

Why Sideline Screaming Can Stifle Your Child's Game

By Mike Voitalla

Imagine you're undertaking a fairly difficult task: assembling a piece of furniture with hieroglyphic instructions, filling out IRS Form 4562 on April 14, or standing on the highest rungs of a ladder painting the crown molding in your living room with 14-foot ceilings. Think it would help if someone yelled at you during the process? Of course not.

Yet when a child tries to control a bouncing ball in a crowd of other kids, adults often believe it's perfectly acceptable to scream "advice." The shouting at America's soccer fields is so epidemic one wonders if adults ever reflect on their behavior. Adults who would never shout at children while they're enjoying the playground, drawing in a coloring book, or rearranging their dollhouse, loudly instruct from the sidelines without hesitation.

When adults scream from the sidelines they're not just invading the children's playtime, they're preventing children from learning the game of soccer in a natural manner. The shouting is detrimental to the children's development as soccer players and at worst can turn them off to the sport entirely.

If parents want to help their children become better soccer players, they can offer to kick the ball around with them in the backyard. But sideline instructions deny children a chance to make their own decisions, it stifles their creative instincts, and all too often the instructions are misguided.

When a player has the ball there are generally three options: dribble, pass or shoot. In the long-term, the great players are the ones who choose wisely most of the time. But if, when they're first learning the sport, that decision is being made for them with a scream from the sideline, how can we expect them to develop the soccer instincts they'll need to make the split-second decisions that are so much a part of the game?

"We don't want to turn the children into parrots waiting for someone to tell them what to do," says John Ouellette, AYSO National Coach. "Soccer is a free-flowing game for children to enjoy and learn from playing. As an organization, we discourage sideline instruction not just from parents but also from coaches."

During the first stage of soccer development it is essential that the children are allowed to discover the game on their own terms. High-level coaches constantly complain that players come through the ranks dependent on instructions because they've been bossed around in the early stages -- being told where to run and when to pass. They also cite a dearth of truly creative players -- the ones with the ability to make the unpredictable moves -- blaming the lack of freedom children are afforded during their early years.

Much of the sideline screaming comes from ignorance about the stages of development. While most parents would know that addition and subtraction must be mastered before algebra is introduced, at the soccer field they often expect children to perform maneuvers they are simply not capable of.

AYSO Hall of Famer Sigi Schmid is a former youth coach who coached UCLA to an NCAA title before entering the MLS ranks and winning a crown with the Los Angeles Galaxy. He stresses that coaches and parents must appreciate how young players learn the game.

Schmid says, "The first thing is, 'It's me and the ball.' The second is, 'It's me and the ball and where's the opponent?' Then it's, 'It's me and the ball, and where's the opponent, where's my teammate?' He's taking on more information. That's how he develops."

The screams from the sideline interfere with this process -- besides often being misguided and counterproductive. To take a few examples:

- "PASS IT! PASS IT!" Discouraging dribbling in the early years is like telling toddlers to shut up when they're learning to speak. Young players should be encouraged to dribble -- because dribbling is the first step to mastering all ball skills -- and there are far better ways to introduce a passing game when children are ready to comprehend teamwork. The passing game enters soccer at the later stages and one will notice that the children themselves will ask each other for the ball.
- SPREAD OUT! Just because the first years of youth soccer look chaotic doesn't mean the children aren't learning. In fact, it's perfectly fine that they all chase the ball in a swarm. Sooner or later they'll figure out how to take advantage of time and space. They'll comprehend positioning by exploring the field, not by being treated like chess pieces.
- SHOOT! SHOOT! SHOOT! This usually comes from an ear-piercing parent-coach chorus as a child dribbles toward the goal and I have little doubt that were it eliminated from the soccer fields of America we'd see more goals in the youth game.

Even the youngest, most novice player knows they are supposed to shoot the ball to score. And can it possibly help a child perform the difficult task of striking the ball while running as fast as they can by being screamed at during the process?

Moreover, the “shoot” scream encourages players to pull the trigger earlier than they should. How do great players score on breakaways? They usually wait until they get close to the goalkeeper. It’s much harder for the keeper to save a shot from four yards away than from 15. There’s also the option of rounding the keeper, especially when a patient attacker forces the keeper to commit.

Shooting advice I often hear from high-level players is not to rush the shot -- that players often have a little more time than they realize. As young players learn to cope with the high-pressure clear to young players which goal their team is aiming at. But what I’m talking about is the outrage that often greets a smart young player who retreats with the ball to move out of the bunch. Watch a game played by sophisticated players and you’ll find that they’re constantly moving the ball in all directions to find space and time.

Young players taking the ball away from the crowd are the clever ones. Will they sometimes put their team at risk? Maybe. But so what? Giving up a goal in a U-8 game isn’t nearly as important as allowing young players how to figure out how to keep possession.

“ATTACK THE BALL!” or “GO GET HIM!” is apparently meant to encourage a defending player to charge an opponent who has the ball at their feet. But in soccer, the defender wants to jockey into a good position to keep the attacker at bay. He wants to avoid over-committing and instead needs to figure out the right time to get a chance at the ball. It’s a matter of positioning and timing that players master by facing the situation over and over again -- not by taking cues from the sideline.

Perhaps the inclination to scream instructions comes from a well-intentioned desire to help children “learn.” But when does screaming at children help educate them? When a child wanders toward a busy street, moves too close to a hot oven, or starts beating on little brother -- OK, that might warrant a roar.

But does screaming at a child while you’re assisting him with math homework help? Very doubtful. And certainly children should be allowed to play soccer without getting yelled at. Then they’ll be able to pay attention to the best teacher of all: the game itself.