

Dear Parents

I remember a few years ago having a conversation with a parent which centred around the issue of the behaviour of parents on the "touchline" whilst supporting their children. The comment from the parent which has remained firmly entrenched in my memory was, "Teachers are far too sensitive to the behaviour of parents on the touchline" The following article, by Brian Moore , I believe gives much food for thought.

## **TIME TO EDUCATE PUSHY PARENTS ON THE FUTILITY OF ABUSE FROM TOUCH LINE**

**by Brian Moore**

Earlier this week Jodie Williams's coach, Mike McFarlane, defended his decision not to send the 17-year-old world junior champion sprinter to the World Championships in Daegu, South Korea, this summer.

In doing so, he clashed with UK Athletics head coach Charles van Commenee, who said he was keen to get Williams competing at senior level. McFarlane and Williams's father stressed the fact that they were focusing on her long-term development, which included concentrating on forthcoming A-levels. Van Commenee highlighted the necessity for Williams to go to Daegu as part of preparations for the 4x100 metres relay team, saying: "You need team players. It's a team event so I select the best team."

Both parties have legitimate points but, in the end, those with more intimate knowledge of the athlete, physically and mentally, have to have the final say and bear final responsibility for Williams's career.

National coach versus personal coach is a specialised facet of the unavoidable dilemma facing anyone trying to both aid and progress his or her child's sporting career. Unfortunately, whilst there are many booklets offering advice, a parent assuming this position faces a difficult task.

Wanting to avoid accusations of duress, I deliberately did not indulge my eldest daughter's casual request to take up mini rugby last year. When she repeated it, more forcefully, at the beginning of this season, I helped her enrol in the mini section of a local rugby club.

We have all seen parents living their dreams through their offspring. I remember vividly the parents of boys against whom I competed in trial games and the resentment I felt as they bellowed to highlight anything their son did better than I did. I also recall my sympathy for the boys chided over mistakes not made purposefully.

As I had a reasonably successful sporting career, I thought that I would easily cope with the potential problems of spectating. I was wrong.

I had already read the guidelines issued to parents by the Football Association as part of their Respect campaign and those framed by the Rugby Football Union and the England and Wales Cricket Board. Whilst each set differs slightly, they stress the same important points of positivity, support, not taking it too seriously, focusing on skill rather than winning, maintaining confidence with helpful analysis and respect for officials.

Bearing all this in mind, my only words before my daughter's first training session were, "enjoy yourself, listen and try your best".

The possible problem of her coach not meeting what I thought should be an appropriate standard thankfully did not arise, as he was admirably dedicated and skilled. Therefore, I settled down to enjoy vicariously a nine-year-old's first experience of a game I love; then it all went wrong.

All the youngsters made mistakes, but they and she had a particular problem with the offside line, not surprising given that internationals, elite referees and some opinionated co-commentators have similar difficulties. I tried to help by shouting, and I promise in a gentle way, for them to make a line behind the pile-up (breakdown) and saying "well done" when they did.

As it seemed to help, I repeated the advice at the next breakdown and the next and so on. I was mortified when my daughter suddenly yelled "stop shouting at me".

I had not appreciated that, although I only mentioned her name once during this general advice, she interpreted it as personal criticism on each occasion. Prickling with automatic defensiveness, I choked my protest that I was only trying to help and instead mumbled a quiet "sorry" as the other parents stared at me.

Reading deeper into this shows you the fine line between helping and hindering. All children are aware of a parent's presence and this creates some pressure, whatever the parent's behaviour. Children discern far more than we think and often infer things from the slightest word or gesture.

They do not always recognise a general expression of disappointment and believe it is directed at them. Head shaking, rolling of the eyes, looking away, kicking the ground - any of these can discourage children, and exhortations like "come on" and "sort it out" are as practically useless from the touchline as they are on the pitch.

There is a school of thought, subscribed to by many parents, that kids need to learn to live with this and that it will toughen them up to face bigger challenges, but the evidence refutes this. It is not about giving unqualified praise; this is wrong, especially when the child knows they have not played

well. It is about being aware of all the above points and discussing performance at the right time, offering only constructive advice.

All this is counselling perfection; parents will always fall short because they are human. However, when you note the subtlety of the matters, you must wonder why a number of parents still openly threaten and abuse their own and others' children, genuinely believing that they do nothing wrong.

It is astounding that these parents cannot see that their example may embarrass and subliminally condone similar behaviour from their child in the future.

Make no mistake; this sort of behaviour happens in most sports. The factual accounts of the behaviour of certain impossibly expectant, middle-class tennis parents are the equal of anything coming from Hackney Marshes.

Parental aggression led the FA to introduce the spectator zone in kids football, which ropes parents away from the pitch. Whilst this may seem silly, we should applaud the FA for recognising the problem and attempting to solve it. They and every other sport should not tolerate even a small degree of these dangerous and damaging actions.

When you read the evidence, you have to concede that parental attitude and action play at least an equal part in a child's sporting development as does coaching. This being so, it is difficult to resist the proposition that we should invest as much money into educating parents on these issues as we do into formal coaching.