

Balancing act

By Adam Shilling

Coaching your own child in sports is full of challenges. Finding the proper balance between giving your young athlete too much attention, or going overboard trying to avoid doing so, is often the difference between a season that is memorable or miserable.

Several years ago spectators at an Indiana youth basketball game collectively scratched their heads after a pass was intentionally made to a player who was sitting on the bench. It just so happens that the recipient of the pass was the coach's son who earlier that night had set a county record for points scored. Several team parents were fed up with the coach's constant insistence that his son be passed the ball and reacted by bribing a youngster to mockingly pass the ball to the child while he was seated on the bench.

That incident, although extreme, is one that cuts to the heart of one of the biggest challenges every parent who steps forward to coach their son or daughter's team faces: Finding the right balance between being a parent and coach and – most important of all – making sure they fulfill their responsibilities of meeting the needs and interests of every child on their team.

It's a daunting task, for sure, considering all the parent-child issues that can pop up out of nowhere once mom or dad steps onto the field or court for the first time. In addition, parents of the other players on the team are always on the lookout for any signs of favoritism being shown toward the coach's child – extra playing time or getting to play the most popular positions among them – which are some of the most talked about and dissected topics in bleachers across the country.

PARENT OR COACH

Ever since the advent of organized sports moms and dads have been stepping forward to oversee teams, orchestrate practices and make sure game days are fun-filled and memorable. These days, more than half of volunteer coaches have their own son or daughter on the team, yet finding middle ground between providing preferential treatment to their child and overcompensating by going out of their way and giving the youngster less attention than the other players can oftentimes be a no-win situation.

"I think it's natural to want to concentrate on your own child during practice and maybe in game situations," said Tim White, a youth sports administrator and coach from Clayton, Ga. "But the idea in coaching a team sport with your child on the team is to teach the team the fundamentals and other aspects of the game in order to help them improve and develop as players. In my situation, each child on the team is given an equal amount of one-on-one instruction in addition to the time we spend working as a team."

The role of a parent can become an ambiguous one once out on the playing field. Even though mom or dad has donned the coaching cap, they never cease being a parent.

There are certain measures that a coach can take that will go a long way toward making the other children feel more comfortable. For example, having the

coach's child refer to their parent as "coach" as opposed to "mom" or "dad" while in front of teammates can help create a feeling of equality for everyone involved.

"My children call me 'coach' when we enter a gym for practice or a game. I insist on that," said Steve Pavlovic, author of the ebook *Successfully Coach Your Child in any Sport*. "Calling me 'dad' could give the impression to the other players that my son is going to get treated better than they are, and that is just not going to happen."

According to Dr. Frank Smoll, a developmental sports psychologist at the University of Washington who specializes in leadership behavior in youth sports, using the two different labels helps to solidify the separation of roles.

However, as many coaches will admit, this can be difficult to pull off.

"Even though you try to establish 'coach' as the proper title, it does go back to 'dad' throughout games and practices," said Nestor Lubowicz, a youth coach from Pembroke Pines, Fla.

Some find this practice futile, especially those in smaller, closer knit communities.

"To me it doesn't matter, my kids call me dad or daddy," White said. "The other parents, players and I know each other well enough that calling me by my first name is just as common as calling me 'coach.'"

Aside from making the other kids feel more comfortable, having a coach's child refer to them as 'coach' will help the child fit in easier with their peers, as well. Also, because a child is likely to have several coaches in their life, getting in the habit of using the term "coach" better prepares them for the day when their parent is no longer their coach.

"All of my players are treated fairly and with respect," said Pavlovic. "I don't even let my son know who is starting a game until I announce it to the entire team. So when we are at home or in the car, I am dad, but once we walk into the gym, I am coach."

Some coaches prefer to limit their interaction with their own child by having them work more with assistant coaches. Last year's National Youth Sports Coaches Association (NYSKA) Volunteer Coach of the Year, Kurt Albers, practices this when coaching his son.

"Personally, when we're out on the field, he's always opposite of where I'm coaching," Albers said. "If I coach offense, then he's working on defense. If I'm coaching defense, he's over working with



the offense. In football, it's easier because I just put him on the opposite side of the field. With baseball, you have to just forget that it's your child and treat him like any other player."

THE TALENTED ATHLETE

Complicating matters, it is not uncommon in youth sports for the coach's son or daughter to be one of the team's better athletes. Certainly, there is nothing wrong with that on the surface, as long as the coach maintains proper perspective and refrains from any preferential treatment that would hinder the progress and experiences of the other players who, over time, could develop into standout athletes themselves with the proper coaching and guidance.

"Both of my sons are above average talent-wise in basketball," said Pavlovic. "But I stress to them, as I have done for the past 23 years that I have coached, that basketball is a team sport and not an individual sport. To be successful, everyone must play together. I never have a 'star' on my team."

When a coach loses proper perspective they begin to place winning above all other concerns – such as participation, fun and learning. That is when improper preferential treatment occurs, usually in the form of unequal playing time.

In recreational youth leagues all players should be given an equal amount of playing time. This is where assistant coaches come in handy. Having multiple coaches instruct and evaluate players can help to prevent a parent's subjective opinions about their own child from influencing the entire team identity. Sometimes coaches have so many other responsibilities to tend to that they may not even realize that their child is getting an uneven amount of playing time. Having assistant coaches help to track the distribution of minutes creates a system of checks and balances.

"All of my players can perform multiple skills, and they also take turns getting a rest on the bench. No one plays the whole game," said Pavlovic. "Also, I will talk with my assistant coaches before each game and get their input on a game plan, so I make sure it is not only me having blinders on about how my son or another child is playing."

The most advanced athlete is not always the coach's son. In this case, the same guidelines for favoritism and playing time must apply.

"Unfortunately, I have seen parent-coaches who would focus more time on above average players and spend less time working with their own child who may not be as talented," said White.

Regardless of whose child the advanced athlete is, he or she should be treated with the same regard and preference as the team's least-skilled player.

"One player doesn't make a team," White said. "If the team is to be successful, time has to be

Savings biggest fan.



Safety isn't just a football position. Budget is committed to safety on the field AND on the road because active lifestyles for the young make life more fun. We are proud to partner with the National Alliance for Youth Sports, and we offer special discounts when members rent with **BCD # Z996900**. So get out there! Play hard. Play it safe.

Visit budget.com for reservations.
Don't forget to mention
BCD # Z996900 for special savings!

Budget.

Budget features Ford and Lincoln Mercury vehicles. 17211
©2008 Budget Rent A Car System, Inc. A global system of corporate and licensee-owned locations.

spent working with all the players. If the coach's child is the most talented he still needs to practice but not be put on a pedestal."

With recreational leagues that are focused on instruction, each child should have the chance to experience a variety of positions. When it comes to more competitive leagues, parents must understand that positions are usually awarded based on a child's skill level, regardless of whether they're the coach's child or not.

"The coach's child is often the best athlete because they practice more at home," Albers said. "What I do ahead of time is tell the parents up front that we try to match the kids by their skill set to certain positions. I tell them that they're going to see some coach's kids in certain positions based on their skills. I have very few problems with parents accusing us of favoritism, especially when we explain it to them up front."

OVERCOMPENSATION

Sometimes, coaches go to the opposite extreme and don't give their child enough attention or playing time for fear of being accused of favoritism. These coaches should remember that their son or daughter is no different than any other child and they deserve the same opportunity as everyone else.

"I had a coach who would always put his child on the bench first to be sure that all the other kids got time on the field," said Rene Nunez, athletic coordinator for the City of Pembroke Pines Parks and Recreation (Fla.). "I used to feel sorry for the child but he said it was okay and that child moved on to a travel team and was a very successful player."

Coaches like these usually have their heart in the right place, but need to be sensitive to their own child's desire to play, along with everyone else's.

"The most common problem is trying to be fair to your child," said Pavlovic. "You don't want to be too hard on them, but you also don't

want them to get away with behavior that will lead to resentment from their teammates, so you need to find a good balance."

NYSCA Coach of the Year Kurt Albers admits that there were times when he probably didn't play his child enough.

"Parents would say to me, 'hey it's okay, put him in' so I learned from that experience that you can easily go the opposite way and not give your child enough time," he said.

This is another area where assistant coaches can come in handy. Just as an assistant coach should alert a head coach when a child is getting too much playing time, they must do the same when a child is getting too much bench time — even if it's the head coach's son or daughter.

"Sometimes I walk my child over to another coach and coach other children while that coach works with my son," said Mario Costa, who coaches in Pembroke Pines, Fla. "Coaches can always choose to spread the wealth and not get too focused on their own children."



"If the team is to be successful, time has to be spent working with all the players. If the coach's child is the most talented he still needs to practice but not be put on a pedestal."

— Tim White
Clayton, Ga.

DETERMINING DISCIPLINE

Parents who volunteer to coach must also keep an eye on their disciplinary style. Each player should be disciplined in the same manner regardless of whether their parent is a coach or not. When it comes to a coach's child, discipline is another area where proper balance is needed.

"One problem that I have witnessed is a coach/parent's inability to separate parenting from coaching," said White. "The incident I observed involved a coach/parent trying to discipline his child in the dugout. The manner in which this was done caused the other players to become frightened and other parents who witnessed, not knowing it was the coach's own child, thought it was excessive and inappropriate."

Coaches must never bring their parenting issues onto the field with them. If a coach is having problems

with their child at home, the ball-field, rink or court is not the appropriate place to handle them.

"The greatest problem is disciplining your own kid," said Desmond Alufohai, a youth soccer coach.


"Also, coaches that coach their kids may place higher expectations on the performance of their kids."

On the other extreme, coaches must not be afraid of disciplining their child when it becomes absolutely necessary.

"Understanding that discipline is sometimes necessary, being a coach of your own child, you have to handle it in a more positive manner – especially when it is done in front of other players and parents," said White.

FINDING BALANCE

Clearly, when it comes to volunteers coaching their own child in sports the secret for moms and dads is finding the proper balance between providing preferential treatment and overcompensating by going out of their way to not heap praise and attention on their son or daughter. Regardless of all the variables involved – the coach's experience with the sport, the child's skill level and even the sport itself – it's up to each individual coach to find what works best for meeting the needs of every young athlete under their care.

When the coach pulls it off, and everyone has a fun and memorable season, that's what it's all about. 

Share your tips with readers

If you coach your son or daughter's team share with us what steps you take to ensure that your child, as well as the rest of the team, has a fun and rewarding season.

Email us at sportingkid@nays.org.

Making the coaching decision with your child

As a parent, you know that you'll have to make all sorts of tough decisions related to raising your youngster, and one that you may come across is determining whether or not to coach your child in sports.

Before taking that step be sure to consider the following tips, excerpted from "Sports and Your Child: Developing Champions in Sports and in Life" by Drs. Frank Smoll and Ronald Smith. For more information, go to www.wardepub.com.

- **Ask your child how he or she feels about you being the coach.** In other words, get your child's perspective prior to the season. If there are reservations, it's important to discuss them. Most children enjoy playing for their parent, but some would prefer another coach. Are some kids afraid to say they would rather play for someone else? Yes, because they might believe their mother or father will feel rejected. To counteract this, you must openly communicate with your child; hear your child; and encourage them to express their true feelings.
- **Discuss how your role will change when you are in the athletic environment and why you need to treat your child like any other team member.** Does the youngster feel any undue pressure, such as perceived favoritism or excessive demands from you? Many coaches tend to be harder on their child, and they bend over backward not to show favoritism. Being fair does not mean being harder on your child. It's a challenge to be impartial and treat your child no differently than anyone else on the team. In addition to talking with your son or daughter, we recommend explaining the situation to the whole team. This can be done at the first practice or team meeting. Some coaches tell their athletes that, even though their son or daughter is on the team, they consider every player as one of their children. Kids are able to understand the message.
- **Be a mom or dad at home and a coach on the field.** Make sure your separate roles are clear in your mind and in your child's. There are at least two ways to put this principle into operation: (a) Have your child refer to you as "Coach" during practices and games. The labeling helps to solidify the separation of roles. (b) If you have an assistant coach, have that person work with your child in situations involving individual instruction. If the assistant also has a child on the team, use the crisscross technique of working with each other's children.
- **Reaffirm your love, regardless of your child's level of performance.** Youngsters will go to extremes to please their parents, and too much emphasis on sports gets things out of kilter. Above all, demonstrate in words and actions that your love does not depend on athletic ability.