

Pointers For Parents

Soccer Moms And Dads: Loosen Up A Little

(NAPSA)—Youth sports coaches across America have a similar problem brewing: Many parents can be harder to manage than the young athletes who play the sport.

Across the country, there has been an increase of incidents and inappropriate behavior among parents at youth sporting events. Although the extreme cases—parents, athletes, coaches or officials seriously injured by enraged parents—are rare, other incidents of inapt behavior, such as parental pressure and verbal abuse, are abundant and plague the nearly 30 million athletes in organized youth sports.

Recent research shows that there are at least three incidents per week that involve violent behavior at youth sporting events. Many experts believe that parents have become more demanding, pressuring their children to win at all costs. The reason? The world is moving at an ever-faster pace and parents, possibly without even realizing it, have begun to heap their everyday pressures onto their children's activities.

At the end of the day, sports should be fun for everyone involved. When we look at highly successful athletes, they thrive because they are passionate about a particular sport. Their dedication comes from within themselves, not coaches or parents.

According to Julie Foudy, captain of the U.S. National Soccer Team, "Parents need to support and encourage their children, but not suffocate them with pressure. The common denominator among our women's national team players is that we love to play soccer—plain and simple. However, that must be the athlete's decision, not the parent's."

She believes that parents need to "loosen up a little" when it comes to youth sports, which goes along with the tagline of one of her personal favorite brands. Across



During youth sports events, a parent's position is on the sidelines, as a positive influence.

the country, Dunkin' Donuts shops are supporting youth soccer by sponsoring local teams.

"Let the coaches do their job in coaching and critiquing. It is important for parents to give unconditional love and support, not pressure the kid," says Foudy.

Tips on "loosening up a little:"

- **Bond with other parents**—The sidelines are a great place to get to know other parents as everyone cheers the team along. Another idea is to establish a schedule where each parent takes turns bringing treats for the players and parents alike. Coffee to-go is delicious and convenient for cooler weather or early morning games.

- **Offer positive reinforcement**—Applaud good plays, offer praise, reward every player at the end of the game—not just for winning. A box of Munchkins™ donut Hole Treats or seasonal varieties of donuts will happily feed kids of all ages.

- **Silent Sundays**—No cheering or yelling allowed from the sidelines. Simply sit in silence and

enjoy watching each kid play. For an experience where there are no winners or losers, don't keep score at certain games, thus keeping the focus on pure fun.

- **Take a break**—Just as you take a coffee break at work when you feel like the world will explode, why not do the same when you feel yourself "heating up" in the stands? Go for a walk to avoid becoming verbally abusive toward the young athletes, officials and other adults.

- **Emphasize the importance of team**—Organized sports embody leadership, so show the kids how teams can work together. Take the lead on a team outing to a game of the U.S. National Soccer Team or a popular high school or college game in the area that could use some positive cheering on the sidelines.

Just like every other aspect of parenting, learning to be a positive role model is a lot of hard work. Foudy, who credits her own parents for encouraging her to "find what you love and then pursue excellence with spirit and hard work," believes that young athletes need to decide on their own the dedication level at which they want to participate in sports.

Although children often joke with their parents to "loosen up a little," it's not such a hard thing to accomplish. It's important to keep in mind that every parent is in the same boat—they love their family and want their children to be happy and successful. However, true teamwork and support is often the best way to battle the difficult challenge of determining what defines success for parents and children alike.

If you have a question for Julie Foudy about the U.S. National Soccer Team or would like to find out more information about parental violence and youth sports, visit www.dunkindonuts.com for additional tips and links to Web sites.