

**Coach Steve Pavlovic's**  
**Coaching Tips on Dealing with Parents**

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## **Foreword**

Coaching can be a very fun and rewarding experience. Working with young players, helping them improve their skills, and watching their development over a period of time is a great experience. Every coach wishes all of their players could become stars. Every coach wishes they could substitute people at any position without missing a beat. Every coach tries their best to benefit and help their team and the individual players. What great people coaches are!!!

However, we don't live in a perfect world. Try as we as coaches might, there will be times we make mistakes. A wrong substitution, a wrong play being called, whatever you can think of, it will happen at some point.

If you coach long enough, something that you do, whether intentional or not, will draw the ire of a parent. Many coaches are also parents, so we understand that no parent likes to see their child hurting. For example, if a player doesn't play as much as he or she thinks they should, they can become upset. Many parents handle these situations very well and can get the child to understand the coach's reasoning. There are some parents though who immediately put the blame on the coach. Seeing their child hurting leaves them frustrated. They look to vent at someone, and since the coach is the one to blame, that is who is going to hear about it!

In this ebook, I am going to outline what I feel is the best way to handle these parent situations. I believe this is a very important subject these days, as you hear more stories about coaches and parents getting into heated arguments that turn into physical violence. Remember the hockey dads in Boston? That coach ended up getting killed. Thankfully, these situations are few and far between. Most coaches and parents that I know are level

headed people. Emotions run high though in many situations, especially ones involving children and athletics. You can't be too careful these days. So even though I enjoy coaching and have done it for the past 18 seasons, I try to be ready for any situation that might present itself.

I would encourage you to read this report and pass it along to other coaches that you know. It will help you if you ever get in a confrontation with a parent. For an individual and a team to succeed, parents and coaches must work together. We are all here for the young players, so everyone must get along! Keep the lines of communication open and everyone will have a great season!

Good luck in your upcoming season,

Coach Steve Pavlovic

## **Reason for Conflict**

No matter how good of a coach you think you are, not all parents will agree with you 100% of the time. If you have a team with 10 players on it, you will have some issues that everyone agrees on, but there are other issues that you might have 10 different opinions. Throughout my years of coaching, I have observed 4 main areas that parents have disagreements with. These areas are: playing time, skills being taught, style of coaching, and competitive level of play.

Playing time is the #1 issue of parent complaints. Every parent wants to see their child play as much as possible. At the younger grades, this is usually not a problem. A coach should play everyone a lot, that's the only way they are going to learn. But in a competitive environment, some players will play more than others. This can lead to frustration on the part of the child, and in turn, the parents.

The skills being taught can also be a source of conflict. I always stress the fundamentals, like passing, dribbling, defense, and shooting. But I have had parents tell me I'm being too basic, that I need to give them more advanced techniques. They forget that you need to learn to walk before you can run!

A coach's style of coaching is also a problem for some parents. Some coaches are laid back, while others are very intense. Some have strict rules to follow, while others let you come and go as you please. Some say nothing on the sidelines, while others are always yelling instructions.

The competitive level of play is another source of conflict. Some coaches and parents want to play to win every game. That's whether they play only a few players or everyone on the team. Other coaches and parents

feel everyone should play in every game, some feel that playing time should be equal at all levels. The outcome of the game is not as important to some as seeing all the athletes play. Another possible headache for you as a coach!

By this time you are probably thinking, “Is there anything I can do to cut down or eliminate these possible conflicts?” The good news is “Yes, there is!”. The most successful way I have found is to meet with the parents on your team right at the beginning of the season. Many parents want to be supportive, but don’t understand every sport. **You must educate the parents as well as the players!** Start with the lines of communication open. Explain to them the level of play, how much playing time they can expect (if it’s equal, or if they get a certain amount of time, or if there is no guaranteed playing time), what your and the team’s goals for the season are, and what you expect of both players and parents. Fully explain any rules that you have and the level of commitment that you are expecting. I always tell my parents at our meeting not to come to me with issues right after a game. I have the players to worry about, and I can’t give them my full attention if I am involved in another issue. However, this won’t stop every parent.

By telling the parents up front what to expect, I have found the number of complaints goes way down. There may still be some, but this way they can’t say they weren’t informed!

## **Stay Calm**

Your team has just played a great game, and win or lose, you walk off the court being proud of their effort. Just as you are exiting though, a parent comes up to you, obviously upset, and says, “We need to talk right now!” What do you do?

Your first reaction, being human, is to get defensive. But you can’t do that in this situation. You must remain calm. If you give a loud response, or one that the parent doesn’t like, the situation could escalate very quickly. A shouting match could ensue, and things could get real ugly.

The best solution is to acknowledge the person, explain that you need to be with your team, but that you will talk to them right after. This does 2 things. It stops a scene from developing in front of the players and all the fans, and it gives the parent and coach time to collect their thoughts.

When you are done with the team, find the parent that needed to see you. I would also recommend having an assistant coach with you, which I’ll discuss later. Make sure you are away from other players, fans, and other parents, like in a classroom or down a hallway. Then you can find out what the parent is concerned about. If it is a simple question that you can answer right there, go ahead and do it. But if it is an involved issue, and emotions are running high, tell the parent that you will gladly sit down with them at a different time and discuss it, but that you will not have discussions of this manner at this time. If emotions take over the conversation, nothing will be accomplished, and that’s usually what happens when a coach is confronted immediately after a game. Even if the person continues to want to discuss the issues, politely repeat your offer of a meeting and walk away.

## **“Cooling Off” Period**

As I stated before, nothing good comes out of a situation where one or both parties are not acting like adults. That is why both the parents and the coach need a cooling off period. You as the coach now know the problem, so you can prepare an answer. The parents have now had time to cool down and be more reasonable. In the heat of the moment, hurtful things are sometimes said.

By letting a day or two pass, the coach and the parent can both put the situation into perspective. Cooler heads will prevail and both sides can calmly discuss the issues at hand. This also makes it more likely the parent will listen to what the coach is saying. They may or may not agree with it, but at least they are listening and trying to understand your point of view as well.

## **Don't be a Loner**

When the time comes to meet, I would highly recommend that you have another person there with you. I would meet in person, not by telephone. Phone conversations have a tendency to turn into one-sided arguments with the other side not able to get a word in. Meet at a neutral site, or at your school or gym.

Why have someone else there too? There are 2 main reasons for this. First, you want someone else to hear what you are telling the parents. I can't believe how many times I have been misquoted and misunderstood in a situation like this. So I have another person there with me. It may be one of my assistant coaches, our athletic director, or a coach's representative from our athletic board. Their main purpose is to just listen to the conversation we are having, and get us back on track if the conversation turns to personal attacks or gets away from the original issues we were discussing. If anything else should develop, or the problem goes to the next level, that person can explain to your athletic board what took place.

Second, you want someone there in case there is trouble. You never know what an upset person might do, so for your own safety, have another adult there with you. It's better to be overly cautious in this situation. The odds are nothing like this will happen, but don't take any chances.

## **Be a Listener First**

Now that you have exchanged greetings and sat down, have the parent describe their concerns to you again. Sometimes parents just need to vent to someone, and you are currently their target. Let them talk as long as they need, as you sit attentively listening to them. If a parent thinks you are taking their concerns seriously, that is half the battle! If you act disinterested, you are only going to make the situation worse.

Don't interrupt the parent while they are talking. Even if you completely disagree with their story, just listen. Don't make any facial gestures either, and don't shake your head "NO" the whole time. This will only add fuel to the fire.

The only time it's alright to interrupt is if the parent is not acting in a civil manner. Personal attacks against you or the use of profanity are grounds to end the meeting if not stopped. Remind the person that both you and them are there to help the child, and uncivil behavior is not going to help. You both want to find a resolution.

When the parents are finished talking, then you can give your response. Talk calmly and answer their questions point by point. Stick to only the issues that were raised, not going off on a tangent about another subject. If a valid point has been raised, agree with the parent and admit you need to work on the situation. But don't compromise your principles. If you are doing what is in the best interest of all the players, don't change everything to please one parent. Allowing one player to get away with something or allowing a player to follow their own rules will cause dissention between the other parents and the other players as well.

You as a coach must remember to be civil. If the parent interrupts you, remind them that you let them talk, now they need to listen to your whole response. Also remind them that you are meeting with them in hope of resolving any problems. You as a coach want their child to be successful just as their parents do. You are both working toward the same goal.

## **The Next Step**

Well, you've given your response, now what? Many times, the parent will see you are really trying to be helpful and will be satisfied with your answers. Many times, just the process of talking about the situation helps the parents to feel better. Either way, your primary goal of the meeting is to walk away with both sides being satisfied.

But we don't live in a perfect world, and not all conferences will go like that. If you and the parent can't reach an agreement, then you need to give them other options. Whether there is a conflict management plan to refer them to, or an Athletic Board or school official, tell them what their options are and how they go about pursuing them.

Sadly, one of the options is for the player to quit the team. This is a last resort, and I don't like seeing a player quit. It hurts me personally when a player turns in their uniform, because I feel like I let them down. In some cases though, where the two sides have completely different views, it is a valid option.

## Summary

This report was not meant to discourage anyone from coaching, but to prepare you in case this situation arises. I can remember the first time a parent came up to me and said they had a problem, I didn't know what to do. If you are prepared for it, the whole process will go much smoother and any concerns can be ironed out. Just remember to always communicate with the team parents. Any time something changes, take the time to inform them. It will make your life and their life a little easier. In the long run, calm heads and open communication will lead to a successful season for all involved!

*Steve Pavlovic is a youth basketball coach at St. Cyril and Methodius Catholic School in Lemont, Illinois. He has coached for the past 24 years, being at all levels from 4<sup>th</sup> grade through 8<sup>th</sup> grade. The last 8 years he has also been basketball coach coordinator, a position that involves supervising basketball coaches to make sure they are following the program skills guidelines and help them with any problems. He is also the author of "Coach Steve Pavlovic's Score More Hoops", a self-published ebook on basketball shooting. You can visit his site at [www.scoremorehoops.com](http://www.scoremorehoops.com)*