

Coaches, Parents and Teachers: Making the relationship work

Balancing school, sport and family life is a delicate affair for any child in their developmental years. Children, and indeed others in their social network, have to invest time, psychological and physical energy. Particularly for children who have aspirations for higher-level sporting participation, they have to endure and learn to manage dual pressure: from school on the one hand and from sport training on the other. Today, especially when academic qualifications and sporting achievement coincide, it is crucially important that these young people have a network of support and coping resources available to them. **Melina Timson-Katchis** takes us through the challenges ahead.

The relationship between parents, teachers and coaches can potentially face enduring problems of boundary negotiations. The existence of the child/student/athlete (who in a sense belongs to all) obligates parents, teachers and coaches to come into contact with each other. Unless a concerted effort is made, this contact is bound to create friction. Teachers and coaches worry about possible threats to their professional expertise and can opt to maintain their distance from parents. Parents, on the other hand, can feel overwhelmed and caught up between ensuring that the sporting development of their child is not at the expense of their educational development. Some parents feel powerless and intimidated by teachers and coaches, whereas others may feel confident and ready to challenge them. An issue at the heart of this 'buffer zone' is the child; their welfare and development.

As a coach, how can you ensure that your athletes are not caught up walking a narrow line between hope and disappointment, success and failure, making the grades and dropping out of school or sport?

The first step is recognising the need for coordinated support for the child by the coach, the parents and school. As such, it is essential to encourage and develop a good working relationship with the parents of your athletes. Parents can be a great source of information and support for the coach, and, provide the link between you (the coach) and school.

But, first, it is important to understand the role that parents play (or can play) in their child's sport. A parent's role in their child's sport goes beyond simply providing transport to and from a session. Through their involvement, parents can shape a child's psychological development. Research has shown that parents can influence a child's motivation, perceived competence and enjoyment of sport. The feedback a parent provides and the manner in which they behave can affect how long a child maintains their involvement in sport, as well as how a child thinks they are doing in sport. Furthermore, what a parent emphasises as an important outcome, for example, winning versus improving skills, reinforces and determines what a child considers to be success in sport. Moreover, how a parent acts before, during and after a session or a competition can cause a great deal of anxiety in the child and, consequently, affect performance, development and enjoyment.

Although the primary role of a coach is to develop athletes, coaches must also accept the responsibility for educating the parents of the athletes. Parents should learn how to best support their children in their sport and the importance of appropriate behaviour in the youth-sport environment. In order to positively engage the parents, it is important to demonstrate to them that, as a coach, the welfare of their child is the priority. To achieve this, organising a 'parents' evening' could be the best way of informing them of your coaching philosophy and approach, your goals for their children, your expectations of them (the parents) and what they can expect from you. It is advisable that such a meeting occurs at the start of the season and be held at a time when the majority of parents will be able to attend, which will likely mean careful and advanced preparation. The location should be convenient for most of the parents and the invitation should be personal, perhaps via a phone call.

A sample agenda for the meeting could be:

Introduction to the coach

Tell them about you; who you are, your experience as an athlete (if applicable) and more importantly as a coach, your coaching qualifications and your motivations for coaching.

A review of your coaching philosophy

What does sport mean to you as a coach? What value do you place on sport?

Inform them about your methods and style of coaching (if physical contact with the athletes is used during coaching, explain how this is done).

Describe a typical coaching session.

Winning, losing, having fun and learning: explain how these elements fit into your coaching programme.

A review of health and safety

What are the risks in engaging in this sport? How do you address these/prevent these?

Emergency medical procedures and guidelines: How do you deal with accidents?

Explanation of expectations and responsibilities:

- rights and responsibilities of athletes
- rights and responsibilities of parents
- rights and responsibilities of coach.

Tell the parents how they can help with nutrition, monitoring and information.

Detailing programme specifics

Session schedule, days, times, venues.

Equipment and clothing: what's required, where to get it, expected costs.

What are the disciplinary processes?

What are the team and league rules?

If a team sport, discuss the player-selection process.

If applicable, discuss travel schedules and expenses, as well as bad weather contingency plans.

Question and answer sessions

Give parents the opportunity to ask any questions and address any concerns they may have.

You may wish to prepare a handout for athletes and parents, outlining all the key information. Include contact details so parents can easily get in touch and discuss any concerns they may have.

'Although the primary role of a coach is to develop athletes, coaches must also accept the responsibility for educating the parents of the athletes.'

Handling confrontations with parents

If you are approached by parents during a session, kindly ask them to wait until the end of the session, particularly if they appear to be in an emotional state. This will allow them time to cool down, thereby diffusing any possible heated confrontation, but will also allow you to deal with them without any distractions.

Encourage a fellow coach or club member to join in any meeting, so that an impartial view is maintained.

Eliminate the possibility of misunderstandings by summarising the situation, thus ensuring everyone involved is fully aware of the issues.

If applicable, and available, provide evidence to support your actions or decisions (eg club rules).

Give parents your undivided attention and listen carefully to their views; it is possible that parents may have an insight into a certain situation concerning their child that you have not considered, or have not been made aware of yet.

Aim to agree on a resolution that translates into specific actions for the coach, the parent and, if applicable, the athlete.

Just like coaches, parents want their children to enjoy doing sport, to learn new skills, become active and acquire valuable life skills. Establishing a relationship with the parents will influence the success of a coaching programme both on and off the field. Include parents in your programme and encourage them to support their children.

What should parents do?

Listen to their children and accept their abilities.

Support their children in sport and school, irrespective of their success and failure.

Help their children understand that the emphasis of participating is not on winning but on giving their best, having fun and learning.

Help their children understand the importance and benefits of a good education in addition to developing their extra-curricular interests.

Get involved – volunteer their time, practise with their child, attend games and show they care.

Provide children with proper equipment and clothing.

Stay up-to-date with how the child is doing, both in sport and in school.

Listen to the coach.

Get to know the teachers.

Ensure the teachers understand the importance of sport in your child's life.

Encourage their children to take responsibility for their actions.

Encourage children to develop further interests in other sports as well as out of sport.

Allow their children to set their own goals.

Allow the coach to conduct the sessions with no disruption. Don't interfere unless the coach has clearly made an error.

Keep the coach and the teachers informed if the child is ill or injured.

Let the coach know how the child is responding to training.

Let the teacher know how the child is managing homework.

Keep the coach informed of any periods of heavy school workload (eg exams).

Keep the teachers informed of any periods of heavy training and/or competition.

Make sure the child is eating properly and sleeping properly.

Be a good role model for the child.

What can a teacher do?

- Invite the parents in: remind parents (and students) that they are welcome to come and talk to you.
- Keep the parents informed of how the child is progressing in school, both academically and socially.
- Make the parents (and, if possible, the coach) aware of the school programme, highlighting in particular, periods of heavy academic workload. The school curriculum can be inflexible, so must be taken into account when planning the training and competition year.
- Encourage and support the students in their sporting endeavours; let the students know you are proud of their sporting achievements.
- Encourage the students to get involved in other school activities and develop further interests outside of sport.
- Separate school from sport: if a child is not performing academically, it isn't necessarily because of their sporting involvement.
- Consider periods of heavy training and/or competition: what support can be put in place to assist the student in managing schoolwork during this time?

Resources

American Sport Education Program (1994) SportParent, Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics

Howie, L. (2004) *Football Parents: The official guide to success on and off the pitch*, FA Learning, London: Hodder and Stoughton

Marriott, L., & Nilsson, P. (2005) *Sport Parent for the Future, Vision 54/Coaching for the Future*

Stankovich, C.E., & Kays, T.M. (2002) *Parent's Playbook*. Columbus, OH: Champion Athletic Consulting

'Parents can be a great source of information and support for the coach and provide the link between you (the coach) and school.'

Profile

Melina Timson-Katchis (MSc) is currently a Researcher with sports coach UK and completing a PhD in Social Psychology of Sport at Loughborough University.