

## How Adults Take the Joy Out of Sports (And How We Can Fix It)

We have all seen it.

I was recently watching a 12-year-old boys soccer game, and I saw it again. Like a deer in the headlights, the left defender on the blue team was seemingly stranded on the field and unsure where to go or what to do. He turned to one sideline, where his coach is urging him to “step up, get tight on your man, don’t let him get the ball and turn.”

He turned to the other sideline, and there is his dad, telling him to “drop off, that player is faster than you, don’t let them play it in behind you!”



“Heads, I listen to instructions my coach shouts. And tails, I listen to instructions my dad shouts.”

So what does he do? While he should be focusing on the game, instead he has to make a choice. Do I ignore my dad, whom I have to live with, listen to on the car ride home, and spend an entire week with before my next game? Or do I listen to my coach, who is my teacher, whom I was told to listen to and respect by my dad, who has the power to give me playing time, or sit me on the bench when I don’t listen?

Is it any wonder why so many kids look confused out there? Why they play tentatively? Why they are afraid to make mistakes? Why they don’t seem to be learning anything? **Why they stop enjoying the experience of playing sports?**

Is it any wonder why so many kids quit sports, when the only choice they are faced with every weekend is to willfully ignore, and in their eyes disrespect, an important adult authority figure in their lives?

We all love our kids, and we want the best for them, but **in this oftentimes race to nowhere** we call youth sports, our words and actions are not helpful to our kids despite our best intentions. They hurt performance instead of helping, and that make sports a place of disappointment instead of enjoyment.

**Many kids quit sports when the enjoyment is gone, for enjoyment is one of the three key components of achievement and long-term participation in sports (autonomy and intrinsic motivation being the other two).** For some reason, many adults have been convinced that sports can either be competitive, or fun, but not both, and they could not be more wrong. This happens because people do not understand that enjoyment is about the happiness derived from pursuing your potential and your passion. It’s about getting better. It’s about the moment, and doing something you love to do. When parents and coaches forget that their youth sports teams are full of kids who want to play well and have fun, the kids begin to question whether the experience that is no longer enjoyable is worth pursuing. The negatives start to outweigh the positives, and when it stops being fun, they quit.

### **Here are 6 ways adults take the enjoyment out of sports:**

**1. Parents coaching from the sideline:** I often talk to the athletes. When asked, “what would you like your parents to say on the sidelines during your games?” 99% of those kids respond immediately with a resounding “NOTHING!” No athlete has ever told me “ I love when my parents tell me what to do” or “it’s great when my dad yells at the referee.”

Here is the funny thing, though. When I ask audiences of parents “what do your kids want you to say on the sideline” they immediately respond “NOTHING!” as well. They know what their kids want, but here is the kicker. I ask “but what are you going to do this

weekend at your kid's' games?" The answer for many parents, as we all know, is yell instructions, disrespect the officials, collectively groan when kids make mistakes, and pretty much do exactly the opposite of what our kids want from us! **This is disrespectful, confusing and disruptive to learning when they are trying to play a game (see the video from the PCA)** and take feedback from a coach, fellow players, and from parents. The next time you see a player turn to the sideline and yell, "shut up, I got it" you should probably take their advice.

**2. Yelling instructions while the ball is rolling:** Any adult giving instruction to a player involved in the play, under pressure, and trying to make the decisions that the game requires, is confusing. It is also scientifically proven to diminish performance. As my friend Tom Statham, who has coached in the Manchester United youth set up for over 20 years, is fond of saying, "we don't coach when the ball is rolling." Let players make decisions and let them learn from both the good and bad ones. Every time we solve a problem for a player in a game we delay learning. It's better to ask after the play "where could you have been on that play" than to tell a kid to pinch in, get rid of it, or my favorite, "SHOOT!" If a teacher gave your kids the answers to the math test, they would get a good result, and learn nothing, right? That's what many coaches and parents do in sports.

**3. Disrespecting officials:** We teach our kids to respect authority figures, from teachers to parents to coaches and yes, referees and officials. Then as soon as that official makes a disagreeable call, we lose the plot. We yell, scream, lose our cool, and then wonder why kids do the same. We ride an official and then admonish a player who gets a card or technical foul for dissent.

**4. Parents questioning the coach:** When parents question coaching decisions, player positions, playing time, tactics, and more, they undermine a coach's authority, and the players respect for that coach. You teach your kids to question everything a coach tells them, and this makes them indecisive come game time. It also takes their focus off things they can control, **like their attitude, their effort**, and their focus, and turns it towards uncontrollable like coaching decisions. Yes, your child might have a coach that sees things differently than you do, but so what? If you really know that much more than the coach, you should coach. If you do not have the time or energy to do so, then be thankful someone does and support that person.

**5. Commenting on Their Teammates' Play:** An athlete's teammates are very likely their friends as well. When a parent tries to make her daughter feel better by saying "I don't know why Jenny always gets to play forward instead of you, she gives the ball away too much" it is very uncomfortable for her child. When a coach makes disparaging comments on the bench about a player on the field, when you put your substitutes in, the only thing they are thinking is "what is he saying about me right now?" You are talking behind the back of their friend and you are destroying the critical trust that teammates need in each other and their coach. Keep your thoughts to yourself.

**6. Making the ride home/post game talk a "teachable moment:"** Ah yes, the ride home, and kids' least favorite memory in sports. Every time I ask a room full of student athletes to tell me about the ride home, the collective eye roll is enough to cause a small earthquake. Most kids tell me that they don't mind some feedback from mom and dad (if they actually know what they are talking about) but very few actually like it on the ride home.

**You can read more about this [here](#)**, but needless to say, parents, please let the conversation on ride home be dictated by your kids, and unless they bring it up, not be about the game. Coaches, say only what needs to be said immediately after the game, and save the teaching and criticism for later when everyone is less emotional.

There is an easy solution to this, believe it or not. Ready for it?

**ASK YOUR CHILD, "WHAT DO YOU WANT?"**

**ASK THEM WHAT MAKES SPORTS ENJOYABLE AND NOT ENJOYABLE, AND THEN DO MORE OF THE ENJOYABLE THINGS.**