

Dealing With Difficult Parents

Being a coach is not always easy...especially when you run into difficult parents or parents who try to interfere in what you or the team are doing.

These types of parents can be overbearing, overly competitive, and overly engaged in your decisions as a coach. And some often try to take on the role of coach.

The majority of issues relate to complaints about playing time, who gets to play what position, sportsmanship issues and conflict with schooling and other sports.

No matter how knowledgeable, fair, or kind you are to your team, you can probably expect an irate parent or two to crop up during the season. Here are a few tips for dealing with these situations.

1. Club Policy

Know what the club policy is relating to complaints and consult with the club at the start of the season on how to best respond to parent issues.

2. Not at the Game

Don't discuss any issues or complaints at the game

The first thing the coach should avoid is discussing a problem with a parent on or near the field, especially if the parent is visibly upset.

3. Don't react

Remain calm. Rather than discuss the problem, the coach should agree to meet at another time to discuss the complaint or refer the parent to a club official.

By doing this, you avoid giving the parent an audience, allow them to 'cool off', and give yourself and/or the club time to prepare a response.

4. Be an active listener

When you eventually talk to the parent, one of the most important things you can do is listen. Acknowledge what you have heard what the parent is saying is important. Show an interest in what they are saying.

5. Don't interrupt

At a meeting avoid interrupting the parent, just listen and respond once the parent is finished. Sometimes they just want to ensure they have been heard.

6. Don't get defensive

The coach should avoid defending or justifying their action. Such behavior at this point may only make the situation worse.

Respond to their concerns with statements like "I'm sorry you feel that way". This will help the parent to understand their problem is being taken seriously. They are likely to be calmer and more willing to find a solution.

7. Clarify the problem

Asking questions helps both parties to focus on the problem, stick to the facts and avoid being caught up in other issues.

8. Offer a range of solutions

A lot of times, parents just want their feelings to be heard. If they want more, try to offer a range of solutions. This demonstrates a willingness to work together to solve the problem. It's important to avoid making promises that you can't keep. Explain to them what you can and cannot do.

9. Get closure

Ideally, you will eventually reach a mutual course of action. At this point it's appropriate to end the meeting. It should conclude with three things:

1. Leave the parent with a closing statement (E.g. 'I'll be sure that happens')
2. Thank the parent for their interest (no matter how unpleasant the meeting).
3. If follow-up is required, tell them when you will contact them (E.g. '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, e.g.. 'If there is ever anything else, please come and see me or see the club official'. 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. Not doing this could allow the problem to fester... and the parent could damage your reputation through word-of-mouth.

Complaint processes often vary from club to club depending on their policies and club structure. Be sure you know the clubs policies and processes and ensure that the club is notified of any issues or complaints presented to you that you consider to be of a serious nature or which relate to the welfare of a child.

Always seek the assistance of your club or a club official if a parent becomes abusive or threatens the welfare of any child in the team at any time.

Additional information for coaches can be found at www.playbytherules.net.au