

# Why Coaching From the Sidelines Will Always Backfire for Sports Parents

[Keith Whitmer](#) Updated: March 13, 2019

As a long-time club soccer coach, I've noticed a troubling trend emerging in the sport.

As scores of parents position themselves on the touchline of a weekend game, many of them seem committed to playing two roles—parent AND coach. This issue is surely not relegated to youth soccer, either. What comes out of sports parents' mouths during games is often a mixture of shocking, fundamentally irrelevant and unintentionally misleading. There's nothing wrong with some encouragement or cheering your child on, but many sports parents tend to go far beyond that. There are only a few formative years where we, as parents, can sit and watch our kids play, yet these parents act like a u8 game is the World Cup final.

As both a coach and a parent, I believe parents coaching from the sideline is one of the most destructive habits in youth sports. It rarely produces better results in the short-term, and over the long-term, it seriously hampers the kid's development and love for the game. If you ask a parent who constantly coaches from the sideline what their end goal is, it often traces to a desire for their kid to get a college scholarship. But the very habit they're engaging in will result in their child having an extremely difficult time adapting to the bigger and

better competition they'll face when they hit their teenaged and high school years. And when their habit extends to other players on their child's team, they hamstring the development of the entire squad.

Trying to coach your kids through their decisions on the soccer field really has no benefit. Soccer is a sport that requires quick decision making. American players are no less athletic than their European counterparts, but are significantly behind in soccer IQ. Previously, I wrote about how [joysticking coaches](#) who tell their players what to do every single second of every game hurt the players. The decision-making responsibilities are taken away from the kids and put onto the coach, and while it may get a couple more wins this season, in the long term, it's disastrous for development. Parents coaching from the sideline fall into the same category, but with the added bias of them wanting their child to be the star player, meaning the instruction they offer is usually even worse. Rene Muelenstein, former Manchester United Assistant coach and Fulham manager, has said that parents coaching from the sideline is useless and should never happen.

Coaches should coach and parents should parent. Good club and recreation coaches should have a predesigned curriculum that has a plan for their players to improve and develop throughout the season. If a parent is interested in learning about the curriculum, that's a great conversation to have. But many sports parents are far less interested in development than they are immediate results. The idea is that little 6-year-old Sally doesn't need to be Alex Morgan right now. She needs time to experiment and learn the game. The best way to do that is by simply playing it herself without having her every move coached. [Playing pick-up soccer](#) is perhaps the best way for her to do this, but since parents feel the need to enroll their kids in organized sports early

and often, the goal should be to make that experience highly hands-off.

However, in America's win-at-any-cost youth sports culture, Sally needs to be great right this second and score all the goals because the best players play forward. God forbid Sally play defense or look to create assists. So to "accelerate" her development, her parents are going to tell her what to do and when to do it. This only confuses the player, because instead of learning how to read and react to the game and learn from trial and error, she's constantly craning her head to look at her parents for what to do. And even worse, if she has a joysticking coach, she's got both her parent and her coach yelling at her with instructions (which will often be conflicting). Does this really sound like a good environment for learning and improving at her sport?

There are nuances to the game that players pick up when allowed to play without interruption from coaches or parents simply watching. Let them experiment and figure out what does or does not work. Most parents have never played the game at a meaningful level, nor are they actual students of the game. They simply coach in the moment, hoping that their screams of instruction will help little Sally or Sam avoid "failure" with their next move, giving little thought to long-term development.

Let kids develop their soccer personalities and build their own identity. We are not building robots. Success does not need to be measured in terms of wins and losses and goals scored—especially when you're dealing with children and pre-teens. Real development is more difficult to quantify. Growth in decision-making skills, technical ability, vision and awareness don't always result in more goals or wins today, and

these elements of the game aren't developed by a coach or parent telling their child what to do from the sidelines.

At older ages, high-level club teams will have a game plan and will often have spent the week working on objectives for the game. The only people who truly know what these objectives are are the coaching staff and the players. You would think that parents coaching from the sideline and ruining game plans would earn them a reprimand from the coach, but here's where we get to the next part of the problem.

Many young athletes now operate in a never-ending state of "free agency," as their parents are quick to have them switch teams if they don't think they're playing enough, being coached well, scoring enough, etc. Few soccer clubs have the power to control the parents. It's a buyer's market, club soccer is big business, and there's always another club willing to take on players. These leads some clubs to surrender to the will of the parents, but this practice is wrong.

Like kids, adults will push boundaries to see what they can get away with. A bunch of parents coaching from the sideline shows a lack of respect for the club and the coach. The ground rules need to be established early and often. No coach wants a parent to scream "shoot the ball!" at his or her player. Moreover, parents are often screaming "shoot" when the player in question isn't in the proper position and doesn't really have possession of the ball. "Pass the ball" is a proverbial favorite from sideline parent-coaches that's rarely helpful. It's often yelled when the player in question either has no options, acres of space in front of them, or has their head down and can't see their teammates.

Youth sports belong to the kids, not the adults. Sidelines have become a cauldron of idiocy, not just in behavior, but in a total inability to just sit back and enjoy the day. It's unclear how an adult can enjoy watching their children play a sport when they are so emotionally invested in the game. Sit back and watch. Relax! You're off the job and it's a night or weekend. There are no college scouts at this 8-year-old game. I know there are sports parents who dislike me because I have told them repeatedly to stop coaching the kids and/or freaking out on the sideline, but I do it because I know the game is for the kids. The more aggressive and controlling the parents are, the less likely the kids are to enjoy the game. The less they like it, the more likely they are to quit before they hit middle or high school. So that grand plan to earn a college scholarship hit a dead end before the child could attend a single college camp or play a single high school game.

Psychologist Carol Dweck has said the problem with her "growth mindset theory" is many people have completely misunderstood or misinterpreted it. I think a lot of sports parents have fallen into this trap. A growth mindset isn't about avoiding failure. It's about not being afraid to fail because you know it's an unavoidable requirement of growth. [Dweck says the purpose of youth sports](#) for kids is having fun, growing their skills and learning how to become a great team member.

This is not intended to be a total takedown of all sports parents. There are plenty of sports parents doing an awesome job out there and helping their kids foster a love and a passion for sports and the values they teach. However, they do seem to be becoming less common. If you're a sports parent who wants to change your ways, it really is as simple as relaxing, being more hands-off, and [simply asking your kid if they had fun](#) after every game or practice instead of berating or

overanalyzing their performance. Rather than only rewarding goals and wins, applaud effort and development (provided those things are actually occurring). "You worked hard and you're getting better" is a lot different than "You're the best because you scored three goals."

If you're a coach dealing with overzealous parents, I've had friends who've found success simply by sending out a reading to the team's parents that details how to act and how not to act on the sideline. It's simple, straightforward, and not overly confrontational or critical. Parents are critical stakeholders in youth sports, as are the coaches. Getting everyone on the right page in terms of how to act and what matters most will create a better environment today and a better sports future tomorrow for all involved.

*Photo Credit: rbouwman/iStock*

### **READ MORE:**

- ['Joysticking' Is Killing Youth Sports](#)
- [Kids Play Fewer 'Pick-Up Games,' and it's Hurting Youth Sports](#)
- [Why Hall of Fame Running Back Terrell Davis Hates Youth Sport Specialization](#)