

Hey, helicopter parents — your bad sportsmanship is killing kids' love of the game: experts

By Jeanette Settembre

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Too much parental involvement, not to mention pressure on performance, can turn your child's sports experience into a chore. NY Post photo composite

When mom-of-three Heather Behrends' oldest son Jake, 15, started playing baseball, she found herself getting involved. Very involved.

"I would go out to practice with him and critique what he was doing — every swing he would take," Behrends, 43, recalled.

Behrends wanted Jake to do well, and when the Denver-based founder of parenting blog [Made In A Pinch](#) saw her son struggling to improve, she paid for private coaching. The more she pushed her son to excel, however, the more Jake's passion for the sport waned.

"I felt like I was forcing him to go to practice," Behrends told The Post. "Eventually it felt like he was doing this thing he didn't want to do, even though he loved the sport. For him, it started feeling like a chore."

A new study from Italian researchers, published in the [International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health](#), found that while enrolling kids in sports can benefit their development, parents should avoid being overly critical of — or hyper-involved in — how they play the game.

Denver mom Heather Behrends realized that her efforts to help son Jake excel at baseball were having the opposite effect.

“Our findings suggest that excessive parental involvement can cause pressure on children who would prefer parental participation characterized by praise and understanding,” the study’s authors wrote. “A balance is needed.”

Jake Schwartzwald, director at Everything Summer, a New York City-based educational consultancy, agrees. Parents typically have their kids’ best interests at heart, he said, but can get into trouble once they

start micromanaging the experience.

“Every parent signs kids up for sports or activities with good intentions. [But] sometimes, there can be a line that’s crossed, where suddenly the parent becomes more involved or invested in the outcome, versus the goal of why they signed up their kids in the sport in the first place,” Schwartzwald explained.

“Very rarely are those additional levels of pressure going to yield positive mental health impacts,” he added.

There are also physical repercussions as well. There’s been [a rash of overuse injuries in youth sports](#), spurred on in part by overzealous parenting. A 2015 survey in the American Journal of Sports Medicine found that 60% of all Tommy John surgeries in the US [are for patients between ages 15 and 19](#).

And unhinged behavior — even threats of violence — by parents at games [has led to some coaches calling it quits](#).

San Francisco parent Luz Casquejo Johnston, 51, opted for a laid-back approach when it came to her son’s involvement in sports.

“We just wanted him to have a good time and develop his passions,” said Casquejo Johnston, a former principal and assistant professor at Saint Mary’s College of California.

Parents need to be careful about becoming overly involved in the game, say experts.

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And so when he didn’t end up making his high-school baseball team, he was able to pivot to another sport — football — without feeling like

he failed.

“At some point, their sports career is going to be over, and they have to be well-rounded to define themselves,” Casquejo Johnston said. “Many parents have unrealistic expectations of what is possible for their athletes and what happens is they squeeze the life out of a childhood passion, which then becomes a source of friction, stress and may end in a strained relationship.”

Jason Sacks, president of Positive Coaching Alliance, a national nonprofit aimed at character-building in youth sports, tells parents it’s not their job to worry about winning or losing. Instead, he advises they be supportive — without hovering.

“Youth sports have become a ‘win-at-all-costs’ mentality, [but] nobody wins when the parents are overinvolved,” Sacks said, noting that parents can become increasingly competitive when athletic scholarships are on the line.

A hands-off approach helped Luz Casquejo Johnston’s teenage son pivot from baseball to football without feeling like a failure, she said.

Courtesy of Casquejo Johnston

If a child sees that a parent is visibly displeased when a coach gives them feedback, it can make them feel like they’ve let the parent down.

“It’s already bad enough when kids make a mistake on the field — they look down, they look at the coach and they look at their parents in the stands and when they feel that pressure from parents, it takes them out of the game,” he said.

Another potentially damaging parenting play? Speaking up for their

children — rather than letting them voice their own concerns. Often, parents will ask that their kids get more playing time, when instead they should encourage one-on-one conversations between kids and their coaches to ask, “What can I do to improve?” Sacks explained.

Expert Jason Sacks explains that if a kid detects disappointment in a parent over their athletic performance, it can be damaging to their self-esteem.

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“When a child leaves high school, they’re maybe heading on to college or going into the workforce where their parents aren’t going to be around so they’re going to have to get used to advocating for themselves,” Sacks continued.

Meanwhile, Behrends eventually found a more appropriate distance from which to cheer on her son.

“I realized he just needed to struggle through,” she said. “When he started doing that on his own, when I let go, it became more fun for him. He actually improved more than when I was spending the time with him.”