

Undermining A Coach: Parental Interference

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Imagine the following scenario. As a player rides home from a game with his parents, the father begins his critique of the game. He begins by telling his son that; “Your coach is making a big mistake with the way he’s handling you. Everyone knows that you’re better than Ralph is and should be one of the starting forwards. What is he thinking?” What ramifications does this behavior have for the player? For the coach?

Initially, we must look at the role that parents have in the soccer experience. Ideally, parents serve as the primary support system for their child’s involvement. This means that they look at the experience from the child’s point of view and offer positive reinforcement for their child’s efforts, no matter what! It is important to note that the above scenario is often the result of this very perspective. The parent is attempting to boost their child’s self-concept of ability as a player. Unfortunately, the method of accomplishing this worthy task is inappropriate. It violates a cardinal rule in developing self-concept, i.e.; it attempts to build the child’s concept of self by putting others down. This serves as a shaky foundation on which to build esteem. It refers to external factors (i.e., the dumb coach) as the source of self-concept rather than focusing attention on the true source of self-esteem, i.e., the internal feelings and perceptions of the child concerning his own skill level, place on the team, or in the world at large.

Of primary concern is the resulting effect of this approach on the child. Undermining the coach in this manner forces the child to choose between two of the most influential adults in his life and creates confusion. Athletically, the athlete exhibits this confusion on the field. Concentration becomes divided during the game with the athlete never really committing to his ‘task at hand.’ He becomes literally frozen in his tracks and is unable to focus on his duties. Individually, the child is torn between the love for his parents and the respect for the coach. Each are integral parts to the development of his self-concept of ability on the field and as a human being.

In essence, the coach’s position as ‘lead decision-maker’ for the team has been placed in question. In many cases, he remains unaware that this problem even exists because the parent chooses to maintain a dialogue with his son, but not with the coach. So, how should this be handled? What should a parent do when he or she feels that their child is being treated unfairly? The parent in two steps should handle this scenario. The first step is to refrain from undermining the coach with his child. Instead, the parent should pursue a dialogue based on the effort his son is putting forth in the role that he has been given. The parent should be able to identify specific tasks that his son is doing well and pay compliments to them. These could include passing skills, aggressive play,

communication on the field, punctuality, etc. By offering positive reinforcement for task related behaviors, the athlete's self-concept of ability is enhanced.



Secondly, the parent has every right to speak with the coach about the role his son has on the team. This conversation should take place away from the field, after practice when no one is around or over the phone if necessary. The approach should be one of 'information seeking' rather than confrontation. For example, the parent could begin the conversation with questions; "I'm interested in my son's role on the team. What do you see as the reasons for his role as a non-starter? What does he need to improve in order to move into a starting role?" The coach should be able to identify specific skills, which are in need of improvement as well as a description of what others are doing who have earned their starting position. The parent should also be able to describe his reasoning for questioning the coach. This reasoning should not be centered on the 'fact that everyone knows...' or on past performances at younger levels. It should be versed in equally compelling evidence of superior play. In the final analysis, at least four possible outcomes exist:

- 1) The coach agrees to start the player
- 2) The coach agrees to look for progress and give the player every chance to work his way into the starting lineup
- 3) The parent agrees to disagree with the coach yet maintain a positive approach with his son
- 4) The parent opts to change teams

It is critical that the "Athletic Triangle" (composed of coach, athlete and parent) functions in an atmosphere of open communication. It is equally critical that the child's welfare is put above all else. This includes adult inadequacies in communication, problems at home that are carried onto the playing field, parental egos, coaching incompetence, and inferior skill levels on the part of the athlete. The game is for the kids! Adults are there to organize, supervise, teach, and offer support for the efforts displayed on the field. In some cases, parents are left with the task of being supportive of their child in spite of disagreements with coaches.

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