

Chapter 38. Best Responses to Handle Upset Parents

Consider the following scene. It wasn't the best game your team ever played. And before you can turn to them to try to smooth over the loss, you are confronted with an irate, in your face, father (or occasionally a mother). In language too salty for a marine drill sergeant, you are given a tongue lashing on everything from your @#%^*& lack of ability as a coach to why his superstar child is not playing the right position, receiving enough playing time, etc. While your insides are rattling with angry emotions, you catch the faces of the kids on your team whose jaws have dropped open.

While such confrontations are hopefully rare in elite sports, they do occur and they do need to be addressed when they happen. These situations can be handled in several ways.

First, if the parental behavior is repetitive or consistent, the governing sport association needs to intervene according to their procedures. Don't hesitate to pursue this before things get even more out of hand.

Secondly, as a coach you need to muster all your self-control capabilities so as to react rationally and not emotionally to the parent. Taking time to cool off before *any* response is essential. "Stepping back" and analyzing the situation (What is this all about?) from the distance can create more calm. Talking to yourself in calming ways or using physical self-relaxation techniques can defuse your emotion. *Then* approaching the parent again about the concerns may be productive and might even get you an apology.

Finally, the situation should be addressed with the team. Having a team meeting as soon as possible (but after you have calmed down) is important. Holding the meeting where there is some quiet and privacy. Don't try to punish or isolate the player for the parent's bad behavior.

It is useful to begin the meeting by acknowledging the emotions that were raised by the fuss ("I was pretty surprised and upset by what happened... I wonder if any of you are feeling the same way.") Without naming the parent or making other references to him or her, discuss with the team that people get upset sometimes and act very excitable when they do. Ask for input from the team for alternate ways to handle problems and perhaps even role-play their responses or suggestions. After the meeting, privately assure the player of the irate parent that you are not upset with him/her and that they are still a valued part of the team. Try to use the incident as an opportunity for coaching the team in some important life skills.

Examples: Here are some potential situations with parents of athletes you may have had to deal with and some response suggestions. In most circumstances, the player should not be present at any of these discussions. These issues are between the parent and coach and should be conducted in private.

Your coaching sucks. Why are you running this system? Acknowledge what the parent is saying. Let them know you heard them. You might say, "Yes, that approach could work in certain situations" or "that's a great suggestion. Maybe we'll implement it later."

As the coach, you need to add the explanation for why they are using the system they are. Reply with: "With the type of competition we play, your suggestion doesn't fit in with the overall scheme. Or you could say, "that's not a play or strategy that we have worked on."

Maybe that's something we should add to the playbook in the future” - assuming the suggestion has at least some merit.

My kid is better than John Doe or Jill Smith. Why isn't my kid playing more?

Acknowledge the strengths and positive attributes of the kid. Tell why you think the player ahead of their son or daughter makes a more significant contribution. Follow up by saying what future plans you have for their kid and reiterate the good points that he or she brings to the table.

We've had it with you coach. Either X,Y, or Z happens or my kid will transfer to another school. First, if the parent is really that upset, acknowledge their anger and ask to meet with them privately at a later time. Offer a specific time and place. Wait several days after a game. At the start of the meeting, let the parent vent. See if there is anything valid they are saying and address it. If they are way off base, help them see where they are incorrect in their thinking. If they have anything meaningful to say, reply with: “I'll take that under consideration.”

At some point, if they refuse to calm down or threaten to transfer, you should calmly say, “If that's your choice, and you feel that is best for your son or daughter, I'll go along with that.”

The parent's kid may not fit into the program anymore anyway, so them leaving may be best for all concerned. But if the parent is simply being difficult, let them know it is their decision and say, “I'd hate to lose X and let's try to work through this.” The goal is for the parent to think you sincerely don't want to lose their kid.

Michael Asken, Clinical and Sports Psychologist
Email: michael.asken@policeone.com