



## Parents and kids sport: Would you please behave!

by Michael Grose

*Children's sport has an amazing capacity to bring out the very worst in some parents – here's some tips for parents on how to behave.*

"How do I get my kids to behave?" is a perennial issue for parents.

However, talk to coaches of children's sports teams and they'll tell a similar story but with one major difference. They'll replace 'kids' with 'parents'. I spent some time with a group of football coaches recently and they were swapping stories of parent interference; some that bordered on the bizarre! Like the mum who asked the Under 12 football coach to have two full forwards, to accommodate her son as the position (her son's preference) was already filled. Huh!

Then there was the story of the dad who would race onto the ground at every break in play to conduct a private coaching session with his son. This may have been acceptable if he would just stick to giving advice to his son. However, this dad liked to share his thoughts with players on the other side as well as the officials on the ground.

But for pure ridiculousness you can't beat the parent who at the start of the year handed her daughter's football coach a list of preferred positions, as well as a list of positions that didn't suit her child. The midfield was in, but defence and attack were out, which somewhat restricted the coach's options.

There is nothing like kids' sport to bring out the worst in parents. Whether it's parent meddling with coaches; abusing the opposition; giving advice to the officials; or simply being super-competitive it seems that it's parents, not the players, game plans or tactics that keep junior sports coaches awake at night, and potentially away from continuing in their volunteer roles.

**If you're a parent who can relate to any of the above, here's some advice guaranteed to help:**

### **1. Get a job**

Junior sport is run by volunteers so there is no shortage of jobs. My coaching mates tell me that parents who are volunteers rarely behave poorly. Presumably, this is due to the fact that they see the bigger picture. That children play sport for many different reasons including to make friends, be part of a team and have fun. While winning increases in importance the older kids become most participants see well beyond winning as reasons for sports participation. So if you struggle to contain yourself at your child's sport then it's simple – volunteer to help. Even offer your services as a coach.

### **2. Watch someone else's child**

One of the biggest problems with junior sport is that most parents tend to focus on their own children. While

their eyes are firmly focused on their child they dissect every move their youngster makes. Sound familiar, if so I suggest you are taking your role as a parent too far. Better to keep it simple. That is, encourage your child's participation; provide the means for them to participate well; and encourage them to behave well toward participants on both sides. If you struggle with this, then I suggest that you start tracking another child's form for a game or two – any child, but your own. This may help you take your child's sport less personally and enjoy it for what it is – a healthy endeavour that should be enjoyable for everyone.

### 3. Say this

If you find yourself offering your child plenty of well-meaning advice before, during and after a game you may actually be turning your child off sport. It's the coach's job to coach and mentor, while it's your role to support your child and, of course, the coach. That's a great formula for success. Rather than give advice say, "I love to watch you play." It's a simple statement of approval that says to your child "I don't care how well you play. I just love the fact that you are taking part." That's it.

### 4. Play yourself

My coaching mates also tell me that it's often the parents that have never, or rarely played sport that are the worst in terms interfering, abusing or overstepping the parenting mark. That makes sense. When you've participated in a sport or game you appreciate how hard it is to master and also have a healthy level of respect for the game itself, which carries over to being a spectator. So consider participating in sport yourself so you can gain some perspective.

### 5. Model right

Kids take many of their cues from their parents, including how they should behave at sports. As a valued role model your behaviour is on show. If you want your child to be a solid citizen then you need to model socially acceptable, even generous behaviours and attitudes when spectating at your child's sporting events. If you struggle, then do all you can to change.

### 6. Take a break

Most children love it that their parents are interested in their sports and interests. And they generally enjoy it when you witness many of their firsts (kick, goal, win, backhand, etc.) and other big moments. On the other hand, kids often benefit from a little parental space, so consider taking a raincheck on occasions rather than go to every game. Instead let your child tell you about the game and of course, take a genuine interest in their blow-by-blow match report.



Junior sport is an integral part of an Australian childhood and it's wonderful that most sporting bodies currently report that children's participation rates are up. In an era when childhood obesity is a genuine concern as a community we need to do all we can to make sure children are participating in healthy endeavours, including sports. The attitude and behaviour of parents at sport can have a massive impact on children's immediate enjoyment as well as their long-term participation. If you overhear your child's coach or worse, your child, saying "How do I get my parents to behave?" then it may be time to rethink your behaviour at your child's sporting events, particularly if you want to encourage their long-term participation in sport.



#### Michael Grose

*Michael Grose, founder of Parenting Ideas, is one of Australia's leading parenting educators. He's the author of 10 books for parents including Thriving! and the best-selling Why First Borns Rule the World and Last Borns Want to Change It, and his latest release Spoonfed Generation: How to raise independent children.*