

# Managing Others

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## Resource: Coach-Parents Meeting

(Applies to the Middle/Late Childhood and Early Teenage Coaching Communities)

(This brief overview of the meeting is taken from Kidman and Hanrahan (2004), *The Coaching Process: A practical guide to improving your effectiveness*, p. 181-185)

A coach-parents meeting should be held at the beginning of the season and all parents should be encouraged to attend. One of the first questions coaches may ask is 'how do we get the parents of our team to this meeting'. Imagine a parent saying no to this: 'Mummy, we are having a parents' meeting for our t-ball team next Monday night. It is going to be a sausage sizzle and the coach is going to provide games for us to play. She said I can't go unless I bring you, so please, please, can we go? I promised Joseph that I would come and he is bringing his skateboard".

Coaches also can contact parents by phone to discuss the importance of the meeting or send home a special note. We all like to hear positive statements, so phone the parents and tell them how well Sarah is doing on the water polo team, for example, that she is a joy to coach and that the team needs more people like her. The objective here is to support the parents so they can support the coach. Of course there will always be parents who have genuine timetable conflicts and cannot attend. Keep these parents in the loop by providing a handout that summarizes the main points of the meeting

### Advantages of a Coach-Parents Meeting

There are many advantages to having such a meeting. Even if you have met these parents before on other teams or during previous seasons, a meeting to reinforce your philosophies and objectives is extremely important. The biggest advantage is the establishment of clear lines of communication. By holding this meeting the parents will have the opportunity to speak with the coach. One of the major concerns of parents is that they are not informed. They are generally quite keen to hear information about programs in which their children are involved. At the meeting, coaches should help parents to understand the team rules and procedures. The coach's expectations for training should be outlined in the meeting, so it is clear to the parents the commitment that is expected of each athlete. The understanding of team rules should reduce potential conflicts. If you establish rules and boundaries, the parents will be clear about your expectations. The meeting also will provide an avenue for coaches to understand parents' concerns.

The meeting will allow coaches to present their objectives of the training season. The parents will get to know you better. This is a time to inform parents of your philosophy and determine any if any parents have differing views. If the parents are not happy with how you will approach the team, then they can look for other teams. For example, if as a coach you decide that the purpose of his or her team is to develop skills and there is a parent who is more concerned with winning, you can communicate the rationale for your philosophy and methods you will use to adhere to this philosophy. The meeting provides an opportunity to discuss the differing views so parents can make informed decisions.

The parents also should be informed about the sport and its potential risks. A coach-parents meeting is a golden opportunity for coaches to discuss safety and implications of wearing protective gear. This is a major issue as coaches are responsible for athletes' safety. Parents should be told of the sort of protective gear required and the consequences of athletes not having the gear. If the lack of protective gear can cause serious injury, the parents should be informed that their child will not participate if not supplied appropriately on the day. A coach's first concern should be the athletes' welfare.

The meeting is a great opportunity to inform parents about the sport and its process. It is an occasion for coaches to explain or demonstrate the sport itself, so parents have an understanding of the competition while watching. In addition, coaches can find out which parents will be able to help conduct the season's activities, fundraise, or provide other forms of support. Many of the parents will have special talents and skills to offer the team. The meeting is a good opportunity to encourage the use of these skills to support the athletes.

It is also essential coaches discuss their expectations of parents on the sidelines – what is acceptable behavior and what is not. Often just holding a meeting shows how much you care about the children, but a little bit of emphasis on fair play and positive expectations helps to create a successful season on the sideline.

## **Conducting a Coach-Parents Meeting**

One of the first considerations is when and where the meeting should be held. Ideally, choose a time when most of the parents can attend. Ensure it is as close to the start of the season as possible because the sooner coaches communicate with parents, the sooner a positive, supportive environment can be created. Encourage all parents to attend. If you personally invite them, they are more likely to come.

Once the meeting is scheduled, then plan the meeting. Try not to make the meeting more than an hour long, because parents and coaches are extremely busy people. The location of the meeting should be somewhere accessible, well-lit, warm and with enough space for the entire team to fit. Ensure there is a video player. A videotape of parents' behaviors, athletes' behaviors, or even the sport itself is quite useful when making a personal statement. It would be appropriate to prepare name tags or have icebreaker games so the parents can get to know each other.

The athletes should attend the meeting if you are comfortable for them to do so. Sometimes having the athletes there can help remind parents of your expectations. Some coaches believe that having their athletes there may inhibit the communication with the parents. If you coach young athletes, it may be appropriate to organize a game or activity they can do while you are meeting with the parents. If the athletes are older, they should be included in the process. It is entirely up to each coach whether or not to include the athletes.

## **Agenda**

What follows are only suggestions based on some experiences that have worked, but the crucial point is to actually conduct such a meeting. One of the first items for the meeting should be an introduction. Welcome the parents to the meeting and introduce yourself. The introduction should include a bit of background about your job and then information about your previous coaching and sporting experience. Next, briefly describe your coaching philosophy. To help prepare for this, use your reflective techniques and consider the following questions:

- Why do athletes play your sport?
- How will athletes benefit from participating?
- What emphasis will you place on winning, on having fun, and on helping the athletes to develop physically, cognitively, psychologically and socially.
- What do you expect from your players? (e.g., commitment, effort)
- What does the team expect from the parents? (e.g., kind of support, encouragement)

This session should last for about 10–15 minutes (just a guideline).

For the next item on the agenda, provide a demonstration of some sort. Providing a videotape of the children practicing can be valuable. It allows the parents to see how their children are behaving and performing and what sorts of skills they are learning. Also, you would be surprised how many parents do not know about the sport their child is playing. Another useful video is one that shows parental behaviors on the sidelines. This video provides a background for discussion about coaches' expectations of parents. There are several commercially made videos that may be available. Contact your regional sporting organization. Another possibility is to get the athletes to provide a live demonstration about some aspect of a skill or strategic move that they have been working on at training. This section should last for 15–20 minutes.

A useful item for next section would be a discussion about the demonstration. If you do not provide a demonstration, then perhaps going straight into a discussion about aspects of parental behaviors and why children play sport would be useful. Remember that the main reasons that children play sport are to have fun, to be with friends, to learn and develop new skills and to experience the thrills that sport offers. Also, remember that some of the reasons children drop out are lack of fun, lack of playing time, too many criticisms, mismatched competitions and excessive anxiety (usually caused by adults who overemphasize winning). Questions to use for discussion include:

- Why do you think your child is playing sport? Have they ever dropped out of a sport? If so, why?
- How important is winning to children?
- How important is winning to you as parents?
- How important is having fun?
- How important is developing skills?
- What is the most important thing in youth sport?

The next item for this section may be to discuss what the role of a sport parent is. This will not be clearly defined, but you could spark some ideas by mentioning some of the good qualities of sport parents, such as keeping winning in perspective, having a healthy attitude towards sport, being a good role model, encouraging but not pressuring their child, knowing their child's goals and providing support to achieve those goals, helping their child to set realistic performance goals and putting your child's development ahead of winning. Some questions for discussion are:

- What do you think are the most important aspects of being a supportive parent?
- What are ways that parents put pressure on children without realizing it?
- How do you think parents could provide a more supportive environment for their child to achieve goals and have fun?

Another important issue to discuss is the coach's relationship with the parents. Stress open, honest communication, with parents supporting the coach when appropriate and talking to coaches about problems when necessary. Some questions for discussion are:

- What should coaches communicate to you – and what should you be communicating to coaches?
- What do you think a model coach-parent relationship should be like?
- What do you expect of your child's coach – and what do you think the coach should expect from you?

One of the major goals of this meeting should be to help parents do what they can to make sport fun, safe, and a valuable experience for their children. Your goal as a coach is to point the parents in the right direction - by encouraging but not pushing their children, keeping winning in perspective, keeping the fun in sports, building the child's self-esteem and providing emotional as well as routine support. What makes sports a valuable experience for children is closely

connected to parents' understanding of why their children like to play sport and what the role of a supporting parent should be. Be the initiator of maintaining a healthy relationship with the parents, but parents also should be encouraged to maintain a healthy relationship with the coach. Some questions to discuss are:

- If you are unable to attend your children's sporting competitions, is your first question to them, "Did you win?" or "Did you have fun?"?
- What are the ways parents could make sport more fun for children?

This discussion section should last about 15–20 minutes.

Before opening the floor for questions and answers, inform the parents about the logistics of the sport and the expectations of the athletes. Some topics to consider include: training times, length of a season, competition details, how you will decide who plays and who does not, how frequently the team will travel, expenses for the season, fundraising, required equipment, safety implications, rules of the team, how you will discipline athletes, and other specific details you may need to discuss.

Now that you have organized and facilitated this important meeting, allow the parents to ask further questions. Be prepared for anything here, but encourage the communication. If you cannot solve an issue that was raised, open it up for discussion to reiterate a willingness to communicate. Be sure to mention how the parents can contact you if they need to speak with you. Once questions have been answered, close the meeting. Reemphasize some major points that have been made, such as maintaining a healthy sport perspective, encouraging but not pressuring the child, and communicating effectively with the coach.