

Coaching Your Own Child

Q: I have a stepson who is 13 and I coach his basketball team. I feel that he is not giving me the respect of a head coach and he is not trying as hard as the other kids on the team. So my question is: How can I get him to try harder in practice and in the games? Also how can I get him to show me the respect as a regular head coach?

Q: I have two sons, 9 and 11. Both are active in sports and play well. My older son is somewhat on the small side; the 9 year old is big (he outweighs his older brother.) Next year I will have the opportunity to have them play on the same baseball team - the first time this has happened. I am concerned that the younger brother may perform close to the level of his older brother, or better, and the effect this will have on my 11-year-old. I can have them play on different teams. Your thoughts? (Ed. note: I couldn't tell whether this parent was actually coaching the children or not)

Q: My son (11) has a coach that is always insulting the players on the team, such as selecting his son and 2 players on the team that never played before and telling the rest of the team they are the best players and the rest of the team can go jump in the lake. How does a parent approach this?

Do any of these questions sound familiar? Most volunteer youth sport coaches are coaching a team because their children are participating on that team. This, of course, creates the potential for the kinds of problems addressed in the three questions above. While each of the questions is about a different specific problem they have the common thread of coach-player relationship. In an ideal world all youth sport coaches would make sure that all members of their teams got to play about the same amount of time. Fortunately, most coaches come close to accomplishing this goal. Unfortunately, some coaches "play favorites", that is, they play certain children most of the time and give other team members only occasional playing time. If one of the coach's "favorites" is a son or daughter, the problem is even more noticeable, particularly if the coach's child is not a skilled athlete. Coaching your own child has the potential for creating an awkward situation. You may feel pressured by your child or other spouse (if married) to play the child more than their fair share. After all, you are the coach, giving of your time, and so your child should benefit, right? Or, sometimes, in an effort to be fair to all the members of the team you put extra pressure on your child to perform so no one can accuse you of favoring your own child.

How can you reduce or prevent problems when coaching your own child? Before you start coaching you must ask yourself: Can I treat my own child the same as I intend to treat all the other members of the team? Will you expect no more or no less from your own child? You must also discuss the decision with your child. Your child must agree to these same expectations/conditions. They must understand that on the field, at the pool, or whatever, you are the coach and they are just another member of the team. They should not expect to be treated differently than any other member of the team, nor should they treat you differently as their coach. If you and your child can abide by these conditions then go ahead, be the coach. If there is any doubt in your mind or the child's mind, then you probably shouldn't. There is an alternative if you are not absolutely sure. Volunteer as an assistant coach first, sort of as a test, and see how that works out. Then go from there.

Regarding siblings playing on the same team, I think only the parents know their children well enough to make this decision. Ask the children how they feel about it. Would they prefer to play together or on different teams? Because either option may produce some type of conflict, the best answer is specific to your family.

This article by Dr. Richard Stratton, Health and Physical Education Program, Virginia Tech