

"When it comes to success, you must be interested in finding the best way, not in having your own way."

John Wooden

(Former UCLA basketball teacher-coach, who celebrated his 93rd birthday on 10/14/03)

Last month I wrote about the need for more Positive Coaching by the educators in our sport. Coaches obviously play a vital role in the development of a successful athlete. This month I will try to address the other major, and the most influential, contributor to a child's development (peer group being the third). This month we take on the double-edged sword of Parental Involvement...

Partners Not Problems – Keeping Parents off Your Back and on Your Side

Research has proven that children whose parents are involved in their education are more likely to have higher academic achievement and better social skills than children whose parents are not a part of their education. When teachers communicate and collaborate with the families of the children they teach everyone benefits. This carries through to a child's athletic achievement as well. A child whose parents are actively involved in their development and support their progress will achieve more in less time.

When families are involved in the learning process, they have greater access to teachers and a network of other parents and several positive things occur. Families:

- Develop a better understanding of policies and curriculum.
- Have more appropriate expectations for their child's development and better understand their child's abilities and skills.
- Are more appreciative of teacher efforts.

Oh but what price do we have to pay as educators having the parents involved?

Have you ever had a parent browbeat you in an attempt to enter a specific meet? Or have a parent file a "disappointment" lawsuit because their little athlete doesn't get enough attention from the head coach? Parents see their child's success as the key to success in life, and they aren't shy about expressing themselves. Some teachers that I know joke that PTA actually stands for "power trip association."

When families rearrange their schedules for practices and competitions, spend thousands of dollars training and grooming Jenny Gymnast for the Olympic berth or Division I scholarship, parents are not always looking at the real world. I will never forget the last gymnast whose parents were not satisfied with the training she was receiving and left our gym in order to get a better chance at a college scholarship. She got one, but only lasted a year at the school. She'd had it and returned to me to let me know the decision to leave was her parents', not hers and she always loved the sport – until her parents got "too involved."

That's not how the parents see it, of course. They aren't being overbearing; they're "helping." Parents are convinced the stakes are so high that they can justify doing almost anything to give their child an advantage. So how do you deal with "parents who care too much?"

You talk to parents about the salutary effects of failure and they look at you like you are crazy. Because they know that if their children experience any failure they are NEVER going to get to a good college and will probably immediately start to take drugs and end up in prison. The idea, the

experts say, is to step back and give the student a little space. Last month I preached to the coaches about positive influences; this month, you need to preach to the parents about letting the child make some of their own decisions and live their lives. Turn those problem parents into partners!

The best place to start is gathering the parents together for a general "focus group" session. Facilitate an open meeting with as many parents as possible to establish effective communication with them by asking three key questions:

- What do you like about our program (what do we do best)?
- What do you NOT like about our program (what don't we do well)?
- How do you feel we should change (how would you do it)?

It may feel intimidating opening yourself up to criticism like this but the key is to be sure to include as many different "interest group" parents in this meeting as possible. Be sure to set the ground rules at the beginning of the meeting and assure everyone that you are truly interested in their comments. Let everyone know that no promises are being made but you will try to respond to their input with a follow-up meeting with the group after a short time. Above all, tell everyone that their comments will be treated with respect and they should participate freely. What typically occurs is as you lead the discussion you will find that as one parent complains about your workout schedule, another parent will express how much they love the schedule. As one parent calls you to task for too many meets, another parent will ask for more competitions (sound familiar?). If the parents love the teachers and coaches, maybe they can suggest ways to recognize the staff that won't cost you any money. If the parents don't like the way the gym is arranged or the lack of certain equipment, you may find that they are willing to help rearrange the gym or coordinate some fundraising to help you purchase new bars. Everyone likes to be part of a solution to a problem. I have found that when all is said and done, the parents have a better understanding and greater respect for your position trying to please as many interests as possible. They appreciate your efforts to listen and address their concerns whether you meet their needs or not.

The next step is to engage staff in your effort and get them to help you create a "family-friendly" operation that welcomes parental involvement and invites cooperation. Coaches need to learn that parents aren't the enemy – that together with the parents, they can help the athlete grow to achieve more than if the coach or parent carries an adversarial attitude. Possible solutions include allowing the parent to observe all workouts (what are you trying to hide anyway?); or if the gymnast works better without the parent watching, at least engage the parent and child in that decision. Coaches should learn to respect the talents and perspective of the parents. Get the coaches to appreciate appropriate help from a parent – a dad who is a carpenter can help build spotting platforms, a mom that works for the newspaper may help get a feature article published about the team. Involve the parents and let staff know that you want that to be OK.

Finally, build alliances with the parents through constant communication. Share information at the follow-up (I call that the follow-through) meeting about program philosophy, discipline policies, procedures, and any pertinent changes you have made since the focus meeting. Create a suggestion box but don't stop there, develop an "I've got a complaint" form, an "I've got an idea" form and an "I've got a compliment" letter. Make it easy for the parents to contact you to let you know how they feel. Get out of your office and greet the parents. Host informal coffee hours to get the parents acquainted with one another. Conduct periodic feedback surveys. The key is to not stop communicating. Publish newsletters, web updates, newspaper articles, personal notes, bulletin board announcements, posters, signs and regular meetings, anything you can to spread your message to keep the parents off your back and on your side.

Next Month – *"Organizational Leadership"*

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"Teaching consists of causing or allowing people to get into situations from which they cannot escape except through thinking."

H. Stephen Glenn