

10 Tips for Soccer Parents on the Sidelines

A few years ago I wrote a post about soccer parents, but at that point, I did not imagine that we would now be one of “those” families.

Honestly though, I do like watching my kids play. In fact, I love watching my kids do anything that helps them grow as human beings, sports or otherwise. I especially love being right there on the sidelines seeing a beautiful game played most often with beautiful sprits by all involved.

What I do not love are the times when parents ruin it.

Oh you know what I mean. Every youth activity has them. These are the people we each believe we ARE NOT, but more often than we would like to admit, probably ARE. So just in the event that you find yourself in this position – *yelling from the sidelines while no one around you joins in or makes eye-contact* – I would like to help with a few tips for soccer parents that I have leaned over the past decade of sitting on and cheering from the sideline.

1) Cheer – don’t coach

Unless your child is on your sideline, they probably won’t hear you anyway – and odds are you don’t really know what you are talking about, so you will just confuse and distract them doing what their coach wants them to. In fact, even if you DO know what you are talking about, “Shhhhhh...” because part of the game is for them to learn how to communicate with one another and implement strategies as determined by the coaches.

2) Cheer as if you were an NPR Producer.

Just as National Public Radio tells five stories about other topics for every one story about themselves, cheer for the other kids on your team. “Great defense Asha!” and then “Good thinking Anna!” and then “Woohoo L.T.!” Doesn’t sound QUITE as obnoxious and parent- braggy when you are also encouraging the other players on your team and just not your child.

3) Don’t address players on the other team.

I still can’t believe how many times I have seen a parent yell at a player on the *other* team. Seriously, please do not dress down a kid no matter how much you want to. Just remember how much you LOVE it when someone confronts or disciplines your child and refrain from doing the exact same thing. Also, shock of all shocks, that young kids may not have perfect control of their body, so that body contact may have actually been an accident, and even the kid that flops like they are on an international team, let it go.

4) Acknowledge when the other team does something well.

A good “Great Job Keeper!” after they go horizontal for a sweet save or “Nice defense #12!” after a particular stellar play goes a long way to reinforce good play and remind folks that soccer and team sports is so much more than a game, but an amazing way to build community.

5) Stay in your area.

If you play in a city where the fields are less than spacious, you cannot always avoid sitting right next to or being interspersed between parents from the other team. While it would be ideal to have some separation, it is not always possible. No, what I am talking about is the parent who walks up and down the entire sideline coaching (see #1) and does so in front of both sets of parents. It takes all my will power NOT to “accidentally” stick my foot out front and trip him on this 10th time walking in front of us yelling something out to his kid. I have yet to actually stick out my foot. Yet.

6) Think it, but don’t always say it.

Generally, a good rule in life, if I had a dollar for every time I have said something that I should probably have kept safely locked up in my mind vault, I would be rich. Sure, you may think the other player is slow, or that your kid should be starting over another kid, but you really don’t need to share that with the rest of us – the rest of us who may or may not be the parent of the kid over whom you think yours should be starting. Awkward.

7) Don't assume that every call is against your team.

Now, I am not saying that every referee gets every call right, but unless there is some elaborate bookie scheme going around with people making money on youth soccer games, I highly doubt that any referee is out to get a team. Plus, many of the refs you will see are kids themselves, so seriously, chill out. Refs are doing the best they can, and trying to keep your kids safe and helping them to learn how to play the game of soccer. And on the rare occasion where there is some question of referee competency or approach, each league probably has a mechanism to file a protest or leave feedback.

8) Don't rush onto the field.

I have been there. It is oh so tempting to rush onto the field and pull your kid into your arms when they go down. Resist the urge to do so. Remember, soccer is a physical game to and sometimes they just need a minute to find their breadth, shake off the sting of a ball to the face, or just walk off a cramp. Parents rushing the field often make things worse, and odds are that the child will be embarrassed. Trust me, if it's bad, the ref and coach will call you over.

9) Maintain Perspective.

Hate to break it to you, but your kid is most likely NOT going to play in the Olympics.

OH. I'm sorry Mr. Offended, I mean every kid except for YOURS! But seriously folks, even if your kid is exhibiting great skills at an early age, talking about college ball when your kid is 11 or younger seems a tad bit over the top (See Tip #6). We have high expectations for what they do or accomplish that it would do us well, to remember that these are still children and our job, as parents, is to help mature them into who they are meant to become and not to put undue pressure on them to become who we think they should be.

10) Learn the Rules.

If more of us of the game actually knew the rules of soccer, especially off sides, the sideline insanity would be tempered quite a bit. My advice is to find the parent who REALLY does know the rules, is not intense and is willing to help the cheering section learn the rules and nuances of the game. Nothing is worse than being the one who blurts out, "NO WAY!!!" as everyone else looks away as if to say, "Actually, yes way." Remember, our kids are watching, listening, and taking note of who we are and what we do. Despite the outside influences in their lives and the aloofness that can sometimes be communicated, I believe that they will mimic in small ways our approach to the game and life - - so we have to get it together on the sidelines, in the car, in the public, at home, etc. It's hard enough actually playing the game of soccer, but while also dealing with school, social pressures and the struggles of being a young person today . . . we need not add to the drama by exemplifying the worst parts of youth sports, but rather we should lesson it by demonstrating the best.

Bonus tips for soccer parents. . .

Bring a camping chair; Sit back and relax; Deal with your problems on your own time, the game is not your Therapist; Support kids who don't have parents or other people cheering for them; Just be kind.

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