

## **Tips for Managing a Youth Squad:**

No matter what age and/or skill level you are coaching, one rule stands above all others: You cannot be their friend. You should be friendly, but do not act like you are friends and part of the same social group. As the coach, you belong on a higher level in the social order of things so you need to act that way, otherwise your team will see you as a contemporary and will not follow your directions. After all, what kid lets another “kid” boss them around? So be firm about who is the boss and very clear from the beginning about the rules and the consequences for breaking them. Make sure they know if they tumble when it’s not allowed and they run the risk running into someone and hurting them, then they have to \_\_\_\_\_. (Sit out for 3 minutes, do ten push-ups and ten sit-ups, whatever is age appropriate.) Consistency is the key. If you don’t follow up you are sending an unclear message about what is and is not okay. You are also sending the message that it’s okay to ignore the rules.

Be prepared for sulking, crying, foot stamping and so forth, but don’t tolerate it. Calmly remind them of the rules for behavior and leave it at that.

### **Expectations**

Remember, these are little kids. They can only handle so much instruction time; one minute per year old they are at most, or you will lose their attention and the information you are trying to give them will just go in one ear and out the other. You can work longer with them when they are actually physically participating, but for sitting still and just watching/listening, keep it short and concise.

Because they are young, they are only so strong and coordinated. Don’t be looking for fancy stunts because they physically can’t do them yet. (Nor should they, without proper training in stunt progressions.) And don’t expect perfection in motions. Not all of them are going to match positions or hit or clap at the exact same time.

### **Communication**

Get them settled and focused on you by using a special call and answer chant. Once all eyes are on you, be explicitly clear when explaining how to do cheer skills, #1 for safety reasons and #2 to prevent frustration. Watch their faces closely when they are working. You don’t want melt downs, and you don’t want someone to go home hating cheering and vowing to never come back. With some younger kids, you may need to get behind them and actually move their arms and legs for cheers, jumps, or dances, until they get it on their own. You want each kid to have fun and be successful, so don’t set them up for failure by not explaining things well enough to them and then leaving them to think it’s their fault they aren’t getting it. And if you do find yourself in that position, be sure to tell the kids it was your fault for not explaining better and making sure they understood what their job was, and then

apologize for it. That way not only are you correcting a problem that you caused, but you are also demonstrating to children how to own up to mistakes in a mature manner.

Watch out for a need to constantly correct them. They can only take in so much information at once, and to rattle off a list of things that need to be fixed just brings them down. So be sure that you only give them one or two things to correct, and follow up with something they are good at, even if it's, "I love your enthusiasm", "you're such a hard worker!", or "you have a super smile for cheering!" (You have to be sincere when doing this. Kids know a throw-away "compliment" when they hear one.) Also be aware that they tend to take criticism very personally. You can plant a seed for learning to take it more gracefully if you tell them this: "If I come into your house and straighten out a crooked picture hanging on your wall, would that make you cry? Would it make you mad? Of course not! And the same should go if I or another team member straightens out your high V, or toe touch, or dance moves. Don't take constructive criticism personally, but please do listen to it and learn from it." (You may find it best not to let other kids do the correcting, but do it yourself to prevent problems with kids who don't like being bossed by their peers.)

Always end the practice with a team meeting. Don't let them run out on you at the end. You need to make sure that they are responsible about cleaning up, and you also need to check in with them. Did they learn anything new today? Did they do well with something? (If you have a pretty small group, feel free to go down the line and tell each child what you saw them succeed at. Keep notes during practice if you think you will forget. You can also ask the kids what they saw their teammates succeed at that day.) And ask them what they need to work on. I've never had one seriously say, "Nothing." They have a pretty good idea of at least one thing they can be working on alone or as a team. Team meeting is also the time to hand out paper because usually parents are there to take them. You can use this time to announce spirit week winners as well.

### **Planning Practice**

Always come prepared with a written plan. For warm-ups you could just dance like you are at a party. Or you could do relay races which develop their skills. You could also teach them Little Sally Walker. Be sure to always give them a good stretching session. I like to push a teeny bit more than you normally do for a regular stretching before exercise begins because I want them to gain flexibility. No more than 10-15 minutes for the warm-up and stretching combined.

Since you will be cheering for football and/or basketball, you need to get right on motions, jumps and cheers. Teach them the basics like standing clean and how to suck in the gut and the butt, roll the shoulders back and down, lift the chin and squeeze everything tight. Show them buckets, candlesticks, and blades. Point out how the thumb lies on the fingers, not sticking out away from them or curling them under them. Show them what broken wrists look like. Show them how to roll their shoulders back in their motions so they don't have flyaway arms or shrugged shoulders. Do hands on hips, claps, high and low V, T, and broken T, and whatever else your most common cheer motions are (which should be really simple or you will lose them fast.) For jumps I start with the motions and counts, but we do pencil

jumps for the first few times to concentrate on timing and arm position. During the beginning of the season when the girls are learning motions, make it fun by playing games like Simon Says to learn the correct motions/jumps. You can pass out candy to the person who wins to have at the end of practice. No more than 5-10 should be spent at practice on motions and no more than 10 minutes for jumps.

For their cheers, plan to do maybe 5 or 6 max in one practice, say the words for one in chunks and get them to echo back to you. Do this a few times, and then just show the motions for that cheer. If it's one with hand and foot motions, just do hands first. If it looks like it's giving them trouble, skip the feet. Be flexible and ready to revamp something you are teaching them. It's more important for them to be successful at a level they can handle than fail at the level you wanted them to be. It may be beneficial to learn the cheers mirrored so you don't have to have your back facing them during demonstrations. 15-20 minutes for cheers. Watch them for bored or fussy faces and lazy motions and cut it short if you start losing their interest.

For dances, plan to teach just a few counts at a time. Start with teach 4 counts then move up to 1 full 8-count. Once it seems they are picking up on the 8-count teach another few counts and put them all together. Start slow and be very repetitious. 15-20 minutes should be spent on dances.

Towards the end of practice it is important for the girls to condition for the last 10 minutes. This could include 2 laps around the track, crunches, push-up, V-ups, leg lifts, etc. As cheerleaders it is important to build muscles to improve strength and techniques.

Finally, end with cleaning up and a team meeting. This plan should more or less fill a 1-1.5 hours practice. If you have extra time and feel you would be pushing it to teach them more, go back to reviewing, play a game that works on motions or jumps, or a game that focuses on team building.

## **Dealing with Parents**

Coaching youth sports sometimes involves dealing with petty behavior, jealousy, high emotions and constant whining.

And then there are the kids.

Sadly, dealing with unreasonable parents can be the most difficult part of coaching youth. Many people who get into coaching youth sports do so because they want to make a difference in young lives. Coaches have an important role to develop character and encourage discipline -- and they may end up doing this for the parents just as much as for the young players.

Many coaches and teachers have been lamenting the increasing trend of "helicopter parents" -- that is, parents who constantly hover (like a helicopter) over their children and become overly involved and meddlesome in their kids' lives. Such parents may question a coach's every move or tend to believe that their child should be treated as more important than others.

Sometimes, the parents' unruly behavior stems from good intentions. Their protective instincts put them on guard to keep their child from getting injured. These parents might become irate at the slightest bump or scratch their children get, even if it is standard for that to happen now and again in

most sports. Or, the overprotective type might be more sensitive to emotional injury -- they might complain that the child is being overlooked or humiliated.

Other parents suffer from an age-old syndrome: wanting to relive glory days. These individuals may yearn so much for their own high school days of being the star cheerleader that they want to experience the thrill again vicariously through their child. They may fight tooth-and-nail to get a coach to award their child as that week's spirit winner or as the flyer in a stunt or cry foul the second their child is reprimanded for their behavior.

Luckily, experienced coaches have come up with several ways to deal with these kinds of parents. Some highly encouraged methods can actually help prevent an ugly situation before it happens. And other tips we'll discuss will help you deal with a parent in the midst of a feud.

### **Communicating with Parents While Coaching**

You'll hear it from any relationship counselor: Communication is key. Indeed, open and clear communication will help in almost all personal and professional relationships, and the coach-parent relationship is no exception.

Countless coaching guides recommend having a parents meeting at the very beginning of the season, or even better, during the preseason. At the meeting, explain the details of what will be expected of the players and parents. Most importantly, take this opportunity to explain your coaching philosophy -- emphasizing your intentions to give every cheerleader a fair shot and your rules during practices/games (attendance, uniform, jewelry, behavior, etc).

Also, be sure to explain your rules regarding parental involvement. This might include asking parents not to shout directions to their child during the game. Let them know that if they have a suggestion or notice a problem, they are free to come up in private to discuss it with you. Confrontations in front of the cheerleaders are never a good idea. Encourage parents to attend practice if they want to. This should help you reach the goal of open communication and help parents better understand decisions you make on game day.

Send out weekly newsletters with information for the week (game time and location, new cheers/chants learned, spirit week winner, fundraising info, etc.).

You need to encourage positive behavior from the parents, so that they can in turn encourage the cheerleaders. Express it by leading by example. Stay positive and express that you're excited to be coaching their kids.

The parents meeting will not only give you a sense of what kinds of parents you're dealing with, but it will give you a chance to establish a good relationship with parents. The best way to do this is to make sure to open the floor for parents' questions.

Although this open communication helps, it might not be enough to prevent meddlesome parents. So, let's get into the nitty gritty of how to deal with particular kinds of helicopter parents.

## **Handling Overprotective Parents While Coaching**

Coaching children who have never cheered before is hard enough, but some will likely come equipped with overprotective parents who fret over everything that could go wrong. Often, such parents simply aren't familiar with the rules of the sport or the common precautions. If that's the case, arrange a time to meet with them and explain the basic rules of the game and the rarity of injuries. If they get upset at small scrapes, discuss that these will likely happen, but that you always keep a first aid kit at hand.

Many newbie parents will take it for granted that, as a coach, you should give their child special treatment and pay more attention to her. Or, such parents will worry that their child's feelings will be hurt if they are reprimanded. As we covered in the last section, discussing your coaching philosophy can help them understand all these things. If you need, meet individually with the parent to reiterate your rules on these points and your reasons behind them. At the meeting, let the parents express their concerns and address them -- show them that you care, even if you disagree.

As hard as it can be to deal with overprotective parents, competitive parents are just as common and often more difficult.

## **Handling Competitive Parents While Coaching**

Sometimes competitive parents can get angry if they feel like you aren't treating their child like the best. It's the coach's worst nightmare: an intrusive, competitive parent. These types are obsessed with winning above all else. They will disagree with your coaching decisions and confront you about it. Often, they think that their child is obviously the best cheerleader on the team and should be treated as such.

As we mentioned on the first page, this type of parent might simply want to relive his or her glory days. However, it might be more complicated than just that -- he might want his child make try-outs in middle or high school cheer. The parent will put the pressure of the child's future on your shoulders.

To prevent parent involvement during games, some coaches ask parents not to talk to them, or cheerleaders. If a parent confronts you and is angry about your coaching style, ask him to meet with you the next day. Let him vent at this meeting and listen to him. Try not to argue with him if he is still aggravated -- simply say you will consider his suggestions and do your best to incorporate them. If you can learn from these complaints, you can help avoid future incidents.

Don't let your emotions get to you when dealing with an angry or competitive parent. Maintaining a civil attitude will help them do so as well. Whatever happens, remember the child's best interest is what's most important.