

When Parents Need to Intervene with a Coach



(Note: When your child is frustrated with some aspect of his or her sports experience [e.g., playing position or getting enough playing time], I recommend using the situation as a teachable moment [depending on the child's age]. Elsewhere in The Double-Goal Coach, I talk about how parents can prepare their child to speak to the coach to try to get the situation changed. Here, the issue is more serious – you need to intervene with the coach.)

Often the presumption is that your child's coach is a well-meaning person who is trying to do the right thing. But the sad truth is that there are individuals coaching kids today who do not have the best interests of their players at heart, and who can be destructive to a child.

I counsel parents to give the coach a wide berth. Youth coaches seldom get much (if any) pay for the endless hours they put in. If a coach makes obvious tactical mistakes, or plays my kid in the "wrong" position, or runs unorganized practices, I remind myself that I could have volunteered to help coach, but chose not to.

The exception, and it's a big one, is if the coach is abusive to players or officials. Youth sports has no place for a coach who verbally or physically intimidates athletes. We would never allow a teacher to bully or humiliate a student, nor should we avert our eyes if it happens in youth sports.

In recent years I have read and heard about coaches with winning records who lost their jobs because of abusive behavior, something that just didn't happen twenty years ago. This kind of change comes about because individuals, often parents, have the courage to speak up to say that it's not okay to browbeat a kid with the excuse that you are toughening him up for competition.

Unless a child is too young to understand what is going on, I recommend talking with your child before acting to intervene. If your child doesn't want you to intervene, you must decide whether you need to do so in spite of the child's desire. You can say, "I understand that you don't want me to talk with your coach, but this is so important that I have to do it."

The first question is whether you start with the coach or go to the person or body that supervises the coach (youth sports board or athletic director or principal).

I always want to err on the side of bringing a problem to the attention of the person most directly involved. That means talking with the coach first, but not before you've thought through what the problem is, and what you want to say about it. If you are angry about what is happening, it is even more important that you get control of yourself and know exactly what you want to say. Waiting 24 hours to "cool off" is highly advised unless there is an immediate danger.

It is also important to pick a time and setting in which the coach, and only the coach, can hear you. Trying to talk with a coach during a game or practice is not a good idea. You should also ensure that none of the players or other parents can overhear, since, among other things, that is likely to cause the coach to be more defensive.

When Parents Need to Intervene with a Coach *continued*

Write down what you want to say, and then rehearse it until it comes out sounding the way you want it to sound. "Coach, my son has been coming home from practices lately in a down mood. I think when he gets criticized for making a mistake, it demotivates him, and he's losing his joy in playing." In some cases you may decide that the best vehicle for communicating with the coach is an e-mail message.

Be prepared with examples if he asks for them. Then listen carefully to what the coach has to say. Either the coach will agree to rectify the situation or he won't. If he doesn't, then you may need to go higher up the organization.

Here again you want to be clear about what you want to say. Written notes from your conversation with the coach are helpful in preparing for a meeting with the athletic director, principal or league president. Think ahead of time about solutions that would be acceptable to you. For example, would it be enough for your child to be transferred to another team? Or is the behavior of the coach so harmful that you want to argue that he or she should be removed?

It's important to remember that your intervention in an abusive situation can be useful even if you don't get everything you want in the moment. Your notifying the coach's supervisor of abusive behavior can help sensitize those involved so that they will take steps to prevent a similar situation from happening in the future. And you always have the ultimate control of any situation in which your child is at risk.

If you have tried everything you know how to do to change an abusive situation to no avail, you always have the ultimate intervention. You can pull your child out of a harmful situation. And sometimes you may have to do this.

Adapted from The Double-Goal Coach by Jim Thompson

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