



AVCA-Heart of America Region EDUCATIONAL TIP OF THE WEEK

More than Teamwork: Managing the Coach Parent Relationship

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THE COACH PARENT relationship is a complicated one, and also one that each club director or coach must deal with at some point or another throughout the season and beyond. It is important to remember that each situation is unique, and there are numerous ways to handle the varied and complicated scenarios that will undoubtedly present themselves. Most importantly, have a developed understanding of your own coaching and leadership philosophy and be committed to it. Your thoughtfulness and consideration will pay dividends if you can effectively communicate your beliefs to parents that are going to be bringing their own opinions, inexperience and questions to you.

At the foundation of the coach parent relationship is the communication that must exist between the coach, leadership, parents and athletes.

Deb: I think the parents do have a voice, but I think there is a process that must be established and utilized. If we're talking about a subject as simple as, say, playing time, we establish that a parent will not come to me without first having

their child/player speak to their particular coach beforehand. We have a handbook that's hosted online that the parents are directed to read, and as we move towards the beginning of the season, we have developed a step-by-step process that they must be aware of. I believe that the parents should have a say in matters, and largely believe that they have valuable feedback. "Culture" is a very big and important word in our club, and we like to believe that we have established a family type setting. As such, we want to encourage communication and the sharing of opinions. It's up to me, as the director, to establish the line on what is appropriate and inappropriate both in terms of topics and engagement. If a parent is behaving inappropriately, I will address them in person. One thing to consider when building your club is this: are the people in your culture adding to the fabric or tearing at the fabric? The more we work together as coaches, players and parents, the stronger that fabric becomes. If someone is tearing at that fabric, address it right away – the longer that you let it go unchecked, the bigger the tear is going to get. Parents can come

directly to me, but if they haven't first worked their way through our checklist, we'll send them to speak with the appropriate coach.

Jodi: I'm a believer that if you've signed up for something as intensive as our training program, hopefully you've done your homework and know what to expect. If you're going to invest in something like participating in a volleyball club, ideally you've done the research and are willing to trust the folks that are making this into a profession. We have a zero-input policy when it comes to parental involvement. It doesn't always make us the most popular or attractive club for people to play for, but at the same time, we attract the types of players that want to buy in to our approach and flourish. Though we encourage our players to address playing time concerns with the coaches, with our younger athletes, it isn't always as productive as they often cannot articulate their wants/needs, and in that case we will entertain questions from their parents.

Sherry: Our parent culture is a huge part of our overall club culture. Parents are just part of the deal. As a director or coach, you've asked for access to two of the most important things in their life: their wallet and their child. You aren't going to get that without them having some opinions. The reality is that you can have policies and rulebooks, but people are going to step out of line. The more that we can do to help our coaches establish proper communication with parents, the more effectively you can engage them as a partner. It helps you as a coach and a club director when the parents understand what you're doing, why you're doing and how you're going about it. That way, they can have your back when they're in the car on the way home and the athlete is

complaining about playing time. We have a process that begins at tryouts wherein we engage, educate and attempt to build a positive interaction with our parents and coaches. Some coaches take to this naturally, but many are afraid of engagement, particularly negative interactions. We have to help our coaches get to some level of comfort so that they can have a positive team dynamic and reach greater success during the season.

One of the biggest issues that affect coaches and parents at the club level is the distribution of playing time. Often, playing time is handled differently at the various age levels. Parents at all levels will become involved in the playing time situation, given the opportunity.

Deb: Different ages require different approaches. The younger the player, the more you want to consider opportunities for everyone to have equal playing time. The challenge here is that volleyball isn't inherently a "timed" sport. Do you sub, do you hold off? And how many parents at this early stage in the career even understand what the substitution rules are? Hopefully, at the older stages, you and your coaching staff have already communicated what the overall goal is. Is the goal to win, or is the goal to maximize playing time opportunities? If you don't know the goal, you can't answer that question, and managing those interactions will be difficult. Before interacting with a parent regarding playing time, have all of the information possible so you can be upfront about exactly why a particular player is getting the playing time that they are. Each player needs to feel valued when they come into your

gym and understanding their playing time situation plays a big factor in that.

Jodi: When you have a no approach style of managing your club and teams, things need to be handled a little differently. We state right upfront what our philosophy and goals truly are. Do we want to win, develop fully, travel and have fun, develop players for certain positions and schools? Whatever our goal, we have to stick to it from day one all the way to the end of the season. If you tell everyone they'll get playing time – coach it that way. We keep basic stats and evaluate at the end of a weekend, looking at how often players got into the match. We also try to manage the schedule so that we're finding situations where we can make sure to play everyone as well as events where we play stronger lineups. Many smaller issues can be alleviated through strong management – such as making sure better players don't feel underused, etc. Playing time must also be managed from an overuse perspective. If you're playing a long season, even the most talented players shouldn't be playing more than 70%, especially considering the surfaces. When you factor in training and match hours, it is crucial to minimize risk of injury and make parents aware of the potential negative impact that overuse can have – there's value in not playing all of the time.

Sherry: We do try to play at the highest level possible in our club. What we tell our coaches when picking their roster (we have rosters of 10 instead of 12), is that we emphasize that everyone is to have a role, understand what that role is, and how they can affect their standing on the roster. We spend a lot of time instilling in our coaches the value that comes from a positive team dynamic. Having someone on the

floor that bench that's upset and complaining because they aren't playing can counteract each other.

Our experience has shown that the concept of fair playing time has different meaning to coaches, parents and athletes. Disparate views on what constitutes fair playing time are the most common source of athlete and/or parent frustration in youth sports.

A big part of the parental involvement is educational – for example, we'll find that a parent had no idea what a back-row player and a middle blocker were, or didn't understand rotations, and at the end of the conversation they'll have a better understanding of how the sport works and leave happier. In our club, every playing time discussion is held by appointment only. It cannot happen before, during or after any practice or competition. Our goal in these interactions is to always reach a positive outcome. Nobody wants frustration to lead to quitting. We don't label parents with playing time issues as problems or helicopter parents – they may just simply not understand the situation clearly. If we see parent behavior of any sort that we think of as detrimental to the athlete, we will proactively contact the parent and try to bring them in for a meeting. Oftentimes overbearing parents, in an effort to help their child, end up hurting their development in more ways than simply on the court. At the start of the season, beginning with tryouts, we're initiating parents into our culture. We have a mandatory parents' orientation that must be attended, even if the parents have been in our program for seven years. We engage with them to proactively address any issues or concerns that may come up. We know

that not everyone will be happy at the end of the season and encourage parents to come to us if they feel things aren't going in a direction they like. If the experience isn't enjoyable, they won't be back.

Sometimes you need to be firm about a noncontact policy with parents.

Jodi: If you want to make an impactful change, you have to have some guts. You have to be able to bite the bullet and just do it – you will always go through some pain in some way regardless of what type of change you make. If you make a decision, go at it 100% and be willing to work through the repercussions. Maybe you don't get the best players, maybe you don't get the coaches you want. Work on educating your parents so that you don't need constant meetings to help them understand their respective situations. Utilize your website. Establish a "parent corner" and post content there to make them feel engaged. Since we

have closed practices, we add video updates explaining what we're focusing on. People love videos – parents love seeing and hearing what their children are doing. If you provide enough engagement and education, you can limit and reduce the need for meetings. Email can be a valuable tool for communicating with parents. I have one rule when I'm responding to a parent that has written me with concerns: is there anything educational in the message that I'm sending? I want to make sure that before I hit "send," I'm giving them something useful and expanding their knowledge of the sport.

Maintaining a positive relationship with the parents associated with your club can pay off greatly in terms of athlete satisfaction, excellent reputation and retention.

Coaching your coaches on the importance of cultivating such a dynamic is beneficial to everyone involved.

Thanks for your membership in the Heart of America Region

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