

Tips for Parents Considering Coaching

By Nancy Churnin / Reprinted with Permission of the Dallas Morning News

Gail Gross, a Houston radio talk-show host who has worked as an educator and is an authority on child development, says the best thing she ever did as coach of her daughter's basketball team was to walk away when asked.

"I was the worst coach who ever lived," Dr. Gross says cheerfully. "I'm right-side dominant and have poor vision. I dreaded every game because I was such a failure."

But her memories of that time are happy because of the good communication she had with her daughter. She took the job at her daughter's request when no one else wanted it. She left it to a replacement when her daughter told her, halfway through the season: "Mom, you're right. This isn't your sport. Thank you for your support, but you don't have to do this anymore."

Dr. Gross and other experts offer these coaching tips for parents:

- **Ask permission:** The first question to ask is whether your child wants you to coach, says Jim Thompson, the author of *The Double-Goal Coach*: (Quill, \$13.95). Mr. Thompson founded the Positive Coaching Alliance ([www .positivecoach.org](http://www.positivecoach.org)), a non-profit organization based at Stanford University. He says you need to know if your child wants to come on board as your partner in the experience. If not, there's very little chance it will work out.
- **Set up cues:** Anticipate moments of conflict, such as how your child will feel when you praise a teammate, or she doesn't get the position she wants, advises Dr. Gross. Ask your child to help you come up with signals, such as a hand sign, to remind her of your agreement not to get upset or act out about disappointments or frustrations.
- **Help kids see you as coach:** It can be confusing to distinguish between the roles of parent and coach. For younger children, it may even help if you literally put on a different hat for coaching to help the child with the transition, says Dr. Ken Christian, a New York-based psychologist, author and organizational consultant.
- **Get your head together:** You have to get your own feelings about your child in order before you take on a coaching job, says Dr. Christian.
- "It's like being therapist to your own child," he says. "Sometimes you are looking in your child to find the thing you like in yourself. When you don't see it, you have to let go and let them be who they are. You have to be Buddha-like."
- **Teach life lessons:** John Bates' son, Nehemiah, complained when his father pulled him off the field to give equal time to a player who didn't perform as well as he did. Quietly, at home, his father would talk to the 5-year-old about how all team members get an equal chance to play even if they have different talents. "He finally got it toward the end."
- **Ask lots of questions:** Telling children what to do never works as well as asking them, says Mr. Thompson. For example, a coach can say, "I have a suggestion for making you a better hitter. Would you like to hear it?" Most of the time a kid will say yes. Then you can make the criticism into an "if and then" statement, as in "If you bend your knees more, then you may get more power." And if the kid is not open to hearing your suggestion, then say, "OK, no problem" and walk away. Chances are he will come back the next day and ask what you were going to tell him.
- **Listen:** When your child complains, don't defend yourself or your position, says Dr. Gross. Let him say what he feels. Then say what you feel.
- **Be fair:** The biggest complaint coaches' kids have is that their parents favor them or are too hard on them. One dad, Tim O'Brien of Pittsburgh, calls the All-Star games "Dad-ball" because the teams are always stacked with the coaches' kids, whether they are

deserving or not. Frank Martin, founder and director of Kids Sports Network, says he can always tell the coach's kid because the coach is paying the most attention to him – often by yelling.

- **Reward good behaviour:** Ignore bad behaviour whenever possible, says Mr. Thompson. Instead of lashing out at the one kid who is not paying attention, Mr. Thompson suggests focusing on one who is, as in saying, "Hey, Ryan, I really appreciate how you're in the ready position."
- **Model good behaviour:** If you want your child to keep his temper, keep your temper. Be generous with praise and use mistakes as teaching opportunities, says Mr. Thompson.
- **Try not to embarrass:** Coaching is a very public form of parenting. And it's hard, at times, not to worry about how the behaviour of your child reflects on you. Remind yourself that your child is not you, says Dr. Gross. Try to either ignore bad behaviour or pull the child aside. Defer as much discussion as you can to the ride home. If problems persist, you may want to enlist assistant coaches or other parents to help and ask them to take over more of the interaction with your child.
- **Busy work is good:** It doesn't hurt to give them an alternative to (literally) climbing the walls while they're waiting for their turn. Pastor Bates entertained the kids on the bench by giving them clipboards and having them take notes on the game for him.
- **Know when to fold 'em:** Youth sports couldn't exist without the parents who generously donate their time. But if it just isn't working for you and your child, find a replacement and find another way to contribute.

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