Then let them decide whether or not to use it. Getting to decide how to teach certain skills and choosing which strategies and tactics to use is a privilege the coaches have earned by making the commitment to coach.

Fill Your Child's Emotional Tank

Perhaps the most important thing you can do is to be there unconditionally for your child. Competitive sports are stressful, and the last thing children need is a critic at home. Be a "talent scout" for your child. Focus on the positive things s/he does, and leave correcting mistakes to the coach. During competitions, look for specific things your child does well, and mention one or two of these things after the competition. "I like the way you landed that axel at the start of your program."

Give your child love and support without reservations, regardless of how well s/he performs. Don't criticize your child's performance right after the competition. This is hard for many parents, but it will pay off in two ways. It will strengthen your relationship, and it will avoid draining the child's Emotional Tank, which needs to be full for children to skate their best. Let me say it again—Don't give advice or criticize your child's performance. Instead, FILL his/her Emotional Tank.

Encourage Other Parents to Honor the Game

Hold yourself to a high standard—never show disrespect for other skaters, the other team, or the judges/officials. But more than that, encourage other parents to also Honor the Game. Your child's coaches will appreciate this help. They would much rather spend their time coaching the athletes, rather than having to supervise the behavior of parents.

Together, coaches and parents can make skating a powerful and positive experience for all involved. Good luck in establishing a partnership with your child's coaches. It will make a difference!

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