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Support from the Stands

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Sitting in the stands at a recent youth sports tournament, I wondered how such seemingly well-adjusted parents could yell such outrageous things. That evening I caught up with the day's professional sports action by watching "Sports Center" on ESPN. I found my answer. Parents are conditioned by the media. Yelling, swearing, and blowing up are commonplace in the stands at professional sports events, and these outbursts are then highlighted on the evening TV sports shows. Parents and fans in the stands are just doing what they know—what they see on TV and what they read about in the newspaper.

The good news is people (including parents) can think for themselves. We need to help parents expand their sideline language and behaviors beyond what they hear and see in the media. I believe parents want to be at competitions for their kids and to support the culture ISI and Positive Coaching Alliance are working to create for their skaters and hockey players; they just need to know how to act. I speak from experience. I've spent years as a coach working to develop my own supportive / effective / empowering sideline language and behavior.

One of the most powerful "teachable moments" for me as a coach occurred while I was working on my Master's degree in Sports Psychology. A fellow grad student video-taped me coaching an entire college tennis match. The match lasted more than four hours, and I soon forgot about being taped. Reviewing the tapes later is something I will never forget. I always thought of myself as a positive, supportive coach—the data confirmed this—for 75% of the time. The remaining 25% shocked me. It wasn't so much what I said, although, that needed work—it was what I did.

My nonverbal communication spoke volumes. Shaking my head, rolling my eyes, contorting my face, burying my face in my hands, slumping and slamming my hand on the bench negated any positive thing I said. I saw and was living proof that actions do speak louder than words. I challenge coaches at the PCA workshops I lead to have a friend video-tape them for an entire game. Then I challenge those who are really brave to watch the tape. I now challenge parents to do the same thing.

What should parents do in the stands to uphold a positive youth sport culture and to support their child's sport experience? What messages can coaches give to parents to help them improve their children's sports experiences?

Use Targeted Cheering

Here's how it works. Before you head to the arena think about what you are going to cheer for at the competition. For example, rather than simply focusing on the outcome (whether or not your team scored, or if your child achieved the highest score), you might want to cheer for great effort, whether successful or not. You might also consider cheering for behavior that supports other teammates and actions that demonstrate resilience and determination. Perhaps you feel up for an advanced challenge. You could decide to cheer for good plays and great effort on the part of players on the other team as well!

When you get to the arena, follow your game plan. Cheer, intentionally, for the things you want to see more of. Examples include: "Great pass, Eric," "Awesome jump, Tina," "Way to hustle for the puck, Sam."

Honor the Game

1. Fill children's "Emotional Tank" through praise and positive recognition, so they can play their very best.

2. Let the coach correct player mistakes.

3. Cheer good plays by both teams (this is advanced behavior!).

4. Mention good calls by the official to parents.

5. If an official makes a "bad" call against your team? Honor the Game—BE SILENT!

6. Remember to have fun! It may seem like a child has many more competitions ahead, but the years pass quickly, so enjoy this time while you can.

Be a Culture Keeper

Culture is simply "the way we do things here." The Culture Keeper's job is to spread the word about Positive Coaching to parents in the stands. Here's how you do it:

• Become familiar with the three principles of Positive Coaching (Honoring the Game, Redefining "Winner," and Filling the Emotional Tank). In particular, memorize the elements of Honoring the Game (ROOTS) which include respect for Rules, Opponents, Officials, Teammates and one's Self.

• Get to know team parents at the beginning of the season. Talk with them about your role and the three principles early on, and ask for their support in the stands.

• Carry a supply of "We Honor the Game" stickers and cards to give to parents. Need cards and stickers? They are available from PCA: www.positivecoach.org/store/index.html or call 650-725-0024.

Enjoy competitions with your children!

It may require a little courage to actually ask a parent to change his or her behavior, or to hand someone a button or card. But it becomes easier when you remember that your motive is to improve the experience for the kids on the ice.

PCA continues to salute ISI for the leadership role it has taken in the movement to transform the culture of youth sports. By being supportive, you play an important role in helping PCA and ISI to develop a life-long love of skating and hockey in our children.