Three Responsibilities of the Successful Sports Parent

Being a sports parent is more difficult than it's ever been.

There was a time, not long ago, when all a child needed was a ride to practice and enough orange slices to feed their friends. However, in today's world the pressure parents face is far greater than ever.

Too often we think of ourselves as "successful parents" by the opportunities we afford our children to get ahead and be successful. As such, we have become agents of their experiences. We lobby coaches and teachers, spend thousands of dollars on special training and "elite" teams, while secretly fearful that we are simultaneously doing too much, and not doing enough.

Social media for parents has made our job more difficult as we succumb to the same comparison trap that our children fall prey to as we subconsciously compare trophies, tournament status, vacation experiences, and the like with our Facebook friends.

This says nothing of the pressure to raise a happy child - one shielded from all physical and emotional danger. We find ourselves spending more and more in our quest to make our child's happiness a permanent state, all the while suspending their maturation with every intervention. Failure, once life's greatest teacher, has become a boogeyman as we tell our children to learn from their mistakes while protecting them from experiencing the real world consequences that should follow.

All of this has a profound impact on a child's experience in sport.

When speaking before parent groups I like to remind them of the three most important responsibilities to protect their child's sports experience. Nothing undermines the potential benefit from a child's participation in sport, and the experience they will have, than parents who neglect these important rules.

#1 - Maintain a healthy emotional separation from your child's performance.

The more successful our kids are as students, athletes, and musicians, the more successful we judge ourselves as parents. - Jessica Lahey

As a parent, if your emotional highs and lows mirror your child's performance, then you are inadvertently adding an enormous amount of pressure to your child's experience. Imagine going to the free throw line with the game on the line. There is enough pressure knowing your team is counting on you, but the burden is far greater if a miss threatens to unleash dad's anger or mom's disappointment. Parents who feel embarrassment or shame because of a child's team assignment, playing time, or statistics must find a way to insulate their own sense of worth from their child's ability to play a game.

#2 - Take responsibility for your influence.

A child's inner voice is shaped by the voices in their life they hear most frequently and most intensely. - Joshua Medcalf

To the chagrin of most coaches, it only takes one toxic dinner table to torpedo an entire team. Parents must realize that their children will often internalize their opinions - whether they are informed or not. Imagine a child being asked to play zone defense, yet at the dinner table he is regularly presented with the benefits of playing man-to-man. How much more difficult is it for that player to perform their role when the coach's strategies are constantly undermined at home?

As parents, we want our children to develop a positive mistake response to their errors on the field and in life. Yet, we often neglect our role in shaping their reactions. Parents and coaches must take responsibility for their role in molding a child's inner dialogue as our voices are heard most frequently, and often most intensely, during the sports experience.

#3 - Let the child lead the sports relationship.

Dad - "Well son, what did you think of the game tonight?"

Son - "Dad, I think you need to spend less time thinking about the game tonight."

My daughter will begin her first organized sports experience this year, and it is likely that I will be coaching her basketball team. While I am excited to share the experience with her, I am also fearful that our sports relationship, should it turn sour, could spoil our father-daughter relationship. Some might consider that an irrational fear, but I have seen it happen enough during my 20 years in coaching that I know it is within the realm of possibility.

When a player comes to resent the parent to such an extent that they either quit the sport they once loved, or they avoid the parent altogether, it's almost always because the parent came to dominate the sports aspect of the relationship. Things quickly become untenable when the parent is unrelenting, overbearing, or uses bribery, shame, or guilt to motivate.

The antidote, however, is simple. **Let the child lead**. Offer to workout, ask them if they'd like to talk about the game, help remove obstacles they cannot remove on their own, but let them be in control.

None of these rules are easy to follow, but all are critical to allow our children to enjoy their sports experience.

Food for thought.

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