



Communication with Youth Hockey Parents

Most youth hockey coaches would probably agree — at least privately — that one of their biggest challenges as a coach is interacting with parents.

Parents, understandably so, care first and foremost about their own son or daughter. We all talk about teamwork but at the end of the day, if truth really be told, most of us focus almost exclusively on what we think is best for our own child.

We talk about “fair play”, but far too many of us want to “win”, or should I say see our child’s team “win”. This translates into who gets the most ice time, who should be on the team, and on its goes.

Coaches face many situations that must indeed be handled thoughtfully. Even if a youth coach does not have his or her own son or daughter on the team (that’s a piece for another day), there is much to plan for.

Here are a few simple things to consider:

Joint expectations

Once the team is selected, or put together (depending on whether it is an “All-Star” or house-league squad), make the time to sit down for a few minutes, privately, with each family and the player to review mutual expectations.

If you agree, or at least can mutually accept, what the plan is for your child (ice time, role on the team, skills that must be developed, discipline or attitude adjustments, etc.) *before* the season starts, there is much less likelihood of upset, misunderstanding or bitterness as the season wears on.

24 hour rule

This is by no means a new concept, but we should still remind ourselves: if we, as parents, are upset by a situation at the rink, most of the time it is healthy for us to sleep on it, cool down a little and wait a good *24 hours* before we make that phone call to a coach or another parent.

Similarly, a youth coach should hold his or her tongue on most occasions, before saying something to a young player or parent, after a game or practice, that may unnecessarily lead to hurt feelings.

Wait a day, and you will likely make whatever point you wanted to make in a more composed, thoughtful and sensitive manner.

Face to face, private —away from the rink

Too often youth coaches have “meetings” with parents at the rink in front of other people.

The timing — and the location— is off.

When you need to have a conversation with a parent, or they need to speak with you, agree on a time and place to meet — away from the rink.

A private meeting should be just that— private.

Your yelling is not personal

All youth coaches are different. Some are quiet, nurturing. Others are yellers, more bombastic and colorful.

Most really do care about the kids they work with, regardless of the way they sometimes present themselves to others.

If you are a “yeller”, someone who instructs forcefully during games or practices, make a point of reminding — and reassuring— parents that your comments to the players are meant as instructive, not as personal criticisms.

If you make that clear — and it is truly the case — parents can sit back and enjoy the game.

Discourage parents from talking about other people’s kids

This is so important. Negativity is toxic and spreads quickly.

It is so important that youth coaches do everything they can to discourage parents from negative rink behaviour. From debating who did or didn’t deserve to be on a certain team, to comments about a child’s playing ability, the coach needs to be a strong, positive example in this regard, and work to keep parents thinking — and talking — positively about *all* the players on your team.

Create a checklist

Before and during each season, create and revise brief checklists as a reminder of the things you want to communicate with your parents.

It’s not enough to have a meeting at the beginning of the season and provide no feedback for the next 8 months.

Good youth coaches are more than people who know how to teach “systems” or implement checking schemes. They know the value of positive, constant communication with the parents.

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