

Being a good sports parent

Let the kids enjoy the game, experts say

By Jane Weaver

In March a brawl among parents of 9- and 10-year-old hockey players in upstate New York resulted in eight people facing misdemeanor charges and a father suffering a dislocated shoulder after being pushed off the bleachers.

At a Pittsburgh high school basketball game in February, a referee was treated for a concussion after a parent body-slammed him for ordering the man's wife out of the gym for allegedly yelling obscenities.

An over-eager New Jersey father created his own soccer league last fall because his 7-year-old son was too young to play in a competitive league.

What's wrong with grown-ups these days?

Are some of them just aging failed athletes trying to live vicariously through their athletic children? Anxious moms and dads hoping that their kids can snare college sports scholarships? Or fanatic parents pushing their offspring to become elite athletes with specialized training, summer camps and personal coaches, whether the child wants it or not?

All of the above, say youth sports experts.

Barely out of diapers

Almost 30 million boys and girls under 18 play some kind of organized sport like Little League or soccer, according to the National Council on Youth Sports. For many of them, it's a way to make new friends and play a game they enjoy.

But over the last decade, more otherwise well-meaning parents have been pushing their budding stars to excel at almost any cost.

Children as young as 3 can sign up for swimming and gymnastics programs. Soccer often starts at 4 and baseball at 5. From there it's become increasingly common for parents to rush the kids into highly competitive situations when they're barely out of diapers.

"Youth sports has clearly become more professionalized in recent years," says Gregg Heinzmann, associate director of New Jersey's Rutgers Youth Sports Research Council. "Many more parents want to see their kids achieve some level of success, be it athletic scholarship or in certain cases a pro sports contract."

That hyper-competitive atmosphere can translate into overly involved parents ready to explode at any coach, referee or other parent who interferes with their own children's performances.

"You'll see lawyers and doctors at little girls' or boys' games and some of these people, it's like they've taken a pill that turns them into demons," says Steve Dawson, associate professor of sports sociology at Wittenberg University in Springfield, Ohio.

Dawson, who is a long-time coach of a high school club soccer team, tells the story of the mother of a 5th grade girls' basketball team who loudly and publicly cheered her daughter for making an opponent cry.

"That's just a minor incident, but it's typical of how carried away some parents get," says Dawson.

'The Tiger Woods syndrome'

Youth sports activist Bob Bigelow calls it "the Tiger Woods syndrome" where parents think they have to push their little kids earlier.

It's parents like that who are ruining youth sports by treating their kids like "miniature adults," says Bigelow, a former first-round NBA draft pick and author of "Just Let The Kids Play."

Dr. Bruce Svare, professor of psychology at the State University of New York at Albany and founder of the National Institute for Sports Reform, says there's a danger to a child's self-esteem when parents send the message to their kids that what they're doing isn't valuable unless they can turn it into something material like a scholarship.

"More parents view their kids as an economic investment that has to be translated into something later on," says Svare.

Dawson agrees. "We've become so competitive, it's out of control."

Parents should take note: A 2001 study by the National Alliance for Youth Sports found that 70 percent of American kids who sign up for sports quit by the time they were 13. The reason? They said it wasn't fun anymore.

"It's a downside of 10- to 12-year-olds who sit on benches because adults think it's more important to win," says Bigelow. "Too many parents are buying into it."

"At one level a lot of parents realize it but they're caught on a treadmill," says Svare. "No one's pointing out that it's easier to get an academic scholarship than an athletic one."

To give some perspective, it's widely cited that there is 70 times as much money available for academic scholarships than for athletic ones. Picking up a paycheck in the National Basketball Association is a 1 in 10,000 chance. The odds of winning an Olympic gold medal are 1 in a million.

Then again, few academic scholarship candidates are treated like rock stars in their home towns or are offered million dollar salaries.

Family time matters

But parents who go to great lengths to help their kids get a sports scholarship or pro contract may be sacrificing valuable family time, experts say.

"They're living in minivans [driving to and from practice and games] and they don't spend time together as a family, and that is every bit as important as kids having long practices," says Dr. Charles Yesalis, a Penn State professor of health and human development. "Kids doing sports activities three to five hours a day for five days a week is almost child abuse." But the kids may not speak up for themselves, according to Yesalis. "When you talk to kids away from their parents, they feign injuries because they're burned out," he says. "They don't want parents to know because of their financial and time commitment."

Although brawling, abusive parents aren't the norm, at least 15 states have adopted statutes making it a crime to assault sports officials. Community leagues require

parents to sign codes of conduct, in addition to developing education programs and forums for parents to address the issues of "sideline rage" and pushing kids too hard.

"Codes and programs are fine, but they're not going to get the job done," says Frank Smoll, a University of Washington psychology professor and co-author of "Sports and Your Child: A 50 Minute Guide for Parents."

"The parents who show up to education programs aren't the ones who need the training," he says.

Was it fun?

So how does a mom or dad avoid becoming a crazed, overbearing sports parent with a stressed-out, unhappy child? Here's some advice:

- Reward your child whether the team wins or loses.
- If you have a complaint or concern, don't raise it in the middle of a game.
- Applaud when either team makes a good play.
- Praise effort.
- Respect the referee's calls.
- Talk to your neighbor during games (don't get too caught up in scores or statistics).
- Ask your child, 'Was it fun?' before 'Did you win?'

Heinzmann acknowledges that it's stressful to see your own child play, especially when you see what you might think is an unfair call. But parents should remember how children see sports.

"It's just a blip in the lives of these kids," says Heinzmann. "What's more important is playing on the field under the lights and getting the chance to run the base and meet new friends."

And whatever you do, he emphasizes, in the ride home after the game "don't say how [the child] could have done better."