

Coaching Parents

By Cal Ripken and Bill Ripken, MLB greats and founders of RipkenBaseball.com.

Youth baseball coaches should make player experience the number one priority. One part of this process that often is overlooked is coaching the parents.

This doesn't mean that you should be trying to teach the parents to understand the game better or to have them master the game's skills. Instead it means that as a coach you should help parents understand their role in maximizing their child's overall baseball experience.

Begin by holding a preseason meeting with your parents to discuss your teaching philosophies, feelings about playing time, the schedule of practices and games and enlisting their support at practices or games. One other thing that you can talk to them about is how they can become "good baseball parents." This can be done via a handout or by simply speaking to them about their roles in creating a positive experience for everyone involved. You may want to consider using these concepts to form a parental code of conduct.

Reinforce the Concept of Teamwork

How many times have you attended a youth baseball game and noticed that a particular parent only cheers for his or her own child? This is common for youth sporting events. As a coach, it can be difficult to teach a young player the importance of supporting his teammates or playing within a team concept if his parents only cheer for one child. Explain to the parents that your job as a coach is to provide an all-around educational experience for the players. Tell them that one of the greatest life lessons that baseball teaches is the importance of teamwork.

Parents are the most influential figures in most kids' lives, so stress to the parents that you want them cheering for all of the players or none of the players. Also, make sure to tell the parents that you would like them to make a point to congratulate every player after every game – win or lose.

Maintain an Even Keel

It's easy to cheer, scream and be happy when your child's team scores 11 runs in the first inning. It's much harder to mask your disappointment when that same team falls behind 12 to 11 in the sixth. Kids feed off the atmosphere at the ballpark. If everyone is full of laughter, smiles and support when things are going great and dead silent when adversity hits, don't you think the players are going to sense that and put more pressure on themselves? Remember, winning is not the ultimate goal when it comes to youth baseball. Making sure that the kids have a good time and learn something are the most important goals. Coaches should tell their parents to maintain an even keel – don't get too high or too low – and then lead by example. The last thing we want is for a kid to be standing on the field thinking that he has failed.

To maintain an even keel, resist excessive criticism – to an individual player or the entire team. Remember that kids are fragile. One negative experience may cause someone to give up the game forever. Coaches or parents – in public view, should never address mental or physical

mistakes. If a kid messes up, he knows it. Pointing it out in front of everyone – even when doing it in an instructive manner – is not going to help that player’s mental state or make him a better player. Coaches should wait until the player comes off the field, and parents probably should wait until well after the game – either that night after they get home or the next day. Nothing does more to shatter a young player’s self-confidence than correcting him or reprimanding him publicly. Make it clear to the parents that you are the coach and will handle everything on the field.

Don’t Blame the Umpires

Umpires make mistakes, but it is only in very, very rare instances that an umpire actually costs a team a game. One of our primary goals as youth baseball coaches is to teach the kids the importance of respecting authority. Like the police in our hometown, umpires are the voice of authority on the baseball field and should be treated as such. Coaches must tell parents prior to the season that verbal abuse of umpires will not be tolerated – not because umpires are always right, but because of the message it sends to the players. Having respect for authority is one of our duties as American citizens. The coach is the only person who ever should be allowed to question an umpire, and when he does it always should be in a conversational, professional and courteous manner.

Cheer for the Other Team

Parents can set a great example for their kids by cheering for the opposing team when there is an outstanding play or performance. Coaches can set the tone by shaking opposing players’ hands, helping them up if they are injured or telling them that they did something well. Most times parents will pick up on this and will join in. Soon, the players on the team will follow suit, giving the team a reputation for good sportsmanship. Like teamwork, winning and losing graciously is a lesson that carries over throughout our lives and can earn us a tremendous amount of respect from our peers.

Ask Parents for Assistance

It’s no secret that many youth baseball coaches — and sometimes coaches up in to the high school level as well — are volunteers in need of assistance. Coaches should reinforce the concept of teamwork among parents, instead of supporting just their own children, by openly asking for assistance from parents at practices and games. Don’t ask for a large commitment. See if one parent of each child will volunteer to assist with one practice and one game. Assure them that you are not asking them to be Joe Torre, just to come to a practice and toss the kids some balls or to make sure the dugout is safe and remains under control during a game. The parents are more likely to take ownership in the team and to get to know and want to support the players if they feel part of it. Additionally, the players will see all the different parents pitching in to make their season a success – further emphasizing the power of teamwork.

Set the Tone

Addressing parents can be a difficult and sensitive issue for coaches. Failure to take control and set some ground rules before the season can be disastrous, however. Most times, if parents sense that the coach has a plan and understand that all he wants to do is to provide their children with the best possible experience, they will be much easier. However, there will always going to be parents who cross the line one way or another. Some parents continually cross the line. As a coach, as long as you set the parameters up front and explain why you approach things the way you do – even consider giving the parents something to sign off on – your chances of creating the atmosphere of teamwork, good sportsmanship, cooperation and support that you desire (among players and parents) are good.

If you are not proactive, choose to avoid the parental issue altogether prior to the season, you will find it nearly impossible to successfully address the issues as they arise throughout the season. This can lead to public second-guessing, criticism and a lack of respect toward you from the parents. As we know, parental attitudes often filter down to their kids, which can create an atmosphere that is completely opposite of what you are hoping to establish.

Cultivate parental attitude of encouragement, sportsmanship, and collective help, and watch as your players continue to become better athletes while they take away valuable life-long lessons.

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