MANDATORY Parent Education Programs

Can Create Positive Youth Sport Experiences

By Jennifer Christofferson and Bradford Strand

Parents play a crucial role in creating a positive youth sport experience for their children (Sanchez-Miguel, Leo, Sanchez-Oliva, Amado, & Garcia-Calbo, 2013). While most parents understand the importance of continual support and encouragement, others display erratic, often detrimental behaviors in their quest to ensure their children achieve perceived athletic success (Knight, Boden, & Holt, 2010). Witnessing emotional parents attempting to coach their children from the sidelines both at practice and games is a common occurrence. Their comments and actions often extend to teammates, coaches, referees and other parents in the stands. In their study on the nature of parent behavior, Kidman, McKenzie, and McKenzie (1999) found that although the majority of parental comments were positive, more than one third were negative in nature.

Twenty-first-century social media has exploded with examples of these parents and has displayed their unruly behavior in front of the world. Omli, LaVoi, and Wiese-Bjornstal (2008) suggested that this behavior occurs because of the emotional bond between parent and child, combined with the stress that accompanies competition. Parents who behave inappropriately during a youth sport event are typically reacting to undesired situations such as their daughter sitting on the bench too long, their son not touching the ball enough, or a call from a referee that they just do not understand. They are often expressing emotions or frustration out of love for their child without realizing the effect it might have on their child's enjoyment of the experience.

The issue of parent conduct must be addressed in youth sport programs to create rewarding sport experiences for kids. Fortunately, organizations have the opportunity to teach parents how to avoid these negative behaviors before they happen. To do so, program directors and coaches must be willing to take the necessary steps to prevent inappropriate parental behaviors in youth sport environments.

Different communities have attempted a variety of strategies to stop negative behaviors in youth sport, including "Silent Sundays," fines for poor behavior, contracts, codes of conduct, or restricting access to events (Kidman et al., 1999; Omli & LaVoi, 2012). Though some of these strategies might achieve short-term success, setting high expectations for parents through educational programs seems to have a longer-lasting effect (Patrikakou, 2008). These educational programs must encourage parents to be ambassadors, providing constant support for their young athletes and encouraging others to do the same. In addition, youth programs must shift attention away from negative behaviors and instead promote examples of parents who are committed to providing a positive and productive climate for all children involved.

Being involved in youth sports can be a difficult balancing act for parents, as they struggle with the desire to push their children to be their best, while also understanding the need to be a supportive spectator. Regardless, children deserve the opportunity to have a rewarding and enjoyable experience in youth sports. McCarthy, Jones, and Clark-Carter (2008) believe that parents play a pivotal role in providing children with an enjoyable sport experience. Positive interactions build a child's self-esteem, one of the most important indicators of an individual's psychological well-being (Mann, Hosman, Schaalma, & de Vries, 2004). If done correctly, completing a quality educational program prior to involvement in youth sport can make parents an asset rather than a liability. If committed, parents can learn to harness their emotions, participate in a constructive way, and help create a positive climate for the entire organization. By taking a proactive approach and requiring parents to complete specific training programs, youth sport directors and coaches can help provide the best possible experience for each and every child involved.

The purpose of this article is to discuss reasons why quality parental training is important and to provide guidelines for the creation of mandatory parental education programs. The following sections will justify the need for required training and will provide techniques to create and implement parent education programs in youth sport.

Why Make Parent Education Mandatory?

SHAPE America – Society of Health and Physical Educators believes that the intention of sport should be to provide opportunities for children to participate, have fun, develop skills, and enjoy the thrill of competition in a positive, nonthreatening environment (National Association for Sport and Physical Education, 2009). However, it seems that many youth sport parents do not act in a way that supports these "youth-first" intentions. According to Omli and Wiese-Bjornstal (2011), negative parental behaviors make participation less enjoyable and partially explain why about one third of athletes quit before the end of the season. After interviewing 57 young tennis players ages seven to 14 years old, Omli and Wiese-Bjornstal concluded that parents can negatively influence sportsmanship behaviors in children and can be a source of stress for young athletes, causing some children to quit youth sport altogether.

From Omli and Wiese-Bjornstal's (2011) research, it is clear that children want their parents to be supportive bystanders who provide positive encouragement and not act like demanding coaches or crazed fans. In fact, Bach (2006) shared a sport violence survey conducted by *Sports Illustrated for Kids* that was given to 3,000 U.S. children. He reported that 74% of the children surveyed said they had witnessed out-of-control adults at their games. The two most commonly observed types of bad behavior were parents yelling at children and parents yelling at officials or coaches. Similarly, Survey USA polled 500 parents in Indianapolis and found that more than half reported having witnessed parents in a verbal dispute at a youth sport event, while approximately 20% had witnessed a physical altercation (Bach, 2006). Therefore, due to the negative effect parental misconduct can have on player development, enjoyment and participation, a mandatory parental education course should be completed before any child is allowed to participate in youth sports.

Convincing administrators, coaches and parents that parental training programs should be required can be challenging, but if these adults believe in putting the needs of young people first, the rewards can be significant. In fact, many communities have already taken action by creating programs to work toward positive change. For example, student-athletes from the University of Maine College of Education created a program called "Sports Done Right" to try to reshape the culture that surrounds youth sports. The authors have written a comprehensive guide to help parents recognize "out-of-bounds" behaviors, increase sportsmanship, and promote a positive athletic experience for youth (Goldstein & Iso-Ahola, 2006).

According to Wilson (2008), progressive change occurred when the City Council in El Paso, TX, passed an ordinance requiring all parents to complete a three-hour training session before their children could compete in youth athletics. The sessions they offered included a presentation by a child crisis center

representative who discussed child abuse, another presentation by a child psychologist who talked about different performance levels of children, and a segment in which parents reviewed all of the rules set by their league (Huddleston, 2000). After three years and 15,000 completed courses, El Paso has seen a dramatic drop in violence, a rise in positive sideline atmosphere, and an increase in cooperation between parents, coaches and officials (Wilson, 2008).

The key to requiring parent education is the creation of programs that are bold and meaningful. Mandatory training programs must provide parents with knowledge that empowers them to make intelligent decisions regarding their child, and parents must be held accountable for spreading positive energy on the sidelines. The programs should be implemented before season participation to prevent dangerous encounters from happening during upcoming events. However, the only way this training will be effective is if parents who complete the program commit to showing consistent respect for all players, parents, coaches and officials. Those who make that choice will be doing what is best for their child by speaking and acting in an encouraging way at home and on the sidelines. This same training could be offered on a voluntary basis, but it is possible that the only parents who choose to complete the program are those who are already behaving in a favorable way (Wilson, 2008). Making programs meaningful and mandatory could result in a decrease in negative behaviors and an increase in the positive parental support that young athletes need to get the most out of their participation in youth sport.

Parent Education Programs: What Should Parents Learn?

1. ***Teach parents the philosophy and structure of the program to help them understand core values and desired outcomes.***

Barcelona and Young (2010) stated that the environment, program philosophy and operational aspects of a youth sport program can have either a positive or negative effect on program participants. As such, being upfront with parents about how a program will be structured and about the values and beliefs that will be followed seems to be an important step in the prevention of potential misunderstandings. Leaders and/or coaches should emphasize the importance of developing a youth-first environment where skill development, sportsmanship and enjoyment are at the forefront. In addition, coaches should be honest about how they will determine playing time and how they will conduct themselves during practices, games and tournaments. They should talk about team goals, provide examples of a typical practice session, and highlight potential safety risks as well as player and parent expectations (Cumming & Ewing, 2002). With the level of commitment required in youth sports, parents deserve to know what to expect so they can decide whether or not they want their children to participate.

2. ***Teach parents the sport-specific rules of the game as they apply to the youth setting to prevent misunderstandings with referees and coaches during events.***

Negative parental behaviors are often a result of ignorance in regards to the rules of the game or incorrect expectations of officials and coaches (Wilson, 2008). Therefore, it is important

for parents to learn the rules of each sport in which their children will be participating at the youth level. One way this can be accomplished is by selecting a few players to demonstrate specific misinterpretations that might occur (Cumming & Ewing, 2002). Other options include inviting local officials to come and explain typical calls, showing video clips, highlighting rule books, or providing pamphlets that familiarize parents with the rules of the sport.

In addition to learning rules, parents must be able to recognize gaps that may exist between their knowledge of the game and that of the coaches and officials. At times, parents vocalize concerns about a call or decision without understanding the reasons why the decision was made. Clearly, in youth sports, there are instances where officials make mistakes and coaches make poor decisions, but if parents can move past those decisions and focus instead on maintaining a positive outlook, everyone involved will have a more enjoyable experience. Therefore, the goal in educating parents about rules and regulations is to decrease negative sideline comments in regards to the decisions made by coaches and referees.

By taking a proactive approach and requiring parents to complete specific training programs, youth sport directors and coaches can help provide the best possible experience for each and every child involved.

3. *Teach parents how to display constant sportsmanship toward players, coaches, officials and other spectators to ensure a conflict-free environment for youth.*

In addition to simply attending their events, the parental behaviors most preferred by children include telling them that they did a good job, clapping after their team does something good, encouraging them while they are playing, and saying "good try" if they make a mistake (Omli et al., 2008). Sadly, some parents simply do not understand how important their words and actions are for the success of their children. It is difficult for children to witness unsportsmanlike conflicts between parents and officials, coaches or other spectators. In fact, sustained exposure to these behaviors not only affects the immediate sport experiences, but also may have long-term consequences for the emotional health of athletes (Omli et al., 2008). For these reasons, one of the most important parts of parental education should be the communication of the programs' expectations in regards to sportsmanship and appropriate sideline behavior.

Research suggests that children are happier and more successful in youth sports when their parents support them in a positive way. Omli et al. (2008) stated that the supportive parent role involves "attentive silence" during play, cheering after a positive outcome, and providing encouragement and praise at appropriate times. It also involves cheering for other children, complimenting officials, and encouraging players to have fun. Parents must learn to be child-centered and must provide constant support and encouragement to all young athletes in an attempt to increase enjoyment and self-esteem for all participants. They must also resist the urge to criticize the performances of players, coaches and officials and instead praise their effort and determination. Omli and Wiese-Bjornstal's (2011) research showed that young athletes believe that having fun in a conflict-free environment is more important than winning games. To provide the positive environment young people deserve, coaches and sport leaders must develop and maintain open, healthy communication with parents to put an end to these unwanted behaviors and spread sportsmanship on the sidelines (Smoll, Cumming, & Smith, 2011).

4. *Teach parents how to recognize emotions and translate them into positive behaviors that support the philosophy of the program.*

Some would say that watching their child or children compete in sports is one of the most difficult things they have to do as a parent or guardian. It brings out emotions that otherwise did not exist and causes parents to act in ways they otherwise would not act. Peter (2011) believed that youth sport leaders must try to understand the emotions of parents and approach parents with empathy rather than judgment or disdain. Therefore, those creating a parental education program must first attempt to understand why youth sport experiences influence the emotions of parents in such a profound way. Leaders can then use that information to create meaningful videos, presentations and scenarios that provide a platform for parents to recognize when their emotions could turn into negative behaviors.

Peter (2011) explained, "My son's involvement in organized youth sports blindsided me in terms of the strength and spectrum of my emotions . . . the intensity of these feelings stunned me as a parent" (p. 124). Often, when these intense feelings are coupled with the perception that an official, coach, player or parent has done something unjust or incompetent, anger-driven emotions surface and cause nontypical negative behaviors. Omli and LaVoi (2012) agreed that changing the perceptions of parents may increase awareness of how expres-

sions of anger can affect everyone, and reduce the frequency with which parents express anger. Therefore, essential steps in creating a parent education program are to help parents recognize times when negative emotions may arise, harness negative energy and turn it into positive comments and behaviors, and work to prevent future feelings of negativity by reflecting on one's own actions.

How to Implement Parental Training Programs

Before implementing a parent education program, leaders should first try to gain insight from parents by soliciting their ideas and suggestions as to what they would like to see in their child's youth program (Peter, 2011). Kanters (2002) suggested that to empower parents to do the right thing, the message that youth sport leaders send must indicate that they want and value positive parent input. Therefore, the first step in the parent education process should be a short introductory meeting where coaches not only provide essential information about their program, but also encourage parents to voice ideas, express concerns, and ask questions. Coaches should work to keep the lines of communication with parents open at this meeting so they will have constructive relations with parents (Smoll et al., 2011) throughout the entire training process. Most importantly, coaches should clearly communicate that children will not be able to participate without parental completion of the mandatory educational training program.

Making programs meaningful and mandatory could result in a decrease in negative behaviors and an increase in the positive parental support that young athletes need to get the most out of their participation in youth sport.

Upon completion of the initial coach–parent meeting, youth sport leaders must then decide how they will facilitate the additional parental education necessary to cover teaching points such as those discussed in the previous section. The following items should be considered:

- length of the training session (long enough to make it meaningful, short enough to keep attention and positive attitudes);
- topics that will be discussed (e.g., procedure, vision, rules, emotions, sportsmanship, etc.);
- methods of information delivery (e.g., video, live training, scenarios, discussions, etc.);
- personnel and materials needed for live seminars (e.g., youth directors, coaches, officials, community members, players, etc.);
- how to provide accessibility to all parents (work schedules, home life, access to technology, etc.); and
- what is included in the written contract or "code of conduct."

A youth sport organization can save planning time in knowing that a parent education program has already been created by the Parents Association for Youth Sports (PAYS), an extension of the National Alliance for Youth Sports (NAYS). A number of programs already use the PAYS program for all or part of their parental education training. For example, in Glendale, AZ, the Parks and Recreation Department implemented the program as a proactive step to prevent something catastrophic from happening in the future (Huddleston, 2000). Also using the PAYS training, the Jupiter-Tequesta Athletic Association in Florida claimed to have seen a large decrease in the number of serious incidents and an increase in positive peer pressure and self-regulation among parents (Huddleston, 2000).

To use the PAYS parent education program, coaches and youth sport leaders can choose from the following three options: 1) Parents take the course online during their own time, 2) programs host a live PAYS meeting and then parents are required to become NAYS members, or 3) programs host a live PAYS meeting without tracking parents in any way (NAYS, 2015). The third option is the most flexible as it allows programs to have access to all PAYS educational materials without requiring parents to become members of the national association. In this way, youth sport programs can use professionally designed information to create their own training sessions and retain the ability to add anything they believe will enhance parent learning. For example, the "Parents' Code of Ethics" (see Figure 1) can be used as a guideline for programs that wish to create their own written parental conduct code. However, if a youth sport program chooses to create its own program, it must be enforced to have any effect.

Holding Parents Accountable

When emotionally intense sport situations arise during competition, it is easy for parents to forget what they agreed to in their "code of conduct." Wiersma and Sherman (2005) questioned the

I hereby pledge to provide positive support, care and encouragement for my child participating in youth sports by following this PAYS Parents' Code of Ethics:

- I will encourage good sportsmanship by demonstrating positive support for all players, coaches and officials at every game, practice or other youth sport event.
- I will place the emotional and physical well-being of my child ahead of a personal desire to win.
- I will insist that my child play in a safe and healthy environment.
- I will require that my child's coach be trained in the responsibilities of being a youth sport coach and that the coach uphold the Coaches' Code of Ethics.
- I will support coaches and officials working with my child in order to encourage a positive and enjoyable experience for all.
- I will demand a sport environment for my child that is free from drugs, tobacco and alcohol and will refrain from their use at all youth sport events.
- I will remember that the game is for youth — not for adults.
- I will do my very best to make youth sports fun for my child.
- I will help my child enjoy the youth sport experience by doing whatever I can, such as being a respectful fan, assisting with coaching, or providing transportation.
- I will ask my child to treat other players, coaches, fans and officials with respect regardless of race, sex, creed or ability.

_____

Parent Signature Date

Figure 1. Parents Association for Youth Sports (PAYS) Parents' Code of Ethics

extent to which parental codes are truly effective in regulating parental behavior and identified the enforcement of codes as a critical issue for leagues considering their implementation. Often, there are loopholes when it comes to enforcing the policies ("Is Parental Involvement a Liability," 2003), and parents tend to keep repeating unwelcome behaviors, thus creating a detrimental learning environment for young athletes. Therefore, it is essential that parents are held accountable when they break the rules that were agreed upon before the season began. There must be firm boundaries in place, and everyone involved must be committed to the same goal. In addition, policies regarding ethical behavior and sportsmanship must be written and continually communicated to players, coaches and parents (Goldstein & Iso-Ahola, 2006). These general guidelines provide a firm foundation for coaches and youth leaders to develop appropriate consequences as individual situations arise. When consequences are given, the message learned should be specific and powerful. And under no circumstances should a child be punished for the actions of his or her parents. Lastly, leaders must be consistent with their follow-through and be sure to avoid favoritism or special treatment based on existing relationships.

In addition to the accountability actions taken by youth sport administrators and coaches, sometimes parents themselves need to find the courage to stand up to their peers to stop negative comments and behaviors. Aubrey Bush, a Capital University student, suggested that a designated person should be available on the playing field to ensure the safety of youth participants ("Is Parental Involvement a Liability," 2003). This idea was shared in Australia where New South Wales created a pilot program to stamp out "sport rage" with the creation of a "game-day ground official" who was responsible for intervening in situations in which the code of conduct was being broken. The results of the pilot program showed that if volunteers for this position are trained correctly, the number of negative instances can be reduced (Goldstein & Iso-Ahola, 2006). Whether or not a youth program decides to use a "behavior official," it is clear that parents need to be held accountable for their own actions and the actions of those who have also agreed to a conduct code. If parents approach each other with respect and understanding, they can remind themselves of the commitment they made to provide their children with a positive youth sport experience. This kind of parental accountability can potentially change the culture of a program and spread the message of youth-first sportsmanship behaviors throughout the entire community.

Conclusion

The majority of parents want the best for their children, but being a parent of a young athlete is not easy; it requires time,

energy and commitment. It also brings out emotions that can sometimes cause adults to transform from a loving parent into an enraged spectator. While most parents have a clear perception of what the goal of youth sports should be, a handful of others stray into the irrational, embarrassing behaviors that are displayed in the media (Bach, 2006). By understanding the emotional root of parental comments and actions, youth sport leaders can work with parents to create meaningful programs that adhere to a youth-first philosophy and encourage the spread of positive behaviors. This process requires leaders to decide who will conduct training, what will be taught, and how it will be implemented. In addition, it requires parents who are willing to hold themselves accountable for their own actions and the actions of other fans. By working together to promote a positive sideline climate through mandatory parental education programs, parents, administrators and coaches can provide the rewarding youth sport experience children deserve.

References

Bach, G. (2006). The Parents Association for Youth Sports. *Journal of Physical Education*, *Recreation & Dance*, *77*(6), 16–19.

Barcelona, R., & Young, S. (2010). The role of municipal park and recreation agencies in enacting coach and parent training in a loosely coupled youth sport system. *Managing Leisure, 15*, 181–197.

Cumming, S., & Ewing, M. (2002). Parental involvement in youth sports: The good, the bad and the ugly! *Spotlight on Youth Sports, 26*(1), 1–5.

Goldstein, J., & Iso-Ahola, S. (2006). Promoting sportsmanship in youth sports. *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation & Dance, 77*(7), 18–24.

Huddleston, E. (2000, November). Youth sports leagues introduce mandatory behavior programs for parents. *Athletic Business.* Retrieved from http://www.athleticbusiness.com/youth-sports-leagues-introduce-mandatory-behavior-program-for-parents.html

Is parental involvement a liability in youth sports? (2003). *Journal of Physical Education*, *Recreation & Dance*, *74*(3), 16–18.

Kanters, M. (2002, December 1). Parents and youth sports: The good, the bad and why we need them — Research update. *Parks & Recreation.* Retrieved from http://www.pysc.org/projects/documents/ParentsandYouthSportsTheGoodTheBadandWhyWeNeedThem.pdf

Kidman, L., McKenzie, A., & McKenzie, B. (1999). The nature and target of parents' comments during youth sport competitions. *Journal of Sport Behavior, 22*, 54–67.

Knight, C., Boden, C., & Holt, N. (2010). Junior tennis players' preferences for parental behaviors. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology, 22*, 377–391.

Mann, M., Hosman, C. M. H., Schaalma, H. P., & de Vries, N. K. (2004). Self-esteem in a broad-spectrum approach for mental health promotion. *Health Education Research, 19,* 357–372.

McCarthy, P., Jones, M., & Clark-Carter, D. (2008). Understanding enjoyment in youth sport: A developmental perspective. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, *9*, 142–156.

National Alliance for Youth Sports. (2015). Parents Association for Youth Sports. Retrieved from http://www.nays.org/parents

National Association for Sport and Physical Education. (2009). *A coach's guide to parental roles and responsibilities in sport*. Reston, VA: Author.

Omli, J., & LaVoi, N. (2012). Emotional experiences of youth sport parents: I. Anger. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, *24*, 10–25.

Omli, J., LaVoi, N., & Wiese-Bjornstal, D. (2008). Towards an understanding of parent spectator behavior at youth sport events. *Journal of Youth Sports*, *3*(2), 30–33.

Omli, J., & Wiese-Bjornstal, D. (2011). Kids speak: Preferred parental behavior at youth sporting events. *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport*, *82*, 702–711.

Patrikakou, E. N. (2008). *The power of parent involvement: Evidence, ideas, and tools for student success*. Lincoln, IL: Center on Innovation & Improvement.

Peter, N. (2011). Confessions of a baseball mom: The impact of youth sports on parents' feelings and behaviors. *New Directions for Youth Development*, *1*, 123–171.

Sanchez-Miguel, P. A., Leo, F. M., Sanchez-Oliva, D., Amado, D., & Garcia-Calbo, T. (2013). The importance of parents' behavior in their children's enjoyment and amotivation in sports. *Journal of Human Kinetics, 36,* 169–177.

Smoll, F., Cumming, S., & Smith, R. (2011). Enhancing coach–parent relationships in youth sports: Increasing harmony and minimizing hassle. *International Journal of Sports Science & Coaching, 6*, 13–26.

Wiersma, L., & Sherman, C. (2005). Volunteer youth sport coaches' perspectives of coaching education/certification and parental codes of conduct. *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport*, *76*, 324–338.

Wilson, K. (2008). Mandatory parent training needed to improve youth sports sidelines. *Moms Team.* Retrieved from http://www.momsteam.com/successful-parenting/game-day/sideline-behavior/mandatory-parent-training-needed-to-improve-youth-sp

S

Jennifer Christofferson (jchris18@cord.edu) is an instructor in the Health and Physical Education Department at Concordia College in Moorhead, MN; and Bradford Strand is a professor in the Department of Health, Nutrition and Exercise Sciences at North Dakota State University in Fargo, ND.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.