

# THE INVOLVEMENT OF PARENTS IN CHILDREN'S SPORT

*Professor Paul Singh, 2006*

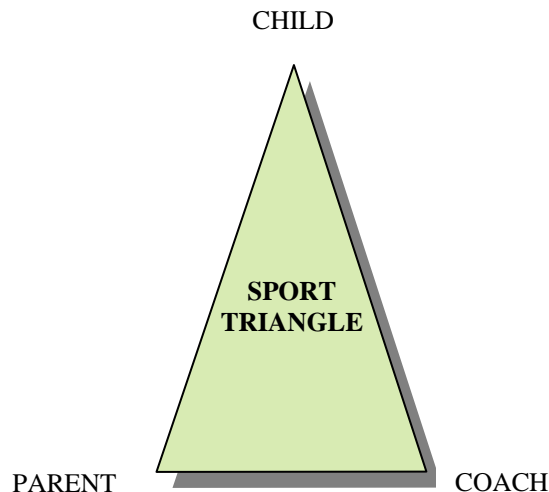
*“Play up, play up and play the game, dear parents!”*

## INTRODUCTION

Parents play an important role in their children's enjoyment, success and continuation of sport participation. Parents play the largest role in the development of their children. Children learn from their parents, who serve as their main role models. Children also learn values, attitudes and how to behave from their parents. Parents are the most important behaviour models, especially during the early years in a child's life.

## THE ROLE OF PARENTS IN SPORT

Parents play several different roles in youth sport. The role of parents is often expressed as a sport triangle, consisting of the child, the parent and the coach, as illustrated below.



In this three-way relationship, the interests of children come first, and they therefore appear on the apex of the triangle. Next are the parents and the important role they play. Sport coaches who also play an important role in shaping the behaviour of children through the medium of sport and physical activities are next. Parents or guardians have been responsible for the initial exposure, encouragement, motivation, support and guidance required by their children to be successful in sport. They have also taken on the

roles of taxi driver, chauffeur, registration official, refreshment co-ordinator, coach, official and administrator, etc.

Whatever the role of parents in youth sport, one fact is universally accepted. Children do not have the same maturity and judgement as adults do. They are therefore vulnerable and incompetent, and especially those children who are under fourteen years of age need parental involvement in their care and raising. This implies that there are also legal implications to parental involvement. Parents have certain duties and obligations that they have to undertake in order to ensure that they protect the interests and welfare of their children. They always have to act in the best interests of their children in terms of the requirements of the 1996 Constitution, and in terms of the UN's International Convention on the Rights of the Child.

## **PROBLEMS IN YOUTH AND SCHOOL SPORT**

Although children rely on parental involvement, the problem today appears to be parents over-identifying with their children's participation or success in sport. Paternal involvement must be caring and nurturing and not involve treating child-athletes as a means to achieve their own ends. Parents who 'live vicariously through their children' are guilty of over-identification. They fail to see the importance and value of allowing children to experience sport on their own terms, for their own sake. In these cases, the parent's self worth is linked to the child's athletic success. Paternal intervention should instead serve "to maximize a child's opportunity for the widest possible array of life experiences, safe from harm". According to Kepler Wessels, one time Proteas Cricket captain, "We can't do it for them. What we can do is be there for them".

Youth sport should be about development. Youth place the highest value on the fun they get from participation. But the atmosphere at today's schools and community clubs is explosive. Unruly adult behaviour and violent confrontations occur very frequently. Organisations that offer youth sport do not have a solid programming foundation, which should include a sound philosophy that does not deviate from providing for the best interests of children. By not having well-crafted policies that are firmly in place, and strictly adhered to, or by ignoring them once the game begins is one of the roots of the problem.

Many parents and children who participate in youth sport fortunately share positive experiences. But the current system of school and youth sport in many communities condones and actually facilitates the emotional and physical abuse of children and encourages unacceptable behaviour. It is very unfortunate that more and more children are dropping out of sport, not because they do not like to play, but because of parents failing them. This could be an important barrier to participation, adding to the already growing increase in inactive and obese youth.

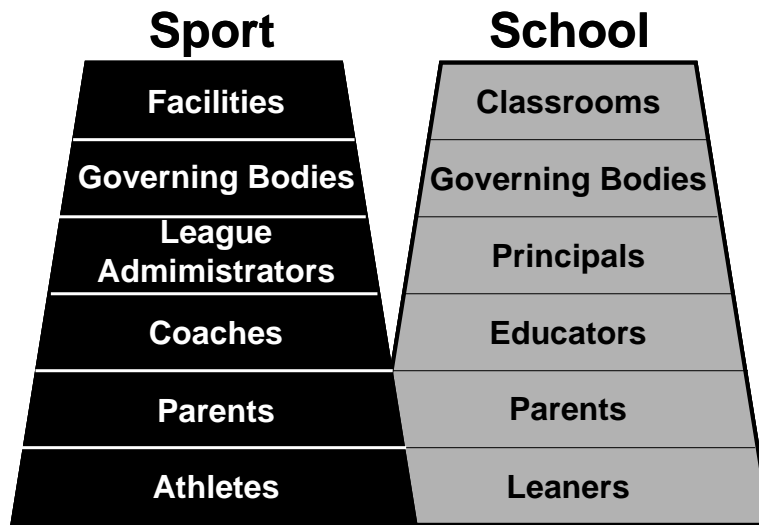
Although children tend to seek the approval of adults in many of their daily activities, many parental reactions to children's yearning for attention in sport and fitness activities is far from satisfactory. Parents often act in ways that could be damaging to relationships with their children. According to Coakley (1990), "The most potentially destructive situation occurs when children believe that their relationships with one or both parents depend on continued involvement in sport or on the quality of their performance as athletes".

One of the largest problems hindering the continuation and enjoyment of play and physical activity in young children is the importance that adults and role models in our society place on competition and winning. Parents often feel that they must challenge and "drive" their child, if they want them to excel in sport. Unfortunately, in a growing number of schools and community sport leagues there are an increasing number of incidents involving adults behaving inappropriately. Everyone has an anecdote. Sport administrators, coaches, referees, parents and even casual observers of youth sports can cite at least an incident or two that they have witnessed or heard of. There is an alarmingly consistent message - a growing number of parents at youth sport events seem to be out of control.

A recent *Sports Illustrated* special report cites a "rising tide of violence and verbal abuse by adults at youth sports events". The increase in violent and vulgar behaviour of parents has been reported at competitive matches between teams of elite teenagers down to the games of five-year olds. While most parents enroll their children in sport with good intentions, clearly the actions of many other parents suggest that there is a problem.

## **THE YOUTH SPORT ENVIRONMENT**

The figure below illustrates that educational systems and youth sport programmes in developed countries are similar when it comes to their structures and critical role in helping children learn and develop life-long skills.



**The link between youth sport and education systems**

(Adapted from N.A.Y.S., 2001)

As shown earlier, the athlete's primary influence and exposure to sport comes from parents, then coaches. The learner's primary influence and exposure to education comes from parents followed by educators. Sport leagues are managed by league administrators, whereas schools are managed by principals. Sport Federations or Governing Bodies are responsible for the governance of sport whereas schools are governed by School Governing Bodies. Sport occurs in the context of sports facilities whereas education fundamentally occurs in classrooms. Thus it can be expected that youth sport should be an extension of the child's education, where they can continue to learn and develop each of the important aspects that are basic to positive and productive human growth and development. If the reasoning illustrated in the figure above be adopted, where the primary goal is to generate outcomes in sports programmes that match the expectations of the schools system, then significant progress can be made to the overall delivery and effectiveness of sport programmes.

Currently there is a difference between the two systems. It is ironical that youth sport agencies are not held to the same high standard as the educational system. In the educational system, children are not sent to schools with educators who are not trained in teaching and working with children. So why does it happen in youth sport? At school functions, such as plays and debates, adults are not allowed to yell at children who forget their lines or use a wrong word. So why is similar behaviour tolerated in youth sport when a child drops a pass or misses a basket? In the educational system educators who demean, ridicule, embarrass or assault children would not be tolerated. So why when volunteer coaches, administrators or officials exhibit the same type of behaviour at a practice session or game is it ignored and simply considered a part of the whole youth sport experience? In the school system, educators are accountable and could be held legally liable for misconduct. So why is it that adults alongside youth sports fields are not held accountable nor penalised for their misconduct?

The environment in today's youth sport has become increasingly hostile and very competitive, high-pressured, and it often encourages and rewards a 'win-at-all-costs' approach. What the scoreboard says at the end of the game is what it really is all about. Adults, in their roles as coaches, administrators, officials and spectators, are often inflicting their misguided motives and ideals on youth sport and in the process, depriving the youth of what should be a fun-filled experience.

One sport psychologist is of the opinion that emotions flare up all the more at school sport these days because a loss in sport is regarded by learners and coaches 'almost like a death in the family'. Pretoria principals stated that the problem begins with parents who run up and down along the sidelines and incite each other as well as the players.

A number of local incidents that were reported in the print media since 1998 serve as a grim reminder of the seriousness of the problem. While not all of the incidents directly involve parents as perpetrators of violence (commission), they indirectly illustrate inappropriate behaviour in the sense that their non-involvement in guiding and supporting their children's health, welfare and safety (omission) quite often worsens the problem. The important question that arises is should parents of young children be fearful that their child could be exposed to criminal behaviour similar to that already described? What is also important is what role should sport and recreation professionals have in the

administration of local youth sport in order to minimise the likelihood of inappropriate conduct or violent incidents occurring in their community?

**Incidents of Youth Sport-Related Violence in South Africa (1998-2003)**

<b>DATE</b>	<b>LOCATION</b>	<b>INCIDENT TYPE</b>	<b>SOURCE</b>
September 1998	Bloemfontein	A parent barred from national junior tennis championships because of racism and misconduct.	<i>Die Volksblad</i> (28/9/1998:1)
October 1998	Durban	S.A.F.A. under-14 inter-provincial football championships. 17 over-age players discovered by X-ray tests.	<i>The Sunday Times</i> (4/10/1998:1)
August 1998	Natal Carbineers Drill Hall, Pietermaritzburg	Parent in drunken rage drove across soccer field and injured two players. Threatened son's coach for dropping him from team.	<i>The Natal Witness</i> (3/08/1998:1)
May 1999	Pretoria Gardens High, Pretoria	A parent attacks another with metal pipe during inter-school rugby match, injuring him.	<i>Die Beeld</i> (1/6/1999:3)
March 2002	Grey College, Bloemfontein	Two parents in fist fight at rugby tournament after consuming alcohol.	<i>Die Volksblad</i> (25/3/2002:1)
October 2003	EG Jansen High, Boksburg	Players and parents of two cricket teams maul each other after disagreement with umpires decision. One mother assaulted; One father's finger broken; one learner sustained a blue-eye.	<i>Die Beeld</i> (15/10/2003:1)

## **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MAKING YOUTH SPORT SAFE**

1. Education of parents and child-athletes appears to be the most practical and widespread strategy to make sport safe and to ensure that youth have fun

2. Youth sport parents/guardians should be required to sign a code of conduct. This would provide a measure of accountability for adults who tend to 'cross the line'. However, codes of conduct should not be regarded as a cure for preventing inappropriate behaviour.

3. Parents' orientation meetings at the start of the season could prove useful in conveying the expectations of proper behaviour. The overall objective of the meeting should be to improve parents' understanding of youth sport and the goals of the programme.

4. Another potentially useful strategy for identifying and preventing undesirable people from becoming involved in youth sport, is to conduct criminal background checks of volunteer coaches, administrators and officials. However, criminal background checks are not foolproof, as only those individuals with a prior criminal record would be identified.

5. Precautionary measures should be introduced to ensure that spectators remain seated on the pavilions, and that referees should not hesitate to take action against foul play.

6. Every effort should be made to ensure that the conduct of all stakeholders in youth sport is appropriate. Regulations and directives from the Department of Education should be enforced. Also, governing bodies of school and youth sport should ensure that appropriate policies, guidelines and codes of conduct are developed, distributed and enforced.

7. As the gatekeepers of community facilities, sport and recreation professionals should ensure that the highest standards of behaviour are upheld at youth sport events. Beyond moral duty, youth sport administrators have a legal duty to ensure that activities are conducted in a safe manner.

8. Professional youth sport administrators should be appointed by local authorities to oversee all youth sport in communities. It is important to have someone who would be accountable and educated about how youth sport works, and who would be able to act as a liaison between municipal recreation departments, community leaders and ward councillors. They should be able to 'keep a finger on the pulse' and raise the standard of youth sport administration.