

ADvice “Working with Challenging Parents”

Dave Kapp, CMAA and Michael Orica, IAA Magazine

One of the most challenging parts of my job as an athletic director is working with parents who are unhappy, critical and sometimes angry. These parents are often over-involved in their child's life, attempt to live through their child's performance and are over-focused on “success.” They are parents who often coach from the sidelines, criticize officials, regularly attend practices, and may want increased playing time for their child. Sound familiar?

Fortunately, most parents that we deal with are supportive and understand that being involved in athletics is part of helping their child develop into a well-rounded individual.

1. The **over-involved parent** creates a situation in which the child is under pressure to perform for his or her parents rather than the focus being on development as an athlete and a person.

The history of parents becoming over-involved probably began in the late 1980's with parents becoming more fearful and anxious about their child's well-being and development. The label of “helicopter” parent was given to this new group of over-involved parents. Their children became precious art objects that were fragile and vulnerable. They began to praise their child at every turn and were reluctant to criticize or reprimand their child for fear of hurting their child's self-esteem. Many parents began to **feel guilt (Abandonment)** because they worked too much, were divorced, or were too exhausted and found they could not say “no” to their child without feeling like they had failed as parents. Parents began to believe that their child must always be happy and satisfied. The result was that they created a child whose self-esteem was “fragile” and who should never fail. As this continued parent began to feel that it was their responsibility to make their child successful, that their child was entitled to being successful, and that their child must immediately and continuously be successful.

At the same time, parents began to **over-invest (Abundance)** in their child, in a way that the child's performance was an extension of his or her own self-esteem. They begin to view their child as a little adult with increased expectations for them to perform. As the parents' egos became more a part of their relationship with their child, these parents became over-involved, not in their development, but in their need to be successful. Before this time, parents worried mostly about raising a responsible and hard-working child. These parents were not as fearful of their child failing and thought it developed tough-mindedness and character. The focus was on their child's development, not on the parents feeling good about themselves.

There are two further types of over-involved parents that require special understanding and strategies as we try to work with them. The first type is what we call

2. “Excitable” parents who are typically supportive of the athletic department but who can get caught up in the moment. They embarrass themselves by becoming loud and by yelling during games and at officials. They usually quiet down once the game is over or complain to you about coaches' decisions during the game or the poor officiating. With these parents your approach should be to support, listen, empathize, and encourage the parents to tone it down. These are the parents you visit in the stands before the game and build a proactive relationship with during the season. They are typically harmless, want the best for their child and the team, but are insecure and just want to be heard.

The more difficult and troubling parent is the

3. “Hostile” parent who is not supportive of the athletic department and is very competitive, aggressive, accusatory, and controlling. These parents’ motivation is very different than the excitable parent. They want to make their issue personal and desire power in their relationship with you. They are not merely expressing frustration about a certain issue but want a confrontation.

Hostile parents have deep feelings of inferiority and inadequacy and are resentful of authority. They attempt to deal with their own fear of failure by projecting on to you or the coach their feelings of inadequacy. They try to compensate for these feelings by living through their child and put tremendous pressure on their child to succeed. In a sense, they are saying, “If my child is successful, then I am successful.” They believe the primary reason for their child to be an athlete is to win awards, gain social status or become a college/professional athlete. They usually have an unrealistic expectation about their child’s ability. Hostile parents will often express their disappointment to their child about their performance. Their child is the athlete who will tend to argue more with coaches and officials, show less effort and enjoyment during practice and training, and are more likely to drop out when they are not feeling successful enough.

With this type of parent, you must set clear boundaries and ground rules about when and where you will discuss the parent’s concerns. You should avoid discussing their concerns at the game. These parents want an audience. You need to be respectful but assertive and should not try to be proactive but keep the relationship courteous but business focus. When you do meet, you shouldn’t be afraid to stop the meeting if the parents become harassing or try to bully you.

Listen more, talk less and document everything! Slow things down and don’t hesitate to have a second meeting to discuss your response to them. This will give you time to take your ego out of it, let everyone cool down and not be defensive. Using this strategy will increase your credibility and minimize the parent’s attempt at controlling the situation and at making it personal.

Appreciate the parents who get over excited but will support you and your many sacrifices. Be assertive and clear with parents who attempt to make it personal that this not the way that you will do business with them. And maybe “team up” and get a little help from a friend. While working with parents is a primary responsibility of an athletic director, it doesn’t have to exhaust you. Enjoy the parents who appreciate all of your long hours and efforts to give their child wonderful high school memories.

"OVER INVOLVED"

- **Situation Created:** PRESSURE based on the need to perform for the parent vs. the development of the 3D Athlete
- Began in late 1980's with parents becoming more fearful and anxious about development
- "Helicopter Parent"
- Children became "precious art pieces" that were vulnerable and fragile
- Reluctant to criticize or reprimand – low self esteem
- **ABANDONMENT** = failed = need for child to be happy
- **ABUNDANCE** – over invest as extension of own self esteem
- **Before** – not based on feeling good about themselves but the need to tough and have character.



"EXCITABLE"

SYMPTOMS

- Supportive but get caught up in the moment
- Tend to get "Loud" at games
- Quiet down afterwards but will give their opinion to AD, referees, coaches

APPROACH

- Support, Listen, Empathize, Encourage
- Encourage them to relax and enjoy the game more
- These parents will want to visit you in the stands and want to build relationships.
- Harmless but insecure, just want to be heard
- ***Being Proactive will help calm them down. If not ...***



"HOSTILE"

SYMPTOMS

- Non supportive, competitive, aggressive, controlling
- Different from "excitable" it is about their agenda – they want confrontation and control
- Feelings of Inferiority and Inadequacy and resentment authority
- "Red Cars" living through their children
- Children will also be combative and show less effort and enjoyment.
- Will Quit if feeling not successful enough



"HOSTILE"

APPROACH

- Implement Pro 34 Plan clearly and 1 on 1 if need be
- Set Clear Boundaries and Ground Rules
- Be respectful yet assertive
- If meeting, do not be afraid to cut short if they become harassing
- Listen more, Talk less and document everything!
- Don't hesitate to respond at second meeting so you can take your ego out of things.
- Create "Allies"

