

Bullying in Sports ~ People Safety for Children's Coaches

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At a recent parent-child workshop, a very kind father called Ron said, "We need this kind of training for coaches too! At the children's soccer games that I coach, we do our best to keep our team members from bullying each other or kids from other teams. But sometimes the kids' parents will start screaming insults and threats at our coaches because they disagree with some decision. Even if they've signed pledges not to, some parents believe that acting this way and booing players is part of sports. What should we do?" "Why are you coaching children's soccer?" I asked. "This is a volunteer job, right? Is your goal to have children learn to win or for some other reason?"

"I like to coach because team sports build character and discipline," Ron said.

"What are children learning about discipline and character when they see their adults closing control and behaving abusively?" I asked. "Perhaps the best learning that these children might gain is by seeing you and the other coaches modeling positive respectful firm leadership."

We role-played the problem. Ron pretended to be an upset parent and yelled at me, "How dare you do that! I'm going to report you."

I calmly replied, "I am following our rules. You are welcome to tell anyone you wish that you disagree! Now please sit down so we can continue the game!"

Ron said that they also have many young teenagers who volunteer to coach. "It's awful," he explained, "when a 35-year-old man starts yelling at a twelve-year-old, 'What gives **you** the right to make this decision?'"

I pointed out that volunteering to be the coach **does** give someone the right to make decisions and that, as unfortunate as it is that a few people act this way, learning how to deal with upset people is an exceptional

leadership skill.

We discussed how to establish a system to make sure that parents signed pledges about respectful behavior and fair play that included some clearly defined consequences if they refused to honor these pledges. We also explored ways to prepare coaches to protect themselves including:

- imagining throwing the hurting words away into a trash can;
- imagining using an emotional raincoat that would protect them from anger;
- identifying common attacking comments and practicing calm firm answers.

The emotional raincoat technique can be practiced in partners. Without touching, one person starts screaming, "BLAH! BLAH! BLAH!" while acting very angry. The other person stays calm, keeps facing the angry person in ready position, with hands holding a whistle, and saying in a firm respectful voice, "I am sorry you are upset. We can agree to disagree. I see it differently and it's my call. It's my job to keep everyone safe here. Please sit down so that we can play."