

## **Praise Is The Key For Kids**

This is an article I got from Robert Freis and sports journalist and former youth coach, The premise is a set of behavioral studies which show that for 6 to 10 year-olds, positive reinforcement helps create a better atmosphere on the soccer field.

It happens every Saturday: The kids on the soccer field go all out, having the times of their lives, while the grown-up spectators on the sidelines scream and yell frantically. In this article, we'll take a closer look at the scene on the sidelines, focusing on typical behavior for coaches and parents of players ages 6 to 10 and give some suggestions for improvement.

Hopefully, it'll make you think!

### **Study Methodology**

A. Observation was the main method used. Our area of interest included the behavior of coaches and parents in relation to children during a game, and the children's reactions.

B. Altogether, we observed 52 matches for 6 to 10 year-olds and recorded the behavior of 208 individuals (49 coaches, 159 parents).

C. Our objective was to describe, categorize and evaluate typical behavior for parents and coaches during these matches.

### **Observed Behavior Types**

A. In the course of our observations, we identified seven behavioral types among coaches and parents. These types served as categories, allowing us to classify the many different actions and verbal expressions we observed according to general tendencies.

B. We observed not only coaches, but the people around them as well.

### **Behavioral Types**

#### **Ambitious**

**Coach:** Always wants to win; only lets the best player play.

**Parent:** Yells criticisms at his or her children during the game.

#### **Know-It-All**

Comments usually begin with "You have to," "You should," and "Don't ever."

### **Uncritical**

Never criticizes the performance of individual players; focuses on the outcome instead.

### **Impulsive**

Yells lots of negative comments throughout the game, but some positive comments as well.

### **Aggressive**

Encourages the children to get aggressive (and sometimes violent) whenever it seems like they're at a disadvantage.

### **Feel Good**

Praises every play; never utters a word of criticism during the game.

### **Quiet**

Rarely makes a comment during the game. Makes corrections when necessary, in simple, easily understood sentences. Doesn't criticize during the game.

## **Results Of The Study**

**A.** When we look at the distribution of individual types by percentage including both coaches and parents, we see that the "quiet" type is the most common (**42.3%**). In other words, almost half of the total spectators behave calmly during matches. ***A satisfying result!***

**B.** However, the "impulsive" type is a significant **20.7%** - much too high. This type, whether coach or parent, gets actively involved in the game, commenting continuously from the sidelines.

**C.** Next come the "feel-good" (**10.6%**), "ambitious" (**9.6%**), "uncritical" (8.2) and "know-it-all" (6.7%) types. Fortunately, we can essentially disregard the "aggressive" type (only 1.9%).

## Types Of Coaches

A. When we looked at distribution by percentage for coaches alone, we note that more than half of the coaches for 8 to 10 year-olds were categorized as impulsive! This is five times as many as was observed in the 6 to 8 year-old division. This appears to indicate that 9 and 10-year-olds are already being trained in a much more success-oriented atmosphere.

In most cases, team rank is more important than the players' development as individuals, while fun is much more highly valued among the 6 to 8 year-olds.

B. The quiet type is the second largest group among coaches overall. However, the 6 to 8 year-olds still have three times as many quiet coaches on the sidelines as the 8 to 10 year-olds do. The reasons for this discrepancy between the age groups have to do with the factors we discussed above.

C. We also noted that the feel-good type is the second largest group among the 6 to 8 year-olds, while among the 8 to 10 year-olds, **it is insignificant as a group.**

To summarize, we can state that coaches are much more active with 8- to 10-year-olds than with 6- to 8-year-olds.

## Types Of Parents

A. Among the parents, on the other hand, we noted that the quiet type is by far the majority. This means that almost half of the parents don't interfere with their children's enjoyment of the game.

B. However, in second place we find the impulsive type, always attempting to influence their children's performance.

C. A look at the ambitious type shows that winning becomes more important for parents as their children get older.

## Summary Of The Results

1) 1.. Prior to our observations, one of our hypotheses was that coach and parental behavior was overwhelmingly negative. **We were not able to prove this.** There were individuals who stood out because of their negative behavior, but almost half of all parents belonged to the quiet type, and more than 10% to the feel-good type. We can certainly consider

this a very positive result. Meanwhile, 40% of the coaches belonged to the impulsive type, which is quite a high proportion. A calmer, more restrained attitude would be desirable for optimum facilitation of player development.

2) Among the 8 to 10 year-olds, we encountered significantly more active coaches (mostly impulsive types) than among the 6- to 8-year-olds (mostly quiet types). The main reason is presumably a more exclusively success-oriented attitude. The parents of both age groups were mostly quiet types. However, note that the 8- to 10-year-olds had significantly more impulsive and ambitious parents than the 6- to 8-year-olds did.

3) coaches and parents do not act the same. In general, parents were calmer than coaches.

4) Parents and coaches both interfere frequently with the action on the field. In every game we observed loud comments that influenced the children's behavior, from both coaches and parents.

5) The closer the game, the more aggressively coaches and parents behaved. Often the opening minutes of the game were the only times children were free from outside interference.

## **Conclusions**

A) Why is it that some parents forget to be good role models when their kids are standing on a soccer field? Does it have to do with a difference between children's and parents' goals?

B) Children play soccer to learn the game and to improve. Fun and excitement must be valued above all. However, adults often try to transfer their own (sometimes exaggerated) ambitions onto children. A purely success-oriented attitude pushes talented kids too fast and puts too much pressure on them too early. No one takes responsibility for proper education.

We can attribute this to two likely factors: On one hand, parents may project their own unfulfilled childhood hopes and dreams onto their own children; or on the other, they themselves may have been very successful as children and now expect the same from their kids.

C) At this age, children depend very much on their parents, and therefore they deserve their parents' support. However, at the game, parents must keep in mind that young players are easily influenced, from many directions. A good youth coach will always try to use parents who behave positively for team organizational duties, and sometimes even auxiliary coaching responsibilities.

D) Leadership by the coach is absolutely necessary during the game. Coaches should always give instructions during breaks, though, because children find it very hard to understand verbal information during play. Also, sentences should be as simple and easy to understand as possible.

E) Choice of words and tone are most important of all. Negative remarks and loud, personal criticisms are inappropriate, while encouraging words are valuable and helpful throughout the game. We repeatedly observed adults screaming at kids. Moderate cheering is, of course, preferable.

F) In closing, we'd like to reiterate that there are some adults who need to rethink the way they treat children on the soccer field, so that kids can develop without interference and do what they want to do: just play soccer!

## **Tips How Should I Act at a Match**

### **For Coaches**

#### **Before the Match**

A) A brief meeting covering basic information on the match is sufficient. Don't overload players with complex instructions. Simple, easily understood tips are much more valuable.

B) Parents aren't missing anything in the locker room. This is the time to build team spirit, without parental influence.

C) Build mature players! Encourage them to be self-sufficient - for example, to be responsible for bringing all their equipment to the game without parental "nagging"

#### **During the Match**

A) Avoid loud personal criticism. We see all too many adults yelling at kids: This accomplishes nothing, and it's completely irresponsible from an educational point of view.

B) Avoid complex words and soccer jargon. Children don't understand them. Simplified explanations and pictures can be helpful instead. Keep your sentences simple and your language calm and objective.

C) Always be positive for the kids. Be supportive; don't criticize them every time they make a mistake.

D) Give plenty of praise!

E) Try to calm the parents when they yell at their kids or criticize them loudly during the game. You may even have to have one-on-one talks with individual parents.

### **During Halftime**

A) Boost players' self-confidence. Remind them of their skills and abilities: For example, tell them what they did right. Use a 3 to 1 ratio of praise to criticism. If you tell them what they did wrong, also tell them how they can do it better.

B) Halftime is also a time to keep the team together and the parents away. Otherwise, every parent will try to have an individual talk with his or her child. This could lead to players getting confused, because they're hearing one thing from the coach and another from their parents.

C) Pass out drinks. Don't start talking right away. Let everyone calm down first.

### **After The Match**

A) Get the team together one more time after the match and discuss the game with them. Let them talk too, so they have a chance to express their own feelings.

B) Never criticize right after the game. If your team lost, calm them down, cheer them up, console them or praise them.

### **For Parents**

A) Team leadership is the coach's job, in any sport. Organizational help, on the other hand, is always welcome and enriches the life of the club (parties, tournaments, etc.).

B) If you're disappointed in the final score or your child's performance, keep it to yourself. Instead, help the children deal with it positively.

C) Try not to yell out personal, highly emotional negative comments during the game. They only cause fear and aggressiveness.

D) Never try to influence the coach's lineup even if it means your own child doesn't get as much of a chance to play.

E) Your enthusiasm for the team and the league should never be dependent on your satisfaction with the coach's decisions.

F) If you're still frustrated, set up an individual meeting with the coach and try to share and discuss your opinions and feelings in an objective, understanding atmosphere.

G) Always stop to think about how you're acting on the sidelines, in practice or at a match, and improve your behavior if necessary.

### **Focus On: Dealing With Youth Players**

#### **TIP1:**

Every youth player is an individual, with all the relevant rights, entitlements and obligations that this implies. Players must therefore on no account have their minds made up for them, be 'mothered', offended or treated like 'machines' chasing goals, points and championships.

Coaches must not just pay lip service to this important aspect of their relationship with the players by 'mouthing off' or making grandiose gestures. Instead, they must clearly recognize players' individuality in a variety of different situations and when dealing with them on a day-to-day basis. Of course, youth trainers have the same rights themselves and should occasionally assert these firmly and consistently.

#### **TIP2:**

Youth coaches must not and cannot set their minds solely on playing the role of 'soccer expert'. Youth work in soccer must also fulfill valuable social and educational functions in today's world. However, to succeed in this, coaches need to have sufficient time, patience and understanding for the problems of their players both inside and outside the sporting domain (school, parents, friendships).

#### **TIP3:**

The basis of good personal contact between players and their coach is being able to talk positively. This talking must not be one-sided, e.g. with the coach

simply issuing instructions, laying down rules or barking orders all the time and the junior players simply listening, asking questions and copying him the whole time.

The players must be able to express their own thoughts, wishes, points of view and feelings in a lively exchange with the coach. Such talks do not always work out.

The coach and his players have to learn certain rules and patterns of conduct. Furthermore, a trusting relationship will take time to develop. It is important to be open with each other and this should start with the youngest age groups. Such openness must be practiced, fostered and built on from the very outset.

#### TIP4:

Youth coaches must constantly be aware of their role-model function both with regard to sport and in human interaction in particular. They must set an example themselves of what they expect from their players by:

- Displaying their own enthusiasm for the game of soccer;
- Being well-mannered in their dealings with others, e.g. adopting a friendly and personal approach, showing a willingness to help, finding constructive solutions to conflicts and consciously seeking to support weaker players;
- Showing how to deal with victories and defeats in a positive way;
- Being 'genuine', i.e. not put on a front or playing certain roles.