



10 Strategies for Managing Team Parents

Introduction

Coaching sports is one of the most rewarding “jobs” a person will ever have. However, it isn’t always fun and games. Sometimes it can be very difficult and even border on being impossible. Usually the major cause of a coach becoming frustrated is one or more parents of one or more players on the coach’s team.

The majority of parents are great to work with. They appreciate the coach’s efforts and they love the fact that their children are able to play an organized sport. However, there are some parents who will make it very difficult on the coach.

Some parents give a coach major problems by doing one or more of the following:

- Yelling at a child, the coach, or a referee/umpire/judge from the stands.
- Undermining what the coach tells a player to do.
- Shouting directions to players from the stands.
- Openly criticizing coaching decisions.
- Not bringing the child to practices or games on time.
- Demanding more playing time for the child.

For these problems and for any other problem that arise, there are some very effective strategies that can be used.

Here are ten great strategies that can be used for a coach to deal with a difficult parent.



Strategy #1: Hold a Preseason Meeting

The majority of problems between coach and parents occur because the parents have no idea about any rules that might exist and the parents don't know what the overall goal of the season might be. To stop many potential problems, all coaches should hold a preseason meeting for parents before the first practice is even held.

Holding a preseason meeting always helps to diffuse any potential problems that might arise once the actual season begins. If all the parents know what the season will be like and what they can expect for their child then a coach is much less likely to have problems when the season begins.

At the actual meeting, a handout should be given to all parents. Then the handout should be reviewed during the meeting.

Having a handout serves many purposes. However, there are two major reasons why it's absolutely necessary to have a handout:

1. The handout can be referred to if a problem should arise later in the season.
2. The handout can be given to any parent who wasn't at the meeting.

In almost all youth leagues there's a rule that every player has to be given a certain amount of playing time in a game. Most parents don't realize this.

A few years ago there was a parent of a Junior High softball player who became angry with a coach because the softball team lost the lead late in the game and then lost the game. Part of the reason why the team lost was because the best players didn't play the entire game.

The parent approached the coach and began yelling at her for not playing the best players the entire game. The coach then calmly explained that it is a state rule that all softball players be allowed to play at least 2 innings. Since that team had 18 players, it was impossible for any girl



to play the entire game. The coach then went on to explain that the point of the team was to make sure every girl learned and became a better softball player.

The parent didn't argue anymore and never became upset again. The parent simply didn't know the rule and was satisfied with the coach following the rules.

This is why a preseason meeting and a handout should be mandatory for every coach.

Strategy #2: Stay Positive at all Times

With just about everything in life it helps to be positive all the time. However, with coaching it's a necessity.

Now, this doesn't mean that you shouldn't lecture your players. It also doesn't mean that you shouldn't be strict with your players. However, you do need to always put a positive spin on things. Make sure you make everything a learning experience and that the players know that you are always teaching them.

It's absolutely necessary for you to always stay positive when dealing with parents. Staying positive will give you leverage when you deal with parents. It will also help you show parents that you always have their child's best interest at heart.

Here's an example:

A parent approaches a coach and voices his dismay with the amount of playing time his daughter gets on the basketball court. The coach thanks the parent for voicing the concern and tells him that it's always great to have parents involved and concerned about their children. (There are two positive statements.) The coach also explains that she has the players' best interest in mind with all her decisions and she truly tries to do what's best for her players. (There's another positive statement.)

Then the coach explains that playing time is based in large part by the amount of effort that's given during practice, and playing time is also limited because there are 11 players for only 5 spots on the floor. The coach finishes by explaining that if the daughter works a little harder in practice then her playing time will probably increase.



The parent now feels good about bringing up the issue to the coach (because the coach thanked him) and he feels better because the coach told him how much she cares. What's more, the coach also told him that if his daughter works a little harder then she may get more playing time.

In the example, the parent was easily calmed down and didn't pursue the issue further. However, there will be some parents who will continue to voice their objections. In these cases, additional strategies should be used.

Strategy #3: Invite Parents to Participate

Another great way to diffuse any potential problems with parents is to invite the parents to come to practice and participate. This may sound like a crazy idea. It may seem like the coach is inviting the fox into the chicken house. But that's not the case at all.

If the players are young then the help of parents should always be welcomed by coaches. The more adults that can help reinforce basic skills, the more beneficial it'll be to the players.

For older players, parents should still be invited to practice but they should only be allowed to participate in specific practices. Some coaches don't allow parents into "regular" practice and that's fine as well. However, all coaches should allow parents to occasionally participate in practice.

Allowing parents into an occasional practice can actually motivate the players to practice harder. It can serve as a nice change of pace when your team has a few days off in between actual competition.

More importantly, allowing parents into the occasional practice makes the parent feel like they're being included on the team. It will also give the parent a chance to see your coaching style. Also, it will give you a chance to speak with the parent if you need to do so. It's always better to have to deal with a parent after a practice then it is dealing with a parent during or after a game. Finally, inviting parents to practice may very well give you a unique insight into how the parents and their children (your players) relate to one another.



A coach of a varsity volleyball team invited parents in to play against their children in a friendly game about a week before the season started. One of the parents at the practice kept yelling at his daughter every time she made the least little mistake. The coach could see that the young girl was flustered. In fact, she began playing worse than the coach had ever seen.

Since this girl was the setter for the team, the coach immediately saw that this could be a huge problem during actual games. So, he politely asked the father to stay after and have a talk with him. After a long talk with the father, the coach got him to agree to not say anything negative during the game. Then when the games started, the father only cheered for the team and the daughter played very well.

Inviting the parents to practice actually did two great things: It allowed the coach to stop a potential problem that would have hurt the team during a game, and it also won over the father so that he was willing to listen to the coach.

Strategy #4: Be Accessible

Most parents hate to be out of the loop when something involves their children. Therefore, anyone who works with children has to be accessible. This certainly applies to coaches.

A coach should be as accessible as possible for parents. This doesn't mean that the coach needs to be available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. It doesn't even mean a coach has to be available every waking moment during the week. However, a coach should give parents a number that the parents can call and at least leave a message at anytime. Then all calls should be returned as soon as possible, no longer than within one business day.

One way most coaches make sure they are accessible is to give parents a number that is always hooked to voice mail. Usually this means giving a work number (this works really well if the coach is also a teacher) or a cell phone number. As long as the coach can access the voice mail at anytime then the number will work fine.

Then the coach just has to check the messages a couple times a day and then make sure all messages are returned promptly.



Another part of being accessible is being able to meet with parents when they feel like a meeting is needed. Obviously you can both work out a time that works well for both of you but you should definitely do what you can to meet in a timely manner.

Being accessible actually accomplishes two things:

1. It lets the parent know that you care about them.
2. It stops a small problem from turning into a huge problem.

The majority of parents will give any coach a break if they feel like the coach is trying to keep them in the loop and showing that they are important. Simply being accessible can accomplish this.

Being accessible also helps to diffuse problems because it allows parents the chance to find out why a coach did something or what really happened in practice or in a game. Otherwise the parent might hear that something happened and get really upset because as time passes and the problem goes unresolved, it's only natural for a person's mind to get started down a track that leads to anger and frustration.

That's why it's so important for a coach to make sure he or she is accessible at all times.

Strategy #5: When Possible, Keep Everything Private

At some point there will be problems with parents. It's simply a part of coaching. And most of those problems will begin in public. Most problems will surface during a game where many other parents and fans are watching.

However, a coach always has to try to keep everything as private as possible.

Unless a problem has to be addressed right away (see Strategy #7) then a coach should always wait to solve problems in private. Not only can trying to address and solve a problem in public lead to embarrassment for all involved, it can make a parent feel threatened, which could lead to an even bigger problem.



The best way to handle just about any problem is by speaking with the parent privately. Simply ask the parent to stay after a game to speak with you or set-up another time to speak with the parent. This is especially good advice if the parent approaches the coach while the parent is upset.

A coach of a boys' baseball team was walking out to the team bus after losing a one run game in which a player was thrown out at the plate to finish the game. A very angry father approached the coach, yelling that a team should "never making the third out on the bases". In theory the father had a point but he had no right to question the coach and he certainly was going about it all wrong.

The coach calmly told the father that he had his reasons and he would be happy to discuss those reasons the following day. The coach then excused himself and got on the bus with his players.

The following day the coach called the father and explained why he sent the runner and told the father it turned out to be the wrong decision but it was over and he couldn't change it. He then went on to encourage the father to coach baseball himself since he seemed to be so passionate about the game.

The father wasn't nearly as upset the next day. And with the discussion happening in private, even if the father was still upset it wouldn't have caused a scene.

Whenever possible a coach has to keep things private. This way the coach doesn't lose face and neither does the parent. Plus, it keeps the coach safe from losing his or her temper if the parent says something that is particularly hurtful.

Strategy #6: Let Your Goals and Rules be Known

Another important strategy to help deal with parents is to make sure your goals and rules are known from the beginning. Of course, this particular strategy goes along with Strategy #1: Hold a Preseason Meeting. And it's true: You need to make sure the players and their parents know what your goals and rules are from the beginning of the season all the way to the end of the season.



So make sure you're very clear about what you're doing with a team. Be sure you know what your goals are and then make sure you live by those goals. One goal might be to make every single player better. Another goal might be to get all the players to play together as a team. Another goal might be to win games. Or it might not be.

Make sure you also let parents and players know if your goal isn't winning. With younger kids it usually isn't. With younger players your goals are usually to learn and to have fun. Some parents don't understand this so be prepared to explain it to some of them.

Once you have your goals set make sure you practice and coach games with these goals in mind. Then when a parent questions a decision you made or an action you took, you can simply explain the goal that you're trying to accomplish.

The same basic theory holds for your rules. Set your rules, let them be known, and then stick by them. Then if something happens you can simply point to the rules.

For example, a player might be late for every other practice. A rule might be that a player needs to be at and on time for all practices. So, that player might barely see the field of play and his parents might have a problem with his playing time. If so, you can simply point to the rule that he has to be on time for all your practices.

If you don't stick to your goals and your rules then you'll run into problems if a parent questions you about something you did or didn't do. So make sure you always coach according to your own goals and rules.

Strategy #7: Take Care of Problems Right Away

Though a coach always wants to try to talk to problem parents in private, that doesn't mean the coach should put problems off. In fact, the coach has to take care of problems as quickly as possible. Also, if a parent is particularly disruptive or out of line, the coach may have to deal with the problem right away. This may mean dealing with the problems in front of others.

If a parent is just saying slightly inappropriate things to the coach, the umpire/referee, or a player (the parent's own child) then sometimes it can be let go until a little later. Other times the parent



may have to be reminded to quiet down and then spoken to after the game. Still other times the parent's behavior might be so bad that it needs to be taken care of right away.

It's up to the coach to decide exactly how to handle a situation. Usually a coach can take the most abuse from a parent. A parent saying inappropriate things to a player should be the least tolerated.

A coach should remember that it's preferable to deal with parents in private. So a gentle reminder to the parent should always be the first option. If the parent continues to be disruptive then the coach should warn the parent, and then remove the parent from the game if it's necessary.

There are many reasons why a coach has to deal with problems right away. The main reason is because the coach has to protect him/herself, the ump/ref, and, most importantly, the players. If the coach doesn't take care of the problem right away then the parent will slowly become even more inappropriate and other parents may even join in as well. Another potential problem might occur if another parent decides to tell the first person to stop then a confrontation could break out between the parents.

In order to ensure that things don't get out of hand a coach definitely needs to take care of problems as soon as possible. While some problems will need to be addressed right away, most problems should be dealt with in private. To help deal with all problems, the other nine strategies in this report should be applied.

Strategy #8: Document Playing Time

This is a pretty basic and a simple strategy to employ and it can save you a lot of trouble.

In just about any sport you have to keep some type of book of stats and playing time. If you don't then you need to document the playing time of every player on your team. It can be as simple as just writing down when a player enters and exits a game.

This will help when a parent questions a child's playing time. You can simply pull out the proof of how much playing time each player has gotten and show it to the parent.

Sometimes parents don't even realize how much their child has actually played. The time their child is sitting the bench always seems like it's twice as long as the time spent in the game. If



you show them proof then usually they'll see that they're wrong and the problem will end right there. If you don't have proof then no matter what you say you'll never convince them that their child plays more than they think.

Also, keeping track of the playing time for all players can help you show a parent that no player gets the chance to play too much. This also helps calm parents down.

Again, many parents are too wrapped up in their own child to see that no player is playing a lot. If you show them proof then you can save yourself a lot of time and effort. You'll save yourself from trying to convince the parent that their child plays just about as much as all the other players.

So make sure you, or someone you can trust, documents how much every single player actually plays.

Strategy #9: Always be Consistent

When dealing with players and parents, a coach should always be consistent. This will help avoid problems and it'll also help solve problems.

A coach needs to be consistent with the way he/she coaches and the way he/she deals with parents. This means the coach should always coach according to the goals and rules that were set forth at the beginning of the season. Everything should always point back to these goals and rules. Then if a parent raises an objection then the parent can be told that the rules and goals are consistently followed.

The greatest benefit to being consistent is that potential problems will be avoided. This is because many problems with parents are due to perceived mistreatment of a child. This includes treating a parent's child differently than the rest of the players.

One example of this is a new coach who was in his first season coaching basketball. He began the season making sure everyone had a chance to start. Then, after everyone started once, he decided to go with five regular starters. His plans to start five regular players needed to be changed when two starters became academically ineligible to play and another player suffered a sprained ankle. Therefore, he had to insert three new starters into the line-up.



There were only ten players on the team so that meant that two players weren't getting a chance to start. It didn't take long before the fathers of both the non-starting players called the coach. The coach had to explain to the parents what was happening. The parents thought their sons were being discriminated against.

After several minutes on the phone it was somewhat straightened out, though the parents didn't seem completely content with the answers they got from the coach. The inconsistency in his starting policy was confusing and didn't seem fair to the parents.

If the coach had simply continued with his rule of alternating starters all season then there would've never been a problem. If he had simply started the five best players all season then there wouldn't have been a problem. But doing both was confusing and resulted in two parents being upset the entire season.

A problem like this could've easily been prevented. In fact, many problems can be prevented if the coach simply remains consistent throughout the season.

Strategy #10: Know You Are a Target

The final strategy for dealing with problem parents is to know that you are often a target of parents. Knowing this and preparing to deal with problems beforehand can help you be ready for whatever comes your way.

No matter what you do as a coach, there will always be at least one parent who will have a problem with you. There are some parents who seem to always think their child is being discriminated against. There are some parents who are having a tough time in their life and want to take it out on someone. There are some parents who feel guilty for not spending more time with their child and they think that they can make up for it by riding the coach to get their child more playing time.

There are countless reasons why some parents always have a problem with a coach. The exact reasons aren't important. What is important is that the coach be prepared to deal effectively with possible confrontations.



As a coach you have to plan what you will do when a problem arises. You have to know how you will handle it.

For example, if you have a parent who is yelling at his child on the field, you might first politely ask the parent to keep it down. Then you'll want to go to the player and remind him to keep his head in the game. Then after the game you'll want to meet privately with the father to explain your concerns and ask him to stop yelling at his son during games.

Your plans for dealing with parents should always include showing the utmost respect for the parent. They should also include remaining positive and polite at all times. You should also remain calm at all times.

It also helps if you stroke the parent's ego a little. You can compliment them on being so involved in their child's life or on being so concerned. Tell them it's nice to see in these times when so many parents don't care about their kids. But then quickly follow that with your concerns and why the parent has to stop doing what he or she is doing.

If you make the parent feel good first, the parent will be much more open to any suggestions that follow.

99% of the time a problem can be solved by the coach simply taking charge of the situation and saying the right things the right way. If the coach knows that he or she is a target and prepares for problems then the problems can quickly and easily be taken care of.