

PARENT ATTENDANCE AND BEHAVIOR AT GAMES

Attending Your Child's Game

"I like to have my mom and dad watch me play, as long as they behave"

--Comment taken from a survey

From the Book "The Encyclopedia of SPORTS PARENTING" by Dan Doyle

Whether or not you are a serious sports fan, you should make the effort to attend at least some of your child's game. In addition to the pleasure of watching a son or daughter play, parents can observe how their athlete reacts in various sports situations, and help guide their child. If you really can miss that early evening or Saturday morning meeting, remember, your child's sports career is a finite experience. One parent wrote, "It felt like it had just begun when it was almost over."

Our surveys show that 87% of young athletes enjoy having parents watch their games. Since it is unlikely you will be able to attend all games, take time to explain to your child any reasons preventing your attendance, including:

- Parent work schedules
- Other family obligations
- Babysitting, transportation issues, or schedules of other siblings
- Distances that prevent attendance at away games
- Time to attend to emergencies, or important jobs at home that can't wait, such as letting in the plumber

Parents of two or more children will encounter inevitable schedule conflicts. When games and/or activities of siblings overlap, discuss with your children how you will divide attendance at their activities. Your attendance plan could include the following:

- In the normal course, you will rotate attendance at games/activities for each child
- When one child has a "Big game/performance," rotate attendance, but allow for the rare "really big game/performance" to take precedence
- If one of your children is in the last year of competition, e.g., a senior in high school with no college sports participation planned, you can certainly adjust your schedule to attend a few more of this child's games (though you should never adjust it to the point of skipping all of a younger child's games). In making such adjustments, also consider whether it may be the last Little League or recreational soccer season for a sibling who may not seem intent on continuing in sports.

Parent Behavior at Games

“Behavior is a mirror in which everyone displays his own image.”

--German author, Johann von Goethe

Some sports fans have the misguided notion that the purchase of a ticket buys the right to practice rowdy, rude, repugnant, and sometimes dangerous behavior in the stands. Too many sports parents fall short of good game conduct. In many cases, their actions negatively impact others, including their own children. You must follow this guiding principle: *Nothing around the game –from rowdy fans, to demonstrative players, to overbearing parents---should ever become more important than the game itself.*

A Big Challenge

When you attend a game in which your child is competing, your self-restraint is likely to be challenged, sometimes severely. Many parents identify so closely with their child's performance that they take it very personally when a “bad call,” mistake, or rough play occurs. At some point during your child's sports career, you can be certain that several of the following situations will occur:

- The coach employs a strategy with which you disagree
- A fan says something that annoys you
- An observer makes negative comments about your child
- The officials make one or more bad calls
- Your child makes one or more mistakes
- The coach isn't playing your child
- The coach does not play your child in the “right” position
- Teammates do not pass the puck to your child
- The coach yells at your child
- Fans or opponents try to rattle your child
- Your child makes a critical mistake which directly affects the outcome of the game.

Any one of these situations can test your emotional, verbal or physical self-control. Remember, in your own small way, you contribute to the success of each game by behaving properly. Your sports parenting goal is to be a positive role model displaying self-restraint and good sportsmanship.

Eleven Behaviors to Avoid

Fan behavior can easily succumb to a “domino effect” when one or more negative, loud, or unruly fans trigger similar behavior among other observers. To help prevent such chain reactions among your fellow fans, at the beginning of the season, ask the coach to present good sportsmanship guidelines which specifically list unacceptable behaviors for parents, coaches and players. Offer to assist the coach by helping to write the first draft. Feel free to use, or share with the coach, the following points. Some may appear obvious, but because they continue to occur, they're worth mentioning:

1. Do not mutter nasty criticisms about other players. This incites more parent conflict than any other fan behavior.
2. Do not needle the officials or opposing players in order to distract them and interfere with the game. Some parents have developed low-volume harassment into an art form.
3. Do not goad other parents into acting inappropriately, and do not join those who do.
4. Do not argue with or respond to the negative comments of poorly behaving fans, especially opposing fans.
5. Do not make angry, loud or profane comments about coaches, players, officials, or other fans.
6. Do not throw objects of any sort. Believe it or not, this happens.
7. Do not scold or yell at your child---or any child---about poor play, during or after a game.
8. Do not try to communicate with the coach during a game. Let the coach concentrate.
9. Do not yell instructions or try to communicate with your child during the game. Your instructions may embarrass and/or confuse your child and undermine the coach's authority.
10. There is a difference between a positive cheer and an ear-piercing screech. Be supportive of your team, but do not allow your cheering to become so loud or relentless that those around you wish they had earplugs!
11. Do not become a boorish "rules expert." Whether or not you have some knowledge of the rules, refrain from loudly correcting questionable calls by officials.

Where to Sit

For a number of reasons, where one sits at a game can become an issue. Sit wherever you are most comfortable. You may want to take a folding chair in case you choose to sit away from group of fans because:

- Sitting near opposing fans subjects you to a barrage of hostile comments.
- Some parents use game time to loudly socialize and gossip.
- You find it stressful to watch your child perform, and sitting alone helps you maintain your equilibrium.
- Your team's verbal assault squad makes it unpleasant to sit with the group.
- You fear you may respond with unpleasant comments when you hear criticisms of your child.
- You prefer to focus quietly on the game without feeling obligated to engage in the polite chitchat. If people want to talk, tell them you will touch base after the game.

Whether it is enjoying the camaraderie of the crowd or sitting alone at the far end of the field, it is your right to enjoy watching your child's competition from whatever vantage point you choose. I often find solitude an agreeable game companion.

If your child expresses a preference regarding where you sit, I would be inclined to honor such a request, because it might help your child maintain focus on playing, without mental distractions associated with looking at or hearing mom or dad.

Your Child is Wronged

There are a few things in competitive athletics that are more gut-wrenching than watching an unprovoked punch or kick inflicted on your child. However difficult, you must remain in your seat and stay out of any conflict, unless your child is seriously hurt, or in danger due to lack of adult supervision on the ice. If you must help your child, do not display anger or engage in verbal or physical encounters with anyone!

The bad spill, while occasionally due to an intentional act, is most often mis-interpreted. Fans, parents and coaches tend to overact when they observe hard contact, especially if contact is to sensitive areas of the body.

Remind yourself:

- At the youth league level, the overwhelming majority of hard contact is accidental. When a youth league player takes a hard fall it is usually caused by an opponent who accidentally gets tangled up with your player.
- Not to display a frequent and foolish fan reaction to hard contact, such as yelling at the opponent involved, or the opposing coach.
- If hard contact is intentional, it is the referee's job to sort it out.
- There are times when a referee won't see such plays, and other times when the referee's judgment will differ from yours. Whether or not you agree with the call, make a commitment to the following principle: *the rules and referee calls are incontestable!*
- Parental overreaction to hard contact may negate your athlete's learning the valuable lessons of competitive self-restraint and self-control, which are necessary to athletic success.

Mature sports parents must maintain self-control even when their child has been intentionally wronged.

The Personal Time Out

Just as players may need a time out to deal with physical or emotional fatigue, sports parents may need to take a break from viewing. If your reservoir of emotional control is depleted, and you can no longer bear to watch, feel free to move your seat, get refreshments, take a walk, watch a game on another field, or go away and read. Far better to take a break than to turn into a rude or belligerent fan who makes a regrettable mistake!

According to sports psychologist Dr. John Sullivan, "Children have an opportunity to learn physical, mental and emotional self-discipline from sports, and part of the learning process is watching how their parents act at a game."

The Parent's Need to Express Frustration

If your need to release frustration is best accomplished verbally, rather than through exercise or some other activity, you should first recognize the distinction between public venting at a game, which you should not do, and private venting to a spouse or friend, which can be very therapeutic.

Four tips on parental venting:

1. It is important to choose carefully the person to whom you vent. Try to pick someone you can trust to keep your feelings confidential. A spouse or someone not involved with the team might be a wise choice.
2. Use caution in discussing your frustrations with other team parents because:
 - a. Your complaining may result in unintentional but implicit criticism of their child or other teammates.
 - b. Venting may well appear to diminish your "team first" commitment, and contribute to a corrosive cycle of parental complaints.

3. Do not vent in front of your athlete. You risk undermining your child's respect for the coach and team while detracting from the "team first" commitment that adds great value to the sports experience.

4. Again, maintain your self-control in public---and do your venting in private!

What About Reading a Book or Newspaper During the Game?

In most cases, your child knows when you are present and rightfully expects your undivided attention.

As a rule of thumb:

1. When the game is being played, even if your child is not in the game, you must watch, and not read.
2. During pregame or halftime, there is nothing wrong with reading. In fact, it might even help you relax.

What If You Do Something Stupid

"If you own up to your mistakes, you don't suffer as much. But that's a tough lesson to learn."

--Philanthropist and former Chrysler CEO, Leo Iacocca

Anyone involved with sports for any length of time has probably done something stupid.

You know the symptoms: you succumb to a rush of anger or adrenaline, and lash out verbally or physically. After your anger drains away, you feel an overwhelming sense of embarrassment and contrition.

Highly respected former Cincinnati Reds third baseman and manager Ray Knight experienced such an episode at a youth league softball game. While coaching his 12-year-old daughter, Knight was unfairly badgered by the father of an opposing player, and made the mistake of retaliating in a physical way. In recounting his mistake to Sports Illustrated, Knight said, "I'll tell you how much it hurt me. My girls didn't even get to play in that league this year. My remorse is immense."

If you make a mistake, here are four tips:

1. Quickly apologize to those you offended, even if it means mending a fence with someone who had a hand in breaking it.
2. Do not qualify your apology with excuses. Admit you were wrong, and refrain from words of equivocation.
3. Use the experience to learn, change, and show others that mistakes need not last forever. You begin this process by quietly but firmly reasserting your personal commitment to model behavior. Your reputation may be temporarily bruised, but most people will be forgiving, especially when they observe your good behavior.
4. Move on, but promise yourself that you will never repeat your mistake.

Intense circumstances, especially those involving children, can provoke good people to act out in ways they never imagined possible. If you feel you are about to lose control, take a deep breath, count to 30, and consider the unfortunate consequences that could result from irate behavior, including the fact that parent outbursts at games are now a media lightning rod. You may even find it helpful to promise yourself a reward for maintaining your self-control.

Pearl Buck once wrote, "Every great mistake has a halfway moment, a split second when it can be recalled and perhaps remedied." Never have I seen the decision by a parent to enter a conflict at a sporting event prove to be a better choice than to retreat from a conflict.

Your Player Asks You To Stay Home!

"If you are guilty of pressuring behavior, your child may be too frightened to be honest in response to your questions. Thus, a careful, and often difficult self-exploration is necessary."

---Sports Psychologist, Dr. Bridget Murphy

Thirteen percent of the young athletes we surveyed did not want parents at their games. Not surprisingly, two of the three most common reasons cited were bad parent behavior and excessive pressure to perform. The third reason was simply player nervousness when a parent watches.

If your child is reluctant to have you attend games, you need to take an honest look at your behavior, and try to determine why the reluctance exists. In seeking the answer, first consider whether you are guilty of any of the following:

1. You are too intrusive. You yell instructions to your player, undermining the coach and causing embarrassment, confusion and distraction.
2. You criticize the officials
3. You criticize the other team's players or coaches
4. You criticize players on your child's team.
5. You argue or become rowdy and demonstrative
6. Your cheering is too loud and non-stop
7. You cause embarrassment by hanging around the bench checking up on your player, or showing too much affection in public.
8. You try to give advice to the coach
9. You become angry if your child makes mistakes or the team loses

All of these behaviors are embarrassing to your child and other players. Every team member can identify the overbearing team parents.

After your self-analysis, have an honest conversation with your child regarding your behavior. Do not try to argue or debate your behavior with your child. You are trying to elicit their honest feelings and feedback without the child being afraid of your anger or reprisal.

Too Much Pressure

If your young athlete asks you not to attend games, it might be because your child feels you are constantly pressuring her to perform. Begin by asking yourself whether you expect your child to meet unfulfilled athletic needs of your own.

Then ask yourself and your child whether:

1. Your child feels you are too critical. Do you dissent every performance and burden the child with harsh instructions as to what should and should not have been done?
2. Your child fears disappointing you or letting you down. *If so, you need to repeatedly convey the message that your love and approval are not based on sports performance.* (This is also an appropriate message for the child who simply feels nervous when you are watching.)

3. You are sending the message that you are too personally invested in the details of your child's sports career. Remember, this is your child's sports career, not yours! Sports are intended to be an enjoyable extracurricular activity from which your child is supposed to benefit, not suffer---or watch you suffer!

After listening to your athlete, carefully analyze your behavior. This may include soliciting honest input and opinions from people who are familiar with you and your child's sports situation. Then carefully consider how to modify your behavior and your expectations, and be sure to let your child know you are planning to do so. Remember, it is not your right to take the joy of sports away from your child.

In contrast, if your child states that your presence is nerve-wracking, and you have determined through discussions with your child, and others, that you are not exerting too much pressure or misbehaving, simply tell the child that all athletes must learn to perform in front of fans, including mom and dad.

Too Nervous?

There are a few parents who find it excruciating to watch their child's games. They either stay away, or their anxiety and distraught state during games convey the wrong message to their child. Parents in this category need to evaluate their over-involvement, and consider how such imbalance affects their child's experience.

The 11 Danger Signs of Parental Over-Involvement

Occasional annoyance or discontent over some aspect of your child's sports activities is typical, and not a reason for serious concern. However, regular practice of a number of the following behaviors indicates you have a problem:

1. You obsess over the statistics of your young athlete
2. You feel the need to videotape every game, and you scrutinize the tapes for your child's performance errors.
3. You become angry if your child has a bad game, or makes what you believe are foolish mistakes.
4. You easily become angry with your child's teammates because you feel their lack of skill or performance is holding back your child's "stardom." (This is different from occasional irritation at a "ball hog.")
5. Your anger at your child's teammates includes regular and unfiltered venting of your disgust.
6. You conduct regular "performance evaluations" with your child.
7. You become depressed when your child performs poorly. Your "overriding need" is for your child to succeed, rather than concern for your child's needs.
8. You are too nervous to watch your child play.
9. You are continuously angry with the coach over your child's playing position, lack of playing time, or the coach's strategy.
10. You continuously push for external rewards for your child, such as awards or media recognition, and give little consideration to such internal rewards as fitness and camaraderie.
11. You devote a disproportionate amount of time to child's sport, neglecting other responsibilities.

If you find yourself guilty of many of these behaviors, you have become too personally invested in your child's "games." You should take immediate steps back from your child's activities and try to adjust your mindset, emotions and behavior. In some cases, such adjustments may require professional help.

Your role at games is to be a supportive, well-behaved parent, while watching your athlete pursue enjoyment and proficiency at the child's own pace.