

Tips for Working with Difficult Parents

Every coach has run into situations where a parent wants his or her child to succeed in sports at all costs—whether it means playing hurt or just trying to win the game. Coaches need to treat each situation delicately and learn tips to prevent, diffuse and convert a potentially negative situation into a positive one.

How can I prevent parents from overreacting or becoming difficult?

From the first day of practice, it's important to define and communicate shared goals, values, and procedures to parents and players. You set the tone for practices and play, and can instill a positive ethic that signals zero tolerance for difficult behavior. Your statements may include:

- Our primary goal is to develop the technical and social skills of young athletes.
- Winning is great, but it's not everything. Learning to be a good sport and working as a team is the most important.
- Having fun and getting physical exercise is key.
- Whether we lose or win, we do it as a team.

During the first meeting, it's also important to outline clear roles for yourself, other coaches, parents, and players. You should welcome the parents' support and encouragement and call on the players to work hard and do their best. Open communication through emails, phone calls, and team and individual meetings should be welcome on all levels to reinforce roles and responsibilities.

How should I deal with a difficult situation?

Whenever possible, try to avoid situations where you sense the potential for trouble. In a heated situation during a game or practice, coaches and parents often move into an adrenaline zone that signals to the brain, "fight or flight." This is not the best mental state for resolving an issue; interactions can become aggressive and parents may feel threatened.

Try to maintain a positive attitude and remember: you can only control your own reactions and actions. When you speak with the difficult parent, be sure to:

- Listen
- Empathize
- Explain

People are much more receptive to discussion and alternatives if they believe you understand the reasons behind their actions, whether it's concern about a scholarship possibility, winning a game, avoiding injury, or wanting to be the best.

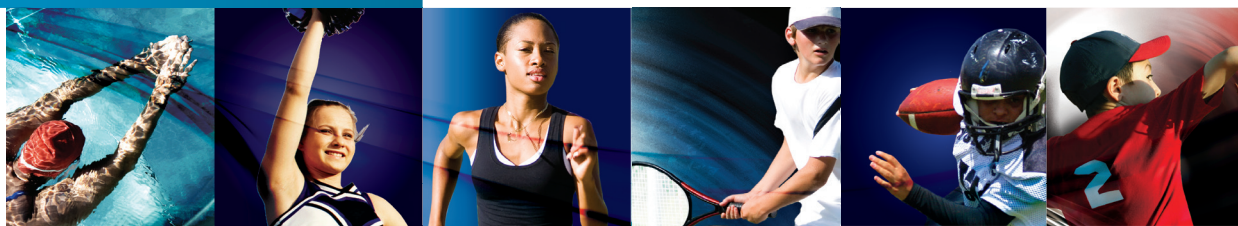
Sometimes the best solution may be to physically separate yourself from the situation for the rest of game or even for a few days. Don't be afraid to take this step if it's necessary.

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How should I handle a tense parent meeting?

In meeting with difficult parents, begin by thanking them for meeting with you and ask them what they think about the issue in question or other related issues. Be sure to listen carefully; do not interrupt. When they finish, ask: "Is there anything else you would like to share?" Once they have finished, acknowledge what they have said and ask once again: "Is there anything further you want to tell me?" Listen again and do not interrupt.

Ensuring that parents have held nothing back at the outset of the meeting lays the groundwork for a constructive discussion. Next, understand the parent's goals, values, and view of how things should go, and empathize. Consider the situation from the other point of view and let the parent know that you understand by repeating back what the parent said.

Finally, explain the problem and your proposed solution in terms that address the parent's concerns. Set out your own goals, values, and view while considering ways to work out multiple options for a solution.

How can I establish what a positive outcome should be?

Parents are generally receptive to an approach that benefits their children in some form. You should make it clear that your role as a coach is to create a positive and safe experience for each child, and you want to work together with the parent to resolve the problem or issue.

Based on this common ground, you can define a positive resolution. In many cases a successful outcome is simply having the parent's opinion heard and understood.

Whatever the other issues/pressures that created the difficult situation, it's important to stress to the parent that you want to work together to create a solution, whether that is resting an athlete or taking a step back during a practice or game.