

Working Effectively With Parents

By Susan M. Walter
Institute for the Study of Youth Sports

Parents are an essential part of any successful youth sports program. Their potential contributions are numerous, but one that is often overlooked is their availability as a resource for coaches. Coaches who communicate well with parents will be able to involve them as partners throughout the season. Three areas will be addressed for working effectively with parents:

- * Organizing a Parent Orientation Meeting,
- * Parental Motivation/Involvement,
- * Avoiding Conflicts with Parents.

Parent Orientation Meeting

Holding a parent orientation meeting allows coaches to meet the parents and suggest ways that parents can help the team. At this meeting, important information should be shared, such as the coach's coaching philosophy, how the season will be structured, expectations of the players and parents, and gathering of medical information. Be sure to organize the meeting at a convenient time for most parents, contact parents by telephone and letter urging their attendance, and provide an agenda for the scheduled meeting.

The parent orientation is probably the only time you will have the majority of the parents together and will have their complete attention. Use this time effectively to communicate your ideas and expectations. For example, before the meeting decide how the season will be structured. That is, decide if the emphasis will be on all players having equal playing time or whether the competitive level of the league prohibits equal playing time. Tell parents what is expected of them as well as of their children. For example, if a child misses a practice, what does that mean for playing in the next game?

Furthermore, use this meeting to set a positive tone for the season. At the meeting, demonstrate you are in charge - yet are receptive to their input and help. Urge parents to communicate with you but also set boundaries for lines of communication. There is a fine line between having parents help while not letting them take over your job as coach. This can be accomplished by conducting an efficient and organized meeting, anticipating questions they may have and having answers ready, and not getting defensive if parents ask questions that seem to challenge yours or the league's philosophy on certain policies and procedures. Before the meeting develop an outline for what topics to include. Below is a list of suggested topics:

Goals for the team and parents

General knowledge of the sport you are coaching Dangers and risk of injury

Emergency procedures

Equipment needs

Athlete's responsibilities

Parents' responsibilities

Channels of communication

Season schedule

Make sure you have enough of the required forms such as permissions slips and emergency medical information for every child.

Finally, remember what you have to say is important and do not apologize for taking their time. If you have scheduled an hour meeting, plan to use that whole time and do not rush through the material. The time you take now to inform the parents can prevent problems later in the season.

Parental Motivation and Involvement

Just as athletes have different reasons for participating, differences in parental involvement and motivation will also exist. Recognizing these individual differences among the parents is important. If you are unaware of these differences you may be unprepared for the variety of responses you receive from parents.

First, identify the needs of the team and establish specific roles or jobs for which parents can sign-up. Some examples of tasks to be accomplished routinely throughout the season include coordinator of uniforms, coordinator of the telephone list and coordinator of team meals on the road. Avoid establishing too many roles for parents; otherwise it can lead to confusion. Remember, you must be able to oversee the roles you create. The roles should reduce the time that is required of you. Don't create more work for yourself than you already have. Second, be able to explain to parents why their participation can be beneficial for the children's sport experience. Having parents involved can allow the parent to see their child's skills develop. Once parents know of their child's relative abilities they are more likely to be able to assist in the development of their child's skills. Be aware that some parents who are not involved may want to be, while some parents choose not to or are unable to be involved. The best solution is to talk with parents and learn of their preferences and capabilities concerning their assistance with their child's team. If it appears a parent would like to become involved, give him/her a task. However, if they do not want to be involved, spend some time getting to know them and avoid making value judgments about them. Try not to overload one to two parent's with responsibilities. This could lead to resentment because they may feel they are doing all the work or other parents may feel they are not able to help.

Finally, develop a strategy for handling parents who appear to be over-involved. Generally, speaking directly with parents is the best way to convince an over-involved parent that he/she should relinquish some of the tasks. Communication is a two-way street. By asking questions and listening, coaches can learn about the parents and utilize them effectively to have a great relationship both on and off the field.

Avoiding Conflicts with Parents

Through effective communication and organization most conflicts with parents can be avoided. Establishing regular communication with parents such as a monthly telephone call or letter can help prevent conflicts. By doing this, parents learn first-hand what is happening over the course of the season, as well as having an opportunity to ask questions. Accepting that every parent may not like you and agree with your decisions is important. Coaching involves helping children grow personally and develop their sport skills. It is not winning a popularity contest. If you try to accommodate too many parents you may find yourself jeopardizing your effectiveness as a coach. Listen to the feedback parents provide and decide whether it is realistic or helpful for the athletes and team.

Establish a positive personal coaching philosophy which focuses on the development of the athletes and utilizes technical feedback with positive reinforcement. Helping parents understand how and why you make decisions makes it easier for them to support you even if they do not agree with your decisions. Be able to demonstrate and communicate your philosophy to parents. By conveying to parents your interests for helping children's athletic and personal development, you demonstrate to the parents that you know and care about their children. In addition, be aware of your actions so that you treat all players equally. Equal treatment refers to all players receiving quality technical feedback. Have all the players help with various tasks and give all children quality playing time so that they have opportunities to improve.

Finally, establishing guidelines can help avoid conflicts. If problems arise speak directly with the parent and address the problem early so that it does not continue to build. Also, have the parents communicate directly with the coach in lieu of starting rumors or gossip about how the team is functioning.

Conclusions.

Coaches should develop and maintain an optimistic attitude and demonstrate sincere enthusiasm for their work. Coaches are the energy source for the athletes. Athletes will respond to how coaches interact with them. Each season produces a variety of challenges. Accepting that your team may not have exceptional athletes, being realistic with what you can do as a coach as well as incorporating these techniques of working effectively with parents into your overall plans can help you have an enjoyable and successful season.

Sources

Walter, S. M., & Scales. W. D (in press). Motivating and communicating with athletes. parents and officials In Clark, M., (Ed) Youth basketball: A Complete Handbook. Carmel, IN: Brown and Benchmark.

Ewing, M. Feltz, D., & Brown E W (1993). Working effectively with parents. In M. Clark, T. Smith, T. George and J. Elliott, (Eds.) Youth baseball A complete handbook. Carmel, IN: Brown and Benchmark