

**Volume 14. The Parent Development Series**

# **Build Effective Parent-Athlete Alliances**

**How to Use Sports to  
Strengthen Relationships With  
Your Children**



**DAVID CANNING EPPERSON, PH.D.**







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## The Opportunity Expanding Sports Collection

This is one in a series in the Opportunity Expanding Sports Collection. Each volume addresses issues related to the challenges of creating opportunity expanding team communities. These booklets are aimed at accomplishing three objectives:

- To inspire you to reflect on whether your current way of playing your sports parenting role is having the desired results.
- To provoke discussion between you, athletes, coaches, and other parents about how you can work together to create an opportunity expanding team community.
- To challenge you to consider taking actions that will lead to the pay-offs you seek from your investment in your children's life in sports.

Most parents have not yet considered the full range of benefits to their children and their families from their sports programs. They have not been challenged to expand their consciousness, values, attitudes and skills so that they can become Savvy Sports Parents. In the main, parents have not been inspired to:

- Engage in self-assessment to discover the level of development of their ability to manage the inevitable frustration and anger that arises in the normal course of athletic competition.
- Explore alternative solutions to common challenges in their team community that take attention off individual performance and place it instead upon achieving benefits for everyone - parents, athletes and coaches
- Complete an analysis of those factors that interfere with their own ability to become deeply involved in what they are doing in their team community,
- Develop a plan of action for facilitating the dreams of their sports mates - the parents, athletes and coaches on their children's team.
- Develop a design for a team community that can open up opportuni-

ties for parents, athletes and coaches to be inspired, empowered and unified through their relationships with one another and by commonly overlooked growth-enhancing features of the sports scene.

- Develop a plan for promoting mutual support among parents, athletes and coaches in their team community.
- Identify those features of today’s team communities that need “fixing” and take actions to repair the “defects.”
- Develop strategies for initiating reforms in school and youth sports that will enhance the sports experiences of everyone who follows.

It is necessary for those with a vision of contentious-free and opportunity expanding sports to discover strategies that inspire parents to invest in equipping themselves to become involved citizens in their team communities. These outcomes will only occur when the consciousness of parents is awakened about what they need to do to prepare themselves to become Savvy Sports Parents.

This collection of booklets has been prepared to help parents:

- A. **Understand And Seek Solutions To Today’s Youth Sports Challenges** (*The Sports Challenges Series*)
- B. **Maximize Possibilities For Athletes, Coaches, Parents, Teams, Schools, Families and Communities** (*The Sports Possibilities Series*)
- C. **Develop The Habits Of A Savvy Sports Parent** (*The Parent Development Series*)
- D. **Support The Professional Development Of Coaches And Sports Administrators** (*The Coach Development Series*)
- E. **Promote The Development Of One’s Own Children And Their Teammates** (*The Athlete Development Series*)
- F. **Actively Contribute To Team Development** (*The Team Development Series*)
- G. **Become Activists In The Enhancement Of School And Youth Sports** (*The Sports Enhancement Series*)
- H. **Develop an Opportunity Expanding Perspective On School and Youth Sports** (*The New Perspectives Series*)

The values and principles of an opportunity expanding vision of sports guide the analysis and recommendations found in this collection. By gaining an appreciation of how you can contribute to the enrichment of school and youth sports you will be better equipped to be a contributing citizen in your children’s team communities.

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*“Parents need to be the principal players in reshaping sports for a new era, an era desperately in need of bonding opportunities for families and communities. Sport can become a powerful unifying activity if the parents and coaches of young athletes choose to do battle against those forces promoting “In-your-face” sports.”*

# Preface

Like every parent you want to ensure that your children have good sports experiences. In order for you to have good sports experiences you sometimes will be inspired to make waves in the bleachers with other parents, rising on cue to celebrate your children's achievements. And sometimes you will need to rise up and make waves beyond the bleachers when the values you cherish are being violated in you children' sports programs.

As a citizen in your children's sports communities you have a responsibility to challenge your children, their coaches, and the other parents to make the most of their sports experiences. Sometimes that means you will have to make waves if you are going to become a good parent, a dependable supporter of your children's coaches, and a dedicated colleague to your fellow sports parent. If you are going to become a responsible citizen in the youth sports community, you will need to get athletes, coaches, and parents in your corner, so that you can successfully negotiate the rough seas of change as you work to restore sanity to sports.

There are times when you will want to smooth the waters so that the journey toward good sports can proceed without emotional turbulence. But there are other times when you will need to make waves by churning still waters so that it will be rough sailing for the mindless boors who are attempting to steal good sports from our children and our families.

Unfortunately self-serving "pirates" are close at hand, always ready to rob us of our rights to opportunity expanding sports experiences. They are the high profile sports personalities who deny responsibility for serving as models for young athletes. They are the coaches who get in the face of athletes and referees in efforts to intimidate them. And they are the spectators who feel they have purchased the right to ruin the sports experiences for others by their craziness.

Why do we, as sports parents, get so upset when the headlines give so much notoriety to those who are stealing sports from our children and our families? The headlines are all too familiar: "Player chokes coach," "Coach Fired for Choking Player" "Hockey Dad Beats Another Dad to Death," Boxer Bites Off Opponent's Ear," Superstar Kills Wife But Goes Scott Free," "Football Player Indicted for Campus

Rape.”

Why are we upset? We are appalled because we consider the playing field a sacred place where children can be safe from unsavory influences. We feel that sport should be a classroom where our children can grow and develop athletically, socially, emotionally, intellectually, and morally. We do not like to see sport become a stage where athletes, coaches, and parents are provided immunity from standards of respect, civility, and responsibility in the service of providing engaging drama.

Too many sports programs for children have lost their way. The same forces that are driving television sports have impacted sports for children. In recent years the need to create drama to hold the interest of the mass sports audiences has transformed the nature of sport in America. To improve ratings “In-your-face sports” are promoted at every turn through TV, newspapers, sports magazines, and the ever-present “raging bulls” on the playing fields, on the sidelines, and in the bleachers. Far too frequently, through our complacency, we have allowed the natural aggression of sport to turn savage.

The thesis of this booklet is that sports parents can reverse this trend toward incivility through organized efforts to reshape the character of sports for their children. In order to achieve this objective you and your parent colleagues, in collaboration with your children and their coaches, will need to muster the courage to make some waves to draw attention to the fact that sport has been grossly underestimated as a source of family and community bonding.

It is time that parents demand accountability from the organizers of school and youth sports programs. The leaders of sports for children need to participate in initiating procedures that bring parents, athletes, and coaches together to create good sports experiences for everyone.

In this booklet I am recommending strategies that ensure participation by parents and their children in shaping the direction of school and youth sports programs. The sports experiences of children are too important to turn them over exclusively to the coaching community without first reaching agreements about the goals and methods of the sports enterprise. The dedicated coaches of our children are too precious for us to fail to support their efforts to create good sports experiences.

Parents need to be the principal players in reshaping sports for a new era, an era desperately in need of bonding opportunities for families and communities. Sport can become a powerful unifying activity if the parents and coaches of young athletes choose to do battle against those forces promoting “In-your-face” sports. High profile professional

and collegiate sports tend to sanction and even celebrate “madness” on the playing field, on the sidelines, and in the bleachers. This trend can be reversed. It must be reversed if we are going to be able to restore sanity to sports. I am convinced that parents can become leaders in the creation of sports experiences that celebrate the pillars of opportunity expanding sports: *respect, responsibility, civility, nurture, creativity, communion* and *civic duty*. Parents are in a position to be able to mobilize athletes and coaches in fashioning good sports experiences for their families and the families of their neighbors. We need to become good villagers, become “our neighbor’s keepers,” if we are going to get the most out of our sports experiences. Our children and our neighbors need to help us restore sanity to sports. We need to ensure that our children’s sports experiences are at their best. When is sport at it’s best?

### **When Sport is at its Best**

- Sport is at its best when it is highly competitive, but not contentious, where parents, athletes, and coaches are treating one another as partners committed to producing good sports experiences.
- Sport is at its best when it becomes a sanctuary, free from the ugliness of everyday life, where everyone’s spirits are uplifted and renewed by their shared experiences.
- Sport is at its best when it allows everyone opportunities to grow and benefit from their partnerships on the field, on the sidelines, and in the bleachers.
- Sport is at its best when it helps bridge the gaps created by today’s fragmented life, where the fabric of the family and the community is strengthened by the collaborative efforts of diverse parents, athletes, and coaches.

In short, sport is at its best when everyone is pushing in the same direction.

In order to achieve these lofty objectives it is essential that parents, athletes, and coaches establish alliances that protect one another from anything that diverts attention away from accomplishing their shared mission. Too often the craziness we observe becomes a barrier to the creation of opportunity expanding sports experiences.

Sometimes making waves is the only way good sports can be ensured. I am proceeding on the assumption that you are ready

to collaborate with your children, their coaches, and other parents in efforts to restore sanity to sports. This booklet is an invitation to prepare yourself to make zestful waves in the bleachers as gestures of support for your children and their teams. But also I am urging you to prepare yourself for making high profile waves when the quality of your children's life in sports is being compromised. You and your fellow sports parents need to be ready to express your concern whenever the pillars of opportunity expanding sports: respect, responsibility, civility, nurture, creativity, communion and civic duty are being compromised.

What follows is designed to inspire you to equip yourself to become an effective citizen in your children's sports communities so that your family can become the beneficiaries of sports experiences guided by the pillars of opportunity expanding sports.

# Introduction

Today's sports parents have been brought up in a social climate far different from the climate in which many of our sports leaders were raised. Unfortunately, it is these leaders who have created the sports policies and practices that are currently providing direction to sports for children. Past generations were more focused upon controlling their world than upon being fully involved in their surroundings. That orientation is reflected in the sports policies and practices they are perpetuating.

Today's crop of sports parents has been brought up in a world that places greater emphasis upon the experiences of living rather than upon the outcomes of living. To many, having a good experience is now more highly valued than becoming a high achiever. Many of today's sports parents, who grew up in the 70's and the 80's, are strongly motivated to be fully involved in their surroundings.

As our social organizations have demanded greater attention to building networks for accomplishing their tasks, the interpersonal and aesthetic values that women have traditionally brought to family life now have gained greater currency in nearly all of our social organizations. Care and aesthetics are moving up the value hierarchy while conquest and dominance are moving down. This change has occurred not only because more women have found their way into traditionally male institutions, like sport, and have impacted the culture there, but also because in today's organizations the skills and values women bring to them are helping the organizations survive and prosper in the Information Age.

The mindset that guided sports in past eras, while still dominant in most school and youth sports programs, is being challenged by more and more parents of young athletes, especially young mothers who are getting more involved in their children's lives in sports. The mainstream culture of sport does not feel right to many of today's sports mothers and a few sports fathers. They are often times more motivated by the a need to become deeply involved in what they are doing, whether or not this involvement leads to rewards and recognition. There is an increasing number of young parents who have been brought up in an era when the journey has become more engaging than arriving at the destination.

If sport is to remain relevant to the requirements of the times and teach participants, (parents, athletes, and coaches) skills that will serve

them well in their lives both in and out of sports, a new paradigm (or model) of sport needs to be fashioned. Right now, I sense that parents are uncomfortable with what they are experiencing as they participate in their children's lives in sports. However, most parents do not feel adequately equipped to lead a movement to transform sport so that it promotes values that are better attuned to the world as they experience it. Hopefully, the formulations I am about to elaborate will provide parents with the inspiration and courage to prepare themselves to participate in the re-forming of their children's sports experiences.

This is a *radical* booklet in that it raises questions about the very roots of current sports practices. It challenges assumptions about the fundamental purposes of athletic activity. But the approach elaborated at the same time is culturally *conservative* with a strong emphasis upon strengthening family ties through sports. And finally these formulations support *liberal* traditions by emphasizing the importance of inclusiveness and collaborative leadership.

It is my hope that the ideas I develop here will appeal to the expansive mentality of many of today's sports parents with its rejection of limiting absolutist doctrine and cookie cutter solutions to sports problems. This is a very American initiative, steeped in the values upon which our nation was founded. However, it is adapted to the realities of life in the 21st century. These are values that seem to have gotten lost as our society has become fragmented and more focused upon the "me" than on the "we."

Today's "soccer moms and dads" can blanket the natural aggression of sport with care and consideration so that it is not allowed to turn savage. They can only achieve that end if they invest in gaining a better understanding about themselves and how they can most effectively work within the sports system to put it in greater sync with the requirements of the times. Savvy Sports Parents invest in learning how to effectively support their children and their team communities so that student-athletes are able to take advantage of opportunities to grow and develop as athletes and as fully functioning individuals.

# 1

## **Develop the Seven Habits Of Savvy Sports Parents**

Your daughter comes home from softball practice and you ask “How did things go today?” She responds “Oh, OK, I Guess.” Parents everywhere complain that their teenage children have little interest in talking with them about what goes on at school. Nor do they show much interest in taking advantage of the wisdom their parents have accumulated over the years to help them negotiate their journey through the teenage years. Also, not many children seek their parent’s counsel about their lives in sports. Unfortunately, it is often within this cautious, tight-lipped social climate that sports parents have to work with their children to help them have good sports experiences.

Because this resistance goes with being a parent of a teenager, you need to avoid beating up on yourself when your children show little or no interest in sharing their sports experiences with you. Does that mean that most children do not want their parents to accompany them on their journey through the world of sports? Certainly not. Young people do indeed want their parents nearby. But in most cases children want to share their experiences on their own terms, not on their parents terms. They want to dictate what they talk about, when they talk about it, and where they talk about it. Most children do not want to report their failures. They typically do not want to be interrogated before or after a practice or game. And they certainly do not want to answer to you about their sports experiences in front of their peers.

If parents are to inspire their children to share with them their experiences in sports they need to invest in building the trust that is required for good communication.

When children resist involving their parents in their life in sports it is generally because their history has been dominated by parents who probe, advise, and evaluate. Children do not feel they need any more of these intrusive experiences, especially in relation to an activity that is supposed to be recreational and fun. For many children they have concluded that sport is an arena where they do not have to accountable

to their parents. It is enough to be accountable to their coaches and teammates.

To help parents prepare themselves for getting and staying connected to their children's experiences in sports, I recommend that they work on developing each of the seven habits of the Savvy Sports Parent that I elaborate in this booklet. Parents who have been successful in establishing a collaborative alliance with their children in sports typically have developed the majority of these habits. A description of the habits of parents who have been successful in establishing effective parent-athlete communication are advanced here to complement the principles of positive sports parenting that were described in *From the Bleachers with Love*, and *Beyond the Bleachers* (Epperson and Selleck, 1999 and 2000).

## **The Seven Habits of Savvy Sports Parents**

### **Savvy Sports Parents:**

#### **Show Restraint (Habit # 1)**

They resist the temptation to intrude into their children's lives in sports.

#### **Support Rather than Promote (Habit # 2)**

They follow their children's dreams – They don't expect them to follow theirs

#### **Are Enthusiastic, But Mellow (Habit # 3)**

They learn to relax and enjoy their children in sports.

#### **Take Advantage of Teachable Moments (Habit # 4)**

They develop effective skills for communicating with their children - They avoid Monologues.

#### **Are Open To Change (Habit # 5)**

They are committed to changing their mindset so that they are able to develop more expansive ways of relating to sports.

#### **Collaborate (Habit # 6)**

They establish agreements with their children, their coaches, and other parents about the role each is going to play in their children's team communities.

## **Pursue Their Vision of Good Sports (Habit # 7)**

They become active leaders for adapting sport to a vision they have developed to guide their actions

These habits indicate that Savvy Sports Parents are enthusiastic supporters of the pillars of opportunity expanding sports: *civility*, *responsibility*, *respect*, *nurture*, *creativity*, *communion* and *civic duty*. Savvy Sports Parents demonstrate *civility* when they show restraint in their relationships with their children, the coaches and the other parents. By backing off and not intruding into the lives of their children they are allowing them to assume *responsibility* for their own decisions in sports. By learning to relax and enjoy themselves in the face of the inevitable frustration of sports parenting they are demonstrating *respect* for everyone around them. By developing their ability to offer counsel to their children about their lives in sports (when they are invited to do so) they are demonstrating their ability to provide *nurture*. By being open to new ways of thinking about sports they are showing their capacity for *creativity*. By providing support for everyone in their children's team communities they are reinforcing the importance of *communion*. And by being ready to accept responsibility for making improvements in their children's sports programs they are modelling *civic duty*. In short, Savvy Sports Parents *are* good sports, they *raise* good sports, and they are *creators* of good sports experiences.

# 2

## Show Restraint

All of us have witnessed parents get in the face of their children when they have not performed up to their expectations. We have also witnessed parents take on a coach for failing to provide their children with the kinds of experiences they feel they deserve. More than a few parents feel it is their right to challenge game officials when a call goes against their children's team. And some of us have agonized through situations where fellow parents have engaged in angry verbal exchanges as a result of disparaging remarks by one of them. Unfortunately there are a few parents who have had the misfortune of having to break up a physical confrontation between parents. Clearly, out of control parents are a significant source of concern for those of us involved in school and youth sports, as parents, coaches, athletes and sports administrators.

Sport is an emotion-producing experience. It is universal for parents to feel powerless and helpless as they witness their children in sports, especially when they are having a frustrating experience. Excitement is certainly a significant contributor to sport's attraction. Lively competition engages us, especially when our children are involved. But when a sense of powerlessness kicks in that leads to frustration and anger parents need to learn to manage these feeling so that they do not express themselves in ways that ruin the sports experiences of their children, the other athletes, the opponents, the coach, game officials or their fellow parents. Clearly we do not want to lose opportunities to experience the excitement of sport.

Savvy Sports Parents have learned to manage their emotional expression. They have developed emotional intelligence. They have matured to the point that they are able to detach themselves from the moment so that they are not only able to avoid outbursts that embarrass their children, anger the coach and intrude into the space of fellow parents, but they are also able to enjoy the excitement, even when their egos are being threatened when things are not going well for their children.

Many parents, who themselves have been successful

athletes, find it difficult to resist the temptation to share their sports “wisdom” with their children in sports. When they yield to the temptation to offer advice they seriously compromise their chances of remaining connected with their children. They have not learned to show restraint in offering advice to their children. Unfortunately, far too many parents have failed to develop the capacity to resist offering unsolicited advice.

The issue is not whether parents should share their insights with their children, it is about *when* to share it, *how* to deliver it, and *where* to provide them with their counsel. Savvy Sports Parents follow the principle, “When in doubt, just say wow!” Which mean when you are unsure as to what to say “simply be there.”

This is not to say that it is never appropriate for you to offer to help your children learn sports skills. When you are provided with an opening it is a wonderful opportunity for you and your children to enjoy being together. Savvy Sports Parents realize that they and their children are carrying a lot of baggage into their interactions, that their history as parent and child, from birth until that point in time, has established filters through which they see your offers to help.

Learning to show restraint is one of the most basic habits parents need to learn to be able to assist their children get the most out of their shared lives in sports. Until parents develop this habit the other six habits of the Savvy Sports Parent will be difficult to master.

# 3

## Support Rather Than Promote

Savvy Sports Parents honor their children's dreams and resist the temptation to be driven by their own hopes and aspirations for them. They also allow their children to take charge of their own lives, declining opportunities to become their children's advocates in relations with their coaches. Parents need to learn how to mentor their children in how to take initiatives with the coach when they are unhappy with their sports experiences.

Savvy Sports Parents do not make unilateral decisions that impact the lives of their children, like enrolling them in a sports program without their consent. Young athletes need to be shown the respect of becoming the primary writers of their own sports scripts. When they need an experienced hand in shaping their lives in sports, you need to be there for them. This means that Savvy Sports Parents avoid probing, advising, and evaluating. They know to stay out of their children's faces.

Your daughter is riding home with you after a practice and says, "Dad I really don't want you to come to my practices any more. It makes me nervous seeing you in the bleachers. I get really nervous when I see you talking to the coach." When you have these kinds of experiences it is difficult not to feel rejected, hurt and even angry, considering the sacrifices you have made to provide sports opportunities for your children. Savvy Sports Parents have learned not to allow rejection by their children to provoke an aggressive or defensive response. It is hard not to feel hurt, but it is essential to control your feelings so as to avoid a verbal assault on your child. You need to reflect on and repeat back to them what you have heard them say in the hope that you can come to a better understanding of the sentiments your children are communicating. In that way you will be provided with an opportunity to respond in a manner that affirms your commitment to honoring your children's preferences. This is not to say that it is inappropriate for you to share your feelings of disappointment with them, but when they have just delivered their announcement is not the

time. One option that buys some time before sharing your thoughts with your children is to yield to their request for the moment, but ask to have the issue put on the agenda of the next family meeting or schedule an individual conference with them.. At that time, it would be appropriate to share with your child how it made you feel when you were asked to stay home.

As children move toward gaining greater independence some find it necessary to establish areas in their lives that are exclusively their own. If your children happen to choose sports as the arena in which they going to claim as their own, you may find it difficult to accept decisions that box you out, especially if sport continues to be important to you. It may be that they have chosen to exclude you from that sector of in their lives because sport *is* so important to you. It takes mature parents, who are comfortable with who they are, to remember not to act out against a child who has cut you out of an area of their lives where you want to be an active partner. We need to keep in mind thagt it takes two to establish a partnership. It is essential that you develop a clear understanding of the role your children want you to play in their lives in sports. It typically works best if you work out a clear understanding with your children about the role they want you to play before a season begins.

Once you have reached an agreement with your children you must honor it or you will quickly lose credibility. If you violate an agreement you will have lost your chance to renegotiate the terms of future agreements. When you have demonstrated that you can be trusted to uphold your end of a bargain with your children, you can then ask for an opportunity to re-negotiate the terms of your “contract.” Each time you adhere to a deal you have reached with your children you increase the prospects of being provided further opportunities to share in their lives in sports.

Savvy Sports Parents have developed the self-understanding required to avoid feeling hurt and angry when they experience rejection by their children in sports. When parents have reached this level of maturity they can be most helpful and enjoyable partners, not only for their own children, but also for all of the athletes, coaches, and parents in their children’s team communities.

# 4

## **Relax and Enjoy Your Children**

As I was witnessing one of my grand niece's high school basketball games my attention was drawn away from what was transpiring on the court to what was occurring in the bleachers. As the parents were following their children's play as the ball moved up and down the floor it was evident that many of them were experiencing a great deal of discomfort, especially when their daughters committed errors, or when their team got behind. I also observed that there was very little commerce among the player families. The parents seemed to suffer or celebrate in isolated family enclaves. The anguish they experienced revealed itself in the tension in their bodies and voices as they cheered on their children. At the time I felt it was unfortunate that the act of witnessing their daughters in action could not be more uplifting. It did not seem to matter whether their team was winning or losing – nearly all of the parents appeared to be experiencing tension and discomfort.

Savvy Sports Parents understand that their children's sports can be a chronic source of stress. But they have learned how to manage that stress so that it does not interfere with either their own or their children's enjoyment. Savvy Sports Parents refuse to allow their children's sports to cause them anguish and aggravation. They have learned to relax and enjoy themselves.

Any observer at a youth sports event cannot help but be struck by the anguish and aggravation that parents feel when their children are struggling on the playing field. All parents experience a sense of powerlessness when their children are being tested. But Savvy Sports Parents recognize the roots of their pain. They understand that it is a natural learned response used to monitor your children's behavior throughout their entire development to avert the "falls" they inevitably take as they move through their childhood years. Savvy Sports Parents have learned to feel this discomfort coming on and identify it for what it is. It is a natural expression of what I like to call "protective

powerlessness.” Savvy Sports Parents recognize this emotional state and have learned to send themselves the message “Relax, its just a game.”

# 5

## Manage Your “Protective Directiveness”

Savvy Sports Parents have learned to cope with a natural impulse that I call *protective directiveness*. When children are small it is natural and essential when a child is approaching a hot stove for a parent to shout “Don’t touch!” That is not the time for collaborative decision making. Unfortunately, many parents never get over trying to protect their children from “getting burned” by making what the parents would consider to be dumb decisions, well into adulthood. They say “You don’t want to do that” in one form or another.

In sports, a parent might be tempted to direct his child by saying “There is no way you are going to quit the team when you have invested so much in the sport. Besides, they are counting on you to be there.” Naturally, no parent wants their children to make poorly informed decisions. However, sometimes it is appropriate to let your children make a less than ideal choice, if the consequences are not grave, so that they can learn from their experiences. Savvy Sports Parents refrain from being overprotective.

In the course of their children’s development parents pass through various stages of protective directiveness. When their children are very young parents typically are highly directive (Stage I). They in essence say “Do it my way, or you will do damage to yourself or to others.” At the other end of the continuum when their children become adults mature parents typically say “Do it your way, I have confidence in your ability to make good choices” even when they have their own opinion as to what would be the right choice (Stage V). When children are of school age and participating in sports, it is seldom appropriate to use either of these responses when parents sense they are putting themselves at risk. There are, however, three responses that reflect different levels of development in the parent-child relationship. These I like to refer to types of partnerships that parents establish with their children.

## LEVELS OF PROTECTIVE DIRECTIVENESS

<b>Level of Parent Involvement</b>	<b>Stage</b>	<b>Who Decides</b>	<b>What parent says</b>
<b>Directive</b>			
<i>Parent-Centered</i> (Dependency)	I	Parent	“Let’s do it my way.”
	II	Parent w/ Athlete Input	“You need my help”
<b>Partnership</b>			
<i>Pact-Centered</i> (Interdependency)	III	Parent & Athlete	“Let’s do it together”
	IV	Athlete w/Parent Input	“I’m available”
<b>Non-Directive</b>			
<i>Athlete-Centered</i> (Independence)	V	Athlete	“It’s your decision”

At the first stage of the partnership level of parent protectiveness (Stage II) the parent says “Tell me how you feel so that I can take your feelings into account, but ultimately I will have to make the decision because I have had more experience in life.” At the second level in parent-child partnerships parents say “Let’s work this out together,” where the parent and child’s views are given equal weight. (I call this Pact-Centered where the decision is made as a result of an agreement that they will work toward a collaborative decision.) And the third level in the parent-child partnership is when the parent says “It’s your decision, but I am available to assist you with your decision if you feel I can be of assistance.” As children age it is essential that parents move from more to less directiveness, if their children are to move toward maturity.

Problems arise in parent-child decision making when children feel they no longer need their parents to look out for their welfare, or when parents feel they need to maintain control over their children’s decisions because they have concluded that their children do not have the maturity to go it alone.

Savvy Sports Parents have developed the ability to recognize when it is time to let go. They also have learned to recognize the urge to provide uninvited directives. And finally they have developed the skills for inspiring their children to assess the consequences of the

various choices they face. These are high level skills that many parents never really master even when their children move into adulthood. (My mother was still trying to get me to enjoy beet salad, even in her nineties) By failing to determine the appropriate level of control over their children, they allow unnecessary barriers to exist between themselves and their children.

Embarrassing moments for children occur when their parents allow their sense of powerlessness or their impulse to provide public directives to provoke responses that they may later regret. Savvy Sports Parents have developed a level of self-understanding that allows them to stay in control when their natural response is to act out against whatever it is, their child, a referee, a coach, another athlete, or even another parent who is observed threatening what they consider to be the well being of their children.

The bottom line is that Savvy Sports Parents refuse to allow their own needs for power and control to ruin the sports experiences of others, whoever they may be. They do not allow their frustration to ruin their child's enjoyment of life on the playing field. They have learned to manage their sense of protective powerlessness.

# 6

## Maintain Dialogue

After you have developed the first three habits of a Savvy Sports Parent, that is, to show restraint, to support rather than promote, and to be enthusiastic, but mellow you still have other habits to learn. You need habits that will allow you to remain in communication with your children so that you can continue to provide guidance for them as they move through the world of sports.

First of all, it is important to realize that it is common for parents to deny there are problems in their relationships with their children in sports. When parents are in denial they fail to work on enhancing their relationship with their children. Taking advantage of teachable moments and being open to change contribute to your ability to maintain good working relationships with your children. By exploring the following situation you will be able to come to a better understanding of the challenges of maintaining open channels of communication with your children.

At your daughter's last volleyball game you observed that she did not demonstrate much joy when she was on the court. You felt the need to develop a better understanding of what was "bugging" her. When you asked her to share her feelings about her sports experiences she angrily responds, "It's nothing." Savvy Sports Parents have learned how to create the conditions that allow their children to feel comfortable with sharing their thoughts with them. They do that by learning to become good listeners. Also they resist the temptation to engage in "When I was a child," monologues. They seek first to understand their children before expecting them to understand what they are trying to communicate. And most importantly they are open to learning from their children – they treat their children as sources for learning, not as the objects of their good intentions.

One of the biggest barriers to establishing dialogue with your children is *The Myth of Adult Wisdom*. In order to strengthen parent-athlete relations it is essential that this myth be exposed for what it typically is – a justification for parents to satisfy their need to stay

in control. Parents proceed on the assumption that because of their superior experience they know what is in the best interest of their children. Children then become the objects of their good intentions. No one likes to be treated as *a gem in the rough* to be polished by their “elders.”

To be able to make a shift in the way you view your children in sports, it is essential that you change your “mindset.” Each parent has learned to order the world of sports using metaphors, images, symbols, and language that were passed on to them by those who were in positions to shape their view of the world of sport. It might have been a parent, an older brother, a coach, or an age peer who was more experienced in the ways of the culture of sport. Quite likely these traditional ways of organizing your sports experiences have imposed limits on the possibilities sport can offer. If, for example, you and your peers bought into the Myth of Adult Wisdom when you were children you may find it extremely difficult to allow your children to falter without being tempted to provide them with the knowledge they need to “be successful.”

It is no easy task to learn to show your children the respect of treating them as subjects, rather than as objects. This requires a major shift in how you view both parenting and sports. To become a Savvy Sport Parent it is essential that you learn to make that shift so that you are able to maintain effective communication with your children in sports. In addition, Savvy Sports Parents have looked at how they have been inducted into the their parenting role and into the world of sports and have determined that it is essential to challenge long standing beliefs, such as the Myth of Adult Wisdom. They realize that many of their long held beliefs stand in the way of their ability to assist their children navigate their way through the world of sports.

By showing restraint, by supporting rather than promoting, by being enthusiastic, but mellow, by taking advantage of teachable moments, and being open to changing your mindset, there is no doubt that you will be better able to raise a good sport.

# 7

## **Provide Opportunities for Your Children To Develop Their Independence**

As their children mature Savvy Sports Parents learn to gradually extend the tether until they finally are able to untie it and set their children free. During this freeing process when their children are testing their abilities to handle freedom there are times when parents feel the need to reel their children back in so that we can become a more potent source of influence in their lives. One of the skills that effective sports parents develop is to know when and how to reel them in. By keeping them on a short tether you risk rebellion. By putting them on a long tether you run the risk that they will lose their way. The key to being a Savvy Sports Parent is keeping your children on a tether that allows them some measure of freedom. At the same time it is important to establish regular times when you and they can communicate without interruption. Family meetings and regular individual conferences with each child can become effective connecting points. You need to make yourself available to help guide your children along the sometimes rough road on their journeys through the world of sports.

By developing the sports parenting skills I am describing you will discover that you will be better equipped to connect with your children so that you can be there for them when they need the support and guidance you are eager to supply.

Let's look at another situation in which parents often find themselves.

Your son comes home from soccer practice and announces "Dad I want to give up my music lessons so that I can concentrate on soccer. Also I want you to volunteer to coach my team since Coach is moving out of town next month." You may prefer that he not give up his music. Furthermore, you may have concluded that your relationship with him could easily be contaminated if you take on coaching his team. You may also believe that becoming his coach will deny him the "on the spot" emotional support he needs when things are not going well.

Also he may not understand how having his dad coach the team may compromise his status with his peers.

It is difficult to resist assertively challenging your child to rethink his decision, especially when you are confident he does not have the experience to appreciate the consequences of focusing his energies on just one sport at this early point in his life. When you and your child have different ideas about a sports decision, it is essential that you take the time to respectfully consider one another's positions. You have to be able to calmly and clearly present your thoughts on the issues in such a way that he is presented, not only with information, but also with choices. When in doubt about how to handle challenging situations is to listen, listen and listen and to avoid preaching. Your assignment is to make sure that your children have had an opportunity to consider the costs and benefits of the choices before them.

# 8

## Reach Agreements

By taking the time to work out agreements with your children you establish standards for addressing disagreements. You also avoid future problems and strengthen your relationship with them by demonstrating that you respect their ideas and are willing to consider their solutions to their own sports problems. The problems are in their “private domain.” They do not become your problems until they appeal to you for assistance. You need to “be there” for them, but they are the ones who need to be provided with the opportunities to develop the skills and the confidence to take charge of their own lives. They deserve the respect to be dealt with as resourceful people who can solve their own problems.

Taking the risks of solving their own problems is easier for them to do if they know you are there for them. Savvy Sports Parents have developed the competency and the confidence necessary to work collaboratively with their children to reach agreements about how to solve problems as they progress on their journey through the world of sports.

In establishing the ground rules for your relationship you need to discuss your respective goals and roles. In these discussions you can decide where and when you will be available to one another. You also need to agree to disagree and agree how you are going to resolve disputes. The important point here is that by making arrangements in advance as to how you are going to play your parenting role greatly reduces the prospects that little disagreements will escalate into disputes that create significant barriers between you and your children. The key to building trust is to engage in dialogue without being manipulative. If your children feel that they are being controlled when you are reaching agreements, they will quickly tune you out and the agreement-reaching process will have lost its effectiveness.

Another action that sports parents can take to stay connected with their children is to work with them to develop some regular rituals that help connect you to their lives in sports. I recall that my dad was

always available to come home on game days and cook me an early, light and wholesome pre-game meal. This demonstration of support coming from a very busy owner of a small business, provided my dad with excellent opportunities to be there for me, if I ever wanted to share with him anything about my life in sports. I have no recollection of him ever giving me unsolicited advice. Clearly his restraint allowed him to keep the lines of communication open in the event I ever needed his counsel. Little routines that you share with your children can be extremely helpful in staying in touch with their lives in sports.

If you are able to develop good avenues of communication with your children, it will allow them to appreciate the benefits of forming mutually supportive team communities where everyone's needs and interests are taken into consideration. When you have developed the trust of your children they will then be ready to collaborate with you and the other members of the their team communities in creating opportunity expanding sports experiences.

## **Be a Good Citizen in Your Childrens' Team Communities**

Savvy Sports Parents understand that, if their lives in their children's team communities are going to provide experiences that are inspiring, growth enhancing, and family strengthening they are going to have to invest in shaping the team culture. The task cannot be left to the coach alone. While the coach has to be a major player in charting the direction the program takes, parents need to make their presence felt. They not only need to provide time and money, but it is essential that they participate in shaping the guiding vision for the program. Once a direction for the program has been collaboratively set, parents need to become prime movers in making the vision come to life.

While the first order of business for Savvy Sports Parents is to be there for their children and the other program participants, they also take decisive steps that will ensure the development of an opportunity expanding team community. Equally important, Savvy Sports Parents understand that it is essential that they model good citizenship in their children's team communities. They know that they need to abide by the ground rules collaboratively set by the parents, athletes, and coaches. And they need to do more than their fair share to perform the functions that are essential for being a contributing member of the team community.

Specifically, what steps do Savvy Sports Parents take as citizens in their children's team communities that will strengthen their commitment to their sports partners?

### **Steps Savvy Sports Parents Take To Assume Citizenship Responsibilities**

1. Savvy Sports Parents use time at family meetings to ask their children what they think it means to be a citizen in their sports communities. When their children have provided them with their ideas they suggest other community responsibilities they feel their

family could assume.

2. Savvy Sports Parents identify some contributions they feel they would like to make to the team community. Before offering any of their contributions, whether they involve helping with coaching, officiating, administering, or fund raising, they discuss their ideas with their children to get their buy off.
3. When Savvy Sports Parents have decided how they are going to contribute to the community they meet privately with the coach to offer their services. They may choose to include their child in the session with the coach. They take great care to ensure that their communication is not interpreted as criticism of the coach's leadership of the team. They make sure that their children are apprised of the approach they are using with the coach. It is possible that their children may know better than their parents how their coach is likely to respond to the parent's initiatives. Secondly, by involving their children they will have provided them with the opportunity to "go to school" on how a caring, mature adult can offer to contribute to an organization. That can be a valuable life lesson.
4. Savvy Sports Parents make a special effort to get acquainted with the parents of the other athletes so that they can assess what types of collaborative efforts might be taken by the various families in the program. Joint efforts with other families allow children to learn about citizenship responsibilities.

The task of creating and maintaining good relationships with your children in sports will be greatly enhanced when you have developed the seven habits of a Savvy Sports Parent. However, it is important to appreciate that the process of developing the habits can be a long-term project, since it requires that moms and dads overcome several natural parenting instincts and widely embraced traditions. You will need to learn to listen carefully to what your children are saying about how they want to participate in the community and how they want you to participate. The investment in developing these habits, however, will pay generous dividends.

# 10

## **Pursue Your Vision of Good Sports**

As you proceed along the pathway toward becoming a Savvy Sports Parent you will have developed the capacity to understand the strengths and weaknesses of the sports programs in which your children have been participating. You will have developed the capacity to discover where the barriers lie that stand in the way of organizing opportunity expanding sports experiences for young athletes. You will have learned those policies and practices that work and those that do not work. Further, you will have discovered how and where decisions are made about available resources and personnel. Along the way, by having paid attention to those forces that have stood in the way of your family being provided with opportunity expanding sports experiences you will have accumulated the wisdom to be able to participate in initiating changes in the ways families are served by your sports organizations.

Savvy Sports Parents take advantage of the knowledge they are gaining to begin to form their own perspective on school and youth sports. Most parents, unfortunately, never reach the level in their growth as a sports parent where they assume responsibility, not only for guiding their own children through the world of sports, but also for helping to promote reforms that allow sports to become more inspiring, empowering and unifying for those families that follow. The habits they develop at this stage rest upon the solid foundation they have established by practicing the other six habits as their children have been progressing through the school and youth sports system.

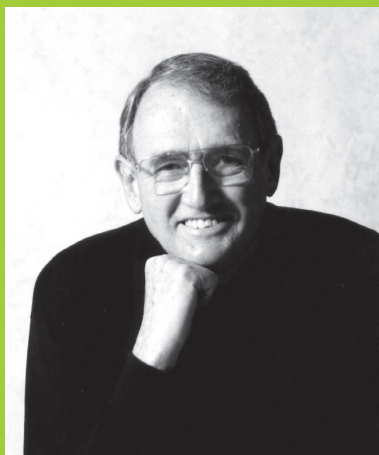




# Develop Effective Parent-Athlete Alliances

## How to Use Sports to Strengthen Relationships with Your Children

"The key to being a savvy sports parent is keeping your children on a tether that allows them some measure of freedom while at the same time establishing regular times when you and they connect. You need to make yourself available to help guide them through the world of sports. The family meeting and regular individual conferences with each child can be those connecting points."



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