

Dealing with the angry sports parent

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Virtually all coaches at some stage of their career have to deal with complaints from an angry parent. The reasons for the complaint are many and varied, and it makes no difference whether the complaint is real or imagined. No one likes to be the target of a complaint, and it is one of the least desirable aspects of coaching children's sport. Here are ten steps for dealing effectively with the angry sports parent:

1. Avoid discussing the problem at the game

The first thing the coach should, or rather shouldn't, do is to discuss the problem with the parent on the field, particularly if the parent is rate. The playing field is not the place for confrontations.

2. Agree to meet at more appropriate time/venue

Rather than discuss the problem then and there, the coach should agree to meet or telephone the parent at a mutually convenient time to discuss the complaint. By doing this, the coach avoids giving the parent an audience, allows the parent to 'cool off', and gives him/herself time to prepare an appropriate response to the complaint.

3. Listen

When the meeting or telephone call from the parent does eventuate, one of the most important things a coach can do is listen. The coach should listen reflectively. Little things such as taking notes and nodding to acknowledge you have heard what the parent is saying are crucial.

4. Avoid interrupting

Even if parents raise their voices or their stones have only half the facts, the coach should avoid interrupting. By interrupting a parent, the coach risks inflaming the situation.

5. Don't dismiss or become defensive

The coach should avoid defending or justifying their action?. Such behaviour at this point will only make the situation worse.

6. Show empathy

Statements like "I'm sorry that you feel your child has been treated unfairly" are appropriate at this time. By doing this, parents are more likely to feel that their problem is being taken seriously. They are likely to be calmer and more willing to find a solution.

7. Clarify the problem

This can be achieved by asking probing questions. This helps both parties to focus on the problem (not personalities), stick to the facts, and avoid being caught up in extraneous issues.

8. Offer a range of solutions

As mentioned earlier; many parents are simply content just to let the coach know. If they want more, try to offer a range of solutions. This demonstrates a willingness to work together to solve the problem. It is important to avoid making promises that you cannot keep. Explain to them what you can and cannot do.

9. Obtain closure

In the ideal case the coach will have outlined the options available to the parent and agreed on a mutual course of action. At this point it is appropriate to end the meeting. It should conclude with three things:

- Leave the parent with a closing action statement (eg. 'I'll get on to that now').
- Thank the parent for their interest (no matter how unpleasant the meeting).
- If follow-up is required, tell them when you will contact them ('I'll ring you tomorrow').

This will leave the parent feeling as though their complaint has been heard, and the parent-coach relationship will be strengthened.

10. Leave the door open

There will be cases, however after this whole process where you will not be able to give the parent the response they are looking for. It is important in these circumstances that the coach leave the door open for the parent, eg. 'If there is ever anything else, please come to me' By doing this the parent will at least feel that his/her complaint has been taken seriously, and the coach-parent relationship, however strained, will remain intact. This will help to prevent bad word of mouth by the parent against the coach.

The do's and don'ts of dealing with angry sports parents

Don't

Discuss the problem at the game
Dismiss the problem
Lose your cool Become defensive
Interrupt Alienate the parent

Do

Deal with the issue
Listen
Empathise
Ask questions
Offer solutions
Leave the door open