



Canadian Red Cross
Croix-Rouge canadienne



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

A few years ago, the Coaching Association of Canada estimated that our country is losing over half of our young athletes by the age of 13. Now, maybe some children leave because their areas of interest change as they grow, but when young people are leaving the sporting environment because of negative experiences with coaches or parents – or both – then we’ve got a problem.

Parents and coaches should have the same interests when it comes to youth sports and that is to provide 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 these conflicts can have a serious impact on young people. Sometimes, the impact is so big that children and youth withdraw from sport altogether.

The Canadian Red Cross *RespectED* program and its partner the *Respect in Sport* online training, have been working together to provide education to coaches and parents so that our sports environment can be a positive one.

On the **Red Cross Support Line**, we’ve received calls from young people who have felt trapped between competing and conflicting coaches and/or parents. “I thought this was supposed to be my opportunity to play, but it sure doesn’t feel very enjoyable,” said one.

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 “hot seat” environment to field their questions. I think there are better ways where we can learn about how to ensure that parents and coaches are working together to make sport safe and fun for all – in particular, the *Respect in Sport* training.

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 nowadays more 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.

“Helicopter parents” and “abusive coaches” are terms that often get used to describe the way parents and coaches act.

The term “helicopter parent” 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 time and energy and are sometimes guilty of lobbying for preferential treatment of their children. Some parents openly challenge a coach’s philosophy and others harangue and harass their children before and after games and practices.

In cases where a coach physically or sexually assaults a young athlete, the term “abusive coach” is clearly appropriate. Coaches like Bob Knight and Graham James are two high profile examples that come to mind. However, this label has also been used – perhaps wrongly – to describe a coach whose team selection process a parent might not agree with, or as part of a parental criticism about athlete playing time. Most coaches use the same approach and strategies in coaching that were used when they were athletes – just like how we are likely to parent the same way we were parented. The difference is that those coaching approaches that included yelling at, or belittling young athletes, are no longer acceptable.

This calls for teamwork! Instead of retreating into separate groups of coaches and parents who complain about one another – we need to work together. Coaches need help with making sure players are showing up on time, are adhering to dietary and sleep regimens, and following through on any other off-site programming that they may suggest. 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.

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. Parents (who represent approximately 58% of our callers) call to express their concerns, but almost always with respect and support for coaches. They 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.

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.

An online training for parents has also been developed, although it's not yet available in Manitoba. This training provides parents with important insights into how their behaviour can affect young athletes for the better or worse.

Setting aside our negative assumptions 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.

Of course, there really is nothing new about these issues as conflict and disagreement between parents and coaches have always existed. However, 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.

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