

6 Reasons Parents Should NOT Watch Practice

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The idea for this article struck me as I sat in my car after dropping off a carpool of girls to practice last week. I was scheduled to drive the carpool both ways and it made sense to stay at the fields for practice as the fields were 30 minutes from my house.

As I sat in my car at the sports complex that includes 12 turf fields – I was witness to a long stream of players and parents marching off to training. It is a big complex and I understood that parents of the young players wanted to be sure their child made it to the proper field, so an escort to training was in order. However, when I started noticing parents walking with older players, and parents carrying blankets to keep warm and one even carrying a portable heater – it struck me that many of these parents were planning on hanging out on the sidelines for practice.

I know how rewarding it can be to watch your child practice and improve. As I watched from my car, the anticipation and excitement of many of the fast-walking parents as they herded their players along was nearly palpable, as I have felt it before.

Up until this year, for the past 3 years, I had attended just about every single one of my daughter's practices. I wasn't on the sidelines watching, I was on an adjacent field coaching and only periodically involved with her training. While my attention was obviously on the players I was working with, I couldn't help but steal a glance in the direction of my daughter at a water break and I will even admit a time or two when the water break was extended for an extra 30 seconds or so, in order for me to watch her on the ball.

I loved watching her practice.

I loved watching her practice because of how it made me feel....Never really taking into account how my presence in her team environment made her feel.

Now, after 6 months of not being at the fields for her practices, I clearly see the benefits of my distance.

6 Reasons Parents Should NOT Watch Practice

1. A parent's role in their child's sports endeavor is to be supportive and encouraging. When parents watch practices – it leads to comments outside of this role. We find ourselves saying things such as "You should pay better attention to the coach when they are talking" or "You kept passing to the other team, you need to be more focused" or "I sure wish you would try harder".

When we watch practices, we open the door to talking about a part of their sports endeavor we should not be talking about.

2. Sometimes it's better not to know. It's better not to know if our child isn't paying attention, or if our child is struggling with the speed of play and giving the ball away, or if our child is not working as hard as we know they can. It's better not to know because when we do know these things, the stress creeps in. What our child needs to receive from us is our support, not our stress.

They need to know that we believe in their ability to be their best. When our child feels our stress, they hear “You should have done better” instead of “I believe in your ability to be your best.”

3. When we watch practices, there is a clear shift in the dynamic between our child and their team and coach. After all, as parents, we are the most authoritative figure in our child’s life. Naturally, they will feel different when we are watching practices. We limit our child’s ability to be a teammate when we insert ourselves into their team dynamic, even if it is from the bleachers or from a distance.
4. Being a teammate is an honor and a responsibility. Our children must learn to play for their teammates and their coach, not for us. When we are in attendance, they are naturally playing for us – to show off to us, to win our approval. We need to allow our children to concentrate not on winning our approval, rather on winning the approval of their teammates and coaches through their personal level of commitment (see 5, below).
5. Our child’s commitment to their team needs to be a decision they make, it can’t be anything we try to facilitate. If we are involved in this decision, our children will eventually burn out or lose interest. If we want to support our children as they develop an identity as an athlete and team member, we must allow their commitment to their team to come from within them. When we are too involved, we hamper this development.
6. Parents should have better things to do than watching practice. If we put our children front and center in our lives, to the point that we are bringing heaters out to training so WE can stay warm and watch, like I witnessed the other night, we are putting too much pressure on them. We are quietly telling them that our happiness, in some way, depends on their performance.

That’s too much pressure.

Our happiness should depend on us – on the walk or run we could take, on the book we could read, on the other things we could accomplish in the hour and a half of their training.

When the girls got back into the car the other night I announced my idea for this article and was met with a resounding “That’s a great idea!” I found this quick response interesting because while the girls in the carpool have parents that may watch the last 10 minutes of training before picking them up (I do this as well), their parents are certainly not watching for the duration of the training.

Interestingly, what the girls then mentioned were the players they have played with over the years who had parents who attended training regularly. They were keenly aware of the parents who came to training, even mentioning a few of them by name. They said they felt sorry for those players.

“Why do you feel sorry for them?” I asked. “They must have felt so much pressure” was the response.

I suppose I wouldn’t want my boss going with me on all of my appointments with clients, or the coaching director watching every single one of my training sessions.

I am sure you wouldn’t either.