

Stop Youth Sports Violence

by Greg Bach, Communications Director, National Alliance for Youth Sports

The childish behavior in youth sports programs across the country isn't taking place on the playing fields, courts or ice anymore. It's in the stands.

The disturbing increase in violent behavior at youth sports events nationwide, where some games are ending in fistfights instead of handshakes, has forced recreation leaders and facility managers to look for ways to stop a problem that is spinning out of control. The well-documented events in Massachusetts involving the death of a hockey coach following a fight with a hockey dad is a sad reminder that when it comes to the world of youth sports, any parent can lose total perspective, in any league, at any time.

There's widespread concern among recreation professionals for the total disregard being shown by parents for not just good sportsmanship – but decent human behavior – at their children's games. Owners and operators of ice arenas across the country are in a unique position to make a positive difference to ensure that children have a chance to play in a fun-filled, stress-free, non-threatening environment. They have a choice. They can take steps to prevent abusive behavior from occurring at their facilities by making sure the coaches and administrators are trained and that parents participate in some type of sportsmanship training. Or, they can sit back and hope something catastrophic doesn't happen.

In 1999, Jupiter-Tequesta (FL) Athletic Association (JTAA) took a novel approach to reverse this troubling trend of violent behavior and verbal abuse by sending their parents to sportsmanship class. If the parents don't attend, the child does not play.

The JTAA, which serves 6,000 youngsters, was the nation's first athletic program to require that its parents attend the Parents Association for Youth Sports (PAYS) program. The PAYS program, created by the nonprofit National Alliance for Youth Sports, is a half-hour class designed to put youth sports in perspective for parents. If adults are educated on their roles and responsibilities in youth sports, and held accountable for their behavior, the likelihood of problems arising are greatly reduced. Hundreds of other communities have implemented the PAYS program.

The PAYS program features a Code of Ethics each parent is required to sign pledging to adhere to a standard of good behavior. Knowing when to cheer, and when to chill out, can often be a fine line for parents. Many wonderful parents successfully walk this behavioral tightrope, but too many others blatantly cross the line, and the results are typically disastrous.

Parents want, and deserve, the very best for their children. Whether it's a figure skating competition, spelling bee or hockey game, they want their child to succeed. But once scoreboards, championships and all-star teams enter the picture, the world of organized youth sports becomes a volatile mix. Parental motives suddenly become skewed, perspective is lost, and reasonable behavior vanishes. And the children are the innocent victims.

All youngsters deserve to play in fun-filled programs that aren't plagued by foul-mouthed, ill-mannered parents whose ridiculous behavior would not be tolerated in any other part of society.

Youth sports programs are a wonderful way to create countless memories that children will look back on for the rest of their lives. It's up to facility owners and managers to help make sure those memories are happy ones.

* If you are interested in taking a pro-active position to educate administrators, coaches and parents using your facilities, contact the National Alliance for Youth Sports at 1-800-729-2057, or visit www.nays.org to start a chapter.