

PARENTS IN SPORT - PUSHY OR SUPPORTIVE?

- Sport participation should be enjoyable for all concerned.
- Coaches, officials and managers should feel fulfilled and recognised for their contributions.
- Participants should enjoy the on-going challenge and fun with healthy interactions with their peers and others within the sporting landscape.
- Parents / guardians should gain happiness and deep satisfaction as the major drivers and supporters of their child's development and participation in youth sport.

However, the reality is not always this way.

Coaches regularly cite 'working with parents' as one of the most challenging aspect of their role. This is the case at most levels of sport with the possible exception of the player managers at the highest levels of professional sport. Young people often mention parental behaviour as a major factor in their discontinuation in sport.

The exact nature of parental engagement varies widely amongst families, this often depending on the stage of child's development in sport. It is the years around the talent identification stage (typically 13-18) that conflict can commonly arise between the parents and coach as transitions between sporting goals are negotiated.

Typically, this is the phase where the young person begins to specialise and become more committed to training and competition. It is also often a time where parental support moves from early instruction and hands-on involvement to being more about transport and time management, with the athlete developing their organisational skills, and the coach taking over more of the participant's development aspects.

Understanding and valuing the role each person plays in the development of the young person is necessary for effective communication and hence the positive relationships between interested parties.

Research* suggests providing a rationale for coaching decisions makes them more meaningful for the listener (e.g. parent/athlete), subsequently increasing the likelihood that they will be taken on board. This approach can also help shift the focus to the goals of the activity rather than the results, which is often a source of tension.



Possible actions:

Set expectations. There are many common sources of tension between parents and coaches. An example of this could be the number of individual lessons allocated to a fencer compared to their training partners and the resulting perception of the fencer's position in the club hierarchy.

In most cases, tension can be minimised or removed by coaches being explicit about how training and competitions will be run. **Could you include parents in club addresses at the beginning of your time together so that everyone knows what is expected?** Some coaches even have this as a regular feature at the start of each training session and competition. Parents are then clear about what is expected.

Make use of parental resources. Not all parents want to be involved (and of course this can be a source of frustration for coaches too). But for those who want to be involved, **can you delegate meaningful tasks to the parents of your fencers?** Perhaps certain parents could take some statistics from the fights that will support your coaching approach (e.g. In matches where hits are scored, in training how much of the session fencers are active vs listening vs waiting.)

Inform yourself. With competitions and overseas trips, do you know the guidelines and policy documents from your sport about the conduct of junior training and competitions? Perhaps you can talk to other coaches and parents regarding how you are going and what approaches others use?

What should also be kept in mind, no matter what the extent of poor behaviour, parents want the best for their children. Troublingly, at times some parents do not have the right skills to constructively deal with any feelings of confusion, anger or embarrassment they may be experiencing in relation to their child's involvement in sport. This can lead to clashes and outbursts that impact greatly on coaches and most importantly, children. By being proactive and seeking positive engagements with parents there is a greater likelihood that everyone coaches, parents, officials, and young people will enjoy their time in sport.

Below is a list provided to use by a local fencing coach:

One of my friends asked "Why do you pay so much money and spend so much time running around for your son to fence?" Well I have a confession to make: I don't pay for my son's training or his kit. Or even for the hundreds of miles we travel.

So, if I am not paying for fencing, what am I paying for?

- I pay for those moments when my boy becomes so tired he feels like quitting but doesn't..



- I pay for the opportunity that my boy can have and will have to make life-long friendships.

- I pay for the chance that he may have amazing coaches that will teach him that fencing is not just about game plans but about life.

- I pay for my child to learn to be disciplined.

- I pay for my boy to learn to take care of his body.

- I pay for my son to learn to work with others and to be a proud, supportive, kind and respectful team member.

- I pay for my child to learn to deal with disappointment, when he doesn't get that result he hoped for, or missed the hit despite having practiced a thousand times, but still gets up and is determined to do his BEST next time...

- I pay for my boy to learn to make and accomplish goals.

- I pay for my son to learn that it takes hours and hours and hours and hours of hard work and practice to create a champion, and that success does not happen overnight.

- I pay so that my son can be on the piste instead of in front of a screen...

I could go on but, to be short, I don't pay for fencing; I pay for the opportunities that fencing provides my child to develop attributes that will serve him well throughout his life, and give him the opportunity to bless the lives of others. From what I have seen for many years, I think it is a great investment!

** Mageau, G.A. and Vallerand, R.J., The Coach-Athlete Relationship: A Motivational Model, Journal of Sports Sciences, 2003, 21, 883-904*