

When Parents Need to Intervene

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by Jim Thompson

Often the presumption is that your child's coach is basically a well-meaning person who is trying to do the right thing. But what if he or she isn't? The sad truth is that there are individuals coaching children today who do not have the best interests of their athletes at heart and who can be destructive.

I counsel parents to give the coach a wide berth. Youth coaches seldom get much (if any) pay for coaching, and the hours that coaches put into the job can seem endless. If a coach makes obvious mistakes, does not appear to maximize the athletes' strengths or runs disorganized practices, I tend to remind myself that I could have volunteered to help coach, but chose not to.

The exception to this thinking - and it's a big one - is if the coach is abusive to athletes, judges or referees. Youth sport has no place for a coach who verbally or physically intimidates athletes. We would never allow a teacher to bully or humiliate a student, nor should we avert our eyes if it happens in a youth sport setting.

In recent years I have read and heard about coaches with winning records who lost their jobs because of abusive behavior - something that just didn't happen 20 years ago. This kind of change comes about because individuals, often parents, have the courage to speak up to say that it's not OK to browbeat an athlete with the excuse that you are toughening him or her up for competition.

Unless a child is too young to understand what is going on, I always recommend talking with your child before acting to intervene.

If your child does not want you to intervene, you need to decide whether the situation is so bad that you need to do so in spite of the child's desire. You can say something like, "I understand that you don't want me to talk with your coach, but I believe that this is so important that I have to do it."

There may be times when you have a problem that the child cannot deal with on his or her own - perhaps an abusive situation. The first question here is whether you start with the coach or go to the person or body that supervises the coach (arena management, youth sports board, athletic director or principal).

I always want to err on the side of bringing a problem to the attention of the person most directly involved. That means talking with the coach first, but not before you've thought through what the problem is and what you want to say about it. If you are angry about what is happening, it is even more important that you get control of yourself and know exactly what you want to say. Waiting 24 hours to "cool off" is highly advised unless there is an immediate danger.

It is also important to pick a time and setting in which the coach, and only the coach, can hear you. Trying to talk with a coach during a practice or competition is not a good idea. You should also ensure that none of the skaters or their parents can overhear you, since, among other things, that is likely to cause the coach to be defensive.

Write down what you want to say, and then rehearse it until it comes out sounding the way you want it to sound. "Coach, my daughter has been coming home from practices lately in a down mood. I think when she gets criticized for making a mistake, it de-motivates her, and she's losing her joy in

skating." In some cases you may decide that the best vehicle for communicating with the coach is an e-mail message.

Be prepared with examples if the coach asks for them. Then listen carefully to what the coach has to say. Either the coach will agree to rectify the situation or he/she won't. If not, then you may need to take the next step to address your concerns.

Here again, you want to be clear about what you want to say. Written notes from your conversation with the coach are helpful in preparing for a meeting with the coaching director, the board president or arena management. Think ahead of time about solutions that would be acceptable to you. For example, would it be enough for your child to be transferred to another coach? Or is the behavior of the coach so harmful that you want to argue that he or she should be removed?

It's important to remember that your intervention in an abusive situation can be useful even if you don't get everything you want in the moment. Your notifying the coach's supervisor of abusive behavior can help sensitize those involved so they will take steps to prevent a similar situation from happening in the future. And you always have the ultimate control of any situation in which your child is at risk.

If you have tried everything you know how to do to change an abusive situation to no avail, you always have the ultimate intervention. You can remove your child from a harmful situation. This move can be extremely difficult, but when your child's well-being is in danger, it is the right move to make.

Jim Thompson is the founder and director of Positive Coaching Alliance (positivecoach.org), an ISI partner.