

Working With Parents

by: Todd Williams

You may not have a great deal of direct contact with your players' parents over the course of a season, but getting them involved will leave you with more time available to work with the players, and to focus on the big picture.

Here's a few ways that you can get the parents involved.

Team Mom - Ask for a volunteer, or ask an individual mom to take on the responsibility of being the "team mom." This role is essential in helping you interface with the parents. For example, the team mom can:

- make phone calls to parents regarding scheduling issues,
- notify you of player availability on game day,
- organize a rotation for game-day treats,
- coordinate team events (like parties),
- work with other parents to make a team banner,
- etc.

In short, the team mom can be great at helping you with many of the administrative tasks associated with running a team.

Assistant Coaches - Some dads (and a few moms) can make great assistant coaches. They can:

- run drills during practice,
- fill in the gaps during batting practice and scrimmages,
- help manage the dugout and coach bases during games,
- take aside players needing special attention or skill development and work with them,
- be an invaluable source of suggestions for aligning players to positions and setting the batting order,
- warm-up the team on game days (outfield and infield routine), so you can spend your time putting the finishing touches on the game plan and visiting with the opposing manager and the umpires, preparing for the game.

You shouldn't have any trouble recruiting parents to help on the field during practice (if you do, you're in a bad situation, and it's time to have a parent's meeting to work on that problem). You should look to find two or three parents to help on the field during games - one or two base coaches, and one dugout manager responsible for making sure the players are ready for their turn at the plate. These select few should share your positive values and vision for the success of the team.

Score Keeper - Scorekeeping can be vital in managing the team from game to game, and a good, consistent scorekeeper will give you an advantage even during a game. In addition to keeping track of balls, strikes, runs and outs, they can keep track of:

- the pitch count for each pitcher,
- where the opposing players tend to hit the ball,

- batting and slugging averages,
- on-base percentages,
- errors,
- etc.

They can help you shore up your team's weak spots, and alert you to your opponent's weak spots and tendencies. Do your best to find someone who understands how to exploit this data to your advantage. Too many coaches overlook this secret weapon.

Those are the key roles that parents can play in helping you run a successful program. There might be others, so use your imagination and don't be afraid to give up some control of the team, because you'll gain more back with the collective talents of the fine people behind your players.

And lastly, if a parent does need to talk with you privately for any reason, you should listen, listen, listen! Always be positive and honest about their child's development, and don't get defensive. If they think you're a lousy coach, just listen politely and do your best to rectify the situation. Try to view the issue from their perspective; you might be surprised at what you see!

In all the youth leagues with which I've been associated, the parents are paying good money and spending valuable time giving their kids an opportunity to have some fun. It can be discouraging to see their kid spending an unfair amount of time on the bench, or not being constructively involved in the game. Do your best to make the event fair and fun for everyone and you'll avoid any bitterness directed at you in return.

If you need to talk to a parent, do so without the child being present. A phone call or face-to-face discussions work best, but even an e-mail can work (depending on your relationship with the parent). Do be careful when you communicate in writing, though, often the tone of the message can be misread. Do your best to write with a clear mind, and have your spouse proofread the note before hitting the "send" button (hint, hint) :o)

Here's a tip that can help reduce the pressure a parent might be putting on their child: set up a practice game between the team and the parents. The game is not as easy as it looks!