

“What’s all that noise from the sidelines?”

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(Loud adult noise from the sidelines) “Shoot the ball! Kick it! Come on Billy; for God’s sake shoot it! (The 10 year old who’s related to the voice nervously tries to pass the ball to his nearest teammate but instead, it awkwardly dribbles off the side of his foot out of bounds. The boy’s father is now yelling.) “Billy what the heck’s wrong with you son? Are you that stupid? I said shoot it! Do it like I showed you! Now don’t be lazy! Move your butt and go get that ball back! (The boy looks miserable and quickly glances over to the sidelines at his father before he hangs his head and runs after the ball. A few minutes later an opposing player cleanly tackles Billy and takes the ball away from him. The referee’s whistle is silent. The father explodes at the official.) “Are you blind or what? Where’s the foul? How can you not call anything there? That’s a yellow card, ref! How can you not see that? (The referee trots over to the father and tells him to calm down. The father doesn’t back down). “I wouldn’t be complaining if you just did your job!” (The referee glares at the man and warns him to keep his mouth shut otherwise he will have him removed from the game. Suddenly it has become very quiet on the field as the game comes to an abrupt halt. Billy and a number of players from both teams stop and watch the altercation. Billy seems to be cringing in embarrassment, looking for a way to disappear.... Just another FUN day on the soccer field!)

*In theory*, soccer is supposed to be an enjoyable “game” organized *for* and played *by* kids. Its’ purpose is to teach game skills, tactics and a love for physical activity. In addition, and when in the hands of *appropriate* adults, soccer provides its’ young participants with a whole host of valuable life learning experiences like hard work as a vehicle for success, teamwork, good sportsmanship, healthy competition, mastering adversity in the pursuit of a goal and utilizing failure constructively, all of which are geared towards building self-confidence and leaving the child feeling better about himself. *In theory!*

Unfortunately, as the above scenario all too commonly illustrates, the reality of today’s youth soccer experience is vastly different. Misguided adults, both parents and coaches are inadvertently and selfishly distracting the child-athlete from what’s really important and, in the process, killing his/her joy for the sport. Parents like Billy’s, who get too caught up in the game’s outcome, who pressure their kids to perform, who are overly critical and demeaning when they make mistakes, insure that their child will consistently play way below her potential, seriously jeopardize the parent-child relationship and increase the likelihood that their child will soon become a sports drop-out statistic.

There’s no question that the vast majority of parents mean well and want their children to be happy and successful. Towards this end, they are willing to sacrifice their time, energy and financial resources taxiing their kids to and from practices, getting them additional training, volunteering for team and club functions and spending countless hours on the sidelines at tournaments and games.

Unfortunately, far too many parents do not know exactly what they should and shouldn’t be doing to be the most helpful. Despite having positive intentions and their child’s best interests at heart, these parents say and do things before, during and after games that distract the child from focusing on the actual game, increase his/her anxiety level and, as a consequence, sabotage his/her overall level of play. So just how important is it for you as a parent that your child has a positive, enriching experience in this sport? Do you really want your son or daughter to perform to his/her potential? Are you truly interested in seeing smiles out there during games instead of tears and unhappiness? If your answer to these questions is a resounding “YES!” then there are very specific things that you can do as a parent to make these things happen. *Your* role in relation to your child’s soccer is absolutely critical in determining the quality of *their* experience. If you adopt the appropriate behaviors and play the right role, then you will ensure that soccer brings a smile to your child’s face and joy to his heart. If you play the wrong role and act like Billy’s dad, then you’ll end up making a significant contribution to your child’s unhappiness and heartache.

So what's the right role? First and foremost your main "job" is to be your child's best fan. You need to be *unconditionally* supportive. If your child is having a bad game, then she needs your love and support far more than when she's playing out of her mind. After a tough loss or a poor outing she needs you to be positive, compassionate and loving. Providing feedback on what she did wrong or expressing your disappointment in her play is NOT what she needs and will only serve to make a painful situation much worse.

Along these lines, love and support does NOT mean that you coach from the sidelines. In fact, the VERY WORST THING that you as a parent can do is to "coach" from the sidelines. What's coaching? Offering "helpful" advice and strategy before and during the game, telling your child what to do and where to go, criticizing their play and getting angry with them when they make mistakes are all examples of off-limit, exceedingly destructive parental behaviors. After game critiquing is another example of VERY destructive parental coaching behavior. Understand that you are NOT helping your child when you coach. You will NOT get them to play better. You are NOT motivating them, even if you know the game and that's your intention! On the contrary! Coaching and critiquing from the sidelines will distract your child from the flow of the game, make him more nervous, kill his enjoyment and, as a consequence, *insure* that he will consistently play badly. In addition, keep in mind that your "helpful" sideline comments are most often experienced by your child as an embarrassment! Coaching behaviors are only appropriate from the coaches, NOT the parents. Instead, parents should smile from the sidelines, cheer for good execution regardless of which side it comes from, and encourage fair play and good sportsmanship. This means that you as a parent need to *model* appropriate, mature behaviors during the game. Yelling at your child, his teammates or the opponents is NOT mature, appropriate behavior. Loudly critiquing the officiating is NOT mature or appropriate either. It is NOT your job to critique the referees. Regardless of how well you may know this game, your calls are not better than the referees'. Excuse me, but you are just a tad bit biased in this situation! Loudly complaining to the ref every time he makes a "bad call" is not only an embarrassment to your child, but it's quite selfish on your part. It takes the focus of the game off of the kids where it belongs and puts it on YOU. Remember, soccer is about the kids, NOT the adults.

Along these same lines it is NOT appropriate for you to spend your sideline time grumbling to other parents about your team's coaches and the playing or tactical decisions that they make. If you have a problem with the coaches then deal with them at an appropriate time and place, NOT just before, during or right after a game. Most coaches are volunteers, are grossly underpaid for their time and are doing the best job that they know how. What they need from you is your support and help, NOT your disdain and criticism.

Finally, try to act on the sidelines in a way that would make your son or daughter proud to have you as a parent. Remember, your child is not the only one that's performing during the game. You are also a performer and the quality of *their* experience is in *your* hands. Conduct yourself in such a way that you clearly communicate to your child and those around you that this is just a game *for* children, played *by* children. That is, you need to keep the proper perspective at all times. If there are other parents around you who are unable to maintain this kind of perspective, notify the team's coach or league officials. It's not your job to get in the face of another parent for misbehaving. Let the coach or parent board educate them at the next parents' meeting.

Remember, soccer is a wonderful vehicle to help your children learn valuable life lessons. Do your part to insure that the lessons that they learn are constructive and positive.