



Canadian Red Cross
Croix-Rouge canadienne



Parents and Coaches – We’re all in this together – Aren’t We?

Parents and coaches should have the same interests when it comes to youth sport – providing opportunities for young people to learn, grow, have fun and be challenged. Yet we all know of cases where parents and coaches have not been working together and other examples where they have been in open conflict. These conflicts can have serious impact on the sport experience for young people, sometimes so much so that children and youth withdraw from sport.

A few years ago, the Coaching Association of Canada estimated that we are losing over half of our young athletes by the age of 13. There are a number of reasons for this dropout rate; some of the reasons (like a child changing their areas of interest as they grow) are good ones. But, when young people are leaving the sport environment behind because of negative experiences with coaches or parents, or both – this is a problem.

The Canadian Red Cross *RespectED* program and its partner the *Respect In Sport* online training, have been working to provide education to coaches and parents so that our sports environment can be an even more positive one. The relationship between coaches and parents is a key component of this work.

“Helicopter parents”, “abusive coaches”,-... we hear these labels thrown around in the media - sometimes at coaches meetings and conferences, in the stands, or on the sidelines at games and competitions.

The term “helicopter parent” is a relatively new one and it refers to some parents’ need to pay very close attention to the experiences of their children at school and in extracurricular activities. The term was originally coined by Foster W. Cline, M.D. and Jim Fay in their 1990 book *Parenting with Love and Logic: Teaching Children Responsibility*. So-called “helicopter parents” will want to: attend all practices and games or competitions, communicate regularly with the coaches, and may use email and phone calls to express concerns and ask questions. Coaches find that these parents take up a lot of their limited time and energy and are sometimes guilty of lobbying for preferential treatment of their children. Perhaps a better term for this parenting type is “curling parent”, which is used in some parts of Europe. This comes from the perceived need of some parents to sweep all obstacles from the child’s path.

Some parents openly challenge a coach’s philosophy and others harangue and harass their children before and after games and practices.

The term “abusive coach” brings to mind high profile examples like Bob Knight or Graham James and in cases where a coach physically or sexually assaults a young athlete the term is clearly appropriate. Verbal abuse, or “mouth hitting” by coaches is another way in which a coach might well be described as abusive. Yet this label has also been used (perhaps wrongly) to describe a coach whose team selection process a parent might disagree with, or as part of a parental criticism about athlete playing time. Most coaches use the same approach and strategies in coaching as were used when they themselves were

athletes - just as we are likely to parent as we ourselves were parented. Those coaching approaches that included yelling at or belittling young athletes are no longer acceptable.

In addition, parents find some coaches controlling and secretive about their time spent with young athletes. Other parents describe coaches who are openly hostile to any approach by a parent or caregiver.

On the **Red Cross Support Line**, we've received calls from young people who felt caught between competing and conflicting coaches and parents. "I thought that this was supposed to be my opportunity to play but it sure doesn't feel very enjoyable," said one. This is where our focus should be – on the athlete; not on a coaches' possible need to control, or a parent's desire to relive their athletic careers through their children.

Some teams and clubs have tried to respond to these potential problems by banning parents from observing their children and youth at practice or while travelling to competitions. This can only exacerbate the tension and is also a serious Risk Management concern. I have recently heard about some teams implementing "coach accountability sessions" wherein volunteer coaches are required to regularly meet with parents in a kind of "hotseat" environment to take questions from parents. There are better ways, I think, to go about ensuring that parents and coaches work together to make sport safe and fun for all.

There really is nothing new about these issues; parent coach conflict and disagreement have always existed. But now we are more likely to be exposed through the media to those sensational cases where there has been violence. Education and awareness have raised our sensitivity to some of these issues on both sides. Parents are more willing to challenge coaches in their behaviour and coaches are more prepared to set limits on intrusive parents. Much of this increased openness and awareness is good but we also need to keep in mind that we are all in this together – for the good of sport and for the sake of the young athletes.

As the Coordinator for the **Red Cross Support Line** that is affiliated with the *Respect In Sport* program, I sometimes wish that I could share the more positive content of many of our calls with everyone. Parents (who represent approximately 58% of our callers) call to express their concerns, but almost always with respect and support for coaches. Parents talk about the caring, commitment and passion that so many coaches bring to their teams, clubs and organizations. Coaches and assistant coaches (who make up about 31% of our calls annually) will talk about the pressures of coaching under watchful parental eyes but they also express their appreciation for the help that parents offer as managers, organizers, chaperones, chauffeurs and enthusiastic fans.

Some sport organizations have tried to implement solutions to these problems. Parental and Coach Code of Conduct contracts typically include reference to the relationship with one another. The *Respect In Sport* online training sessions for parents and coaches include discussions about respectful coach/parent interaction. Team or club meetings at the start of the year between parents and coaches can assist in preventing misunderstandings, and more and more time starved coaches are using the internet to keep parents informed about schedules, practices and athlete progress. These strategies help to improve attitudes and maintain healthy lines of communication.

Coaches need help with players showing up on time, adhering to dietary and sleep regimens, and following through on any other off-site programming that coaches may suggest. Coaches also rely on parents to financially support team/ club or organization activities like travel costs and uniforms. Parents

are also an ongoing “risk management tool” for coaches through the attendance at (and observation of) practices, workouts and competitions.

Parents need the help of the coaches to provide a supportive environment for young athletes and to offer developmentally-appropriate instruction and challenge. Parents also rely on coaches to provide them with ongoing and constructive feedback about their children’s progress in sport and in life.

This calls for teamwork! Instead of retreating into separate groups of coaches and parents who complain about one another – we need to work together. There are places where we can learn better how to do this – in particular the Respect In Sport training:

The *Respect In Sport* online training for coaches is a unique approach to supporting existing coach training. The training goes beyond enumerating unsafe and abusive coaching practices and offers alternatives in communicating with athletes and parents respectfully.

The *Respect In Sport* program now also offers an online training for parents. This training provides parents with important insights into how their behaviour can affect young athletes for the better or worse.

Setting our negative assumptions aside and putting less than ideal experiences with one another in perspective can only make for even better coaches and parents; and, more importantly, those young people in our care can continue to enjoy the richness that involvement in sport can offer.

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