RYP INTERNATIONAL

## RYP Quarterly

# How to Coach Kids Sport Without Becoming the Ugly Parent

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# RYP QUARTERLY

**You've seen them. The parent pacing the sideline, barking instructions louder than the coach. The one slamming the fence when the ref misses a call. The one replaying every mistake on the car ride home like a post-match press conference. You may have even caught glimpses of that parent in yourself.**

We all want the best for our kids in sport. It helps build confidence, discipline, teamwork, resilience. But somewhere along the way, our good intentions can morph into pressure, perfectionism, and performance anxiety. So how do you support your child without **suffocating** their joy?

**A Parent must walk a fine line being their child's biggest fan and their most trusted coach, without becoming the "ugly parent."**

## WHY SPORT MATTERS: IT'S BIGGER THAN THE GAME

Sport is one of the most powerful platforms for personal growth in childhood. Research confirms what many of us intuitively know. When kids participate in sport, they:

- Get to experience the need for emotional regulation
- Practice teamwork and collaboration
- Acquire resilience skills
- And adopt goal-setting disciplines

Through sport, children get to learn life skills such as the exhilaration of winning, and how to recover after a loss. Individually, sport provides a mechanism for the discovery of self-discipline, the importance of practice, and the regulation of temperament.

Sport provides many physical and mental health benefits, which can fuel lifelong wellness habit. Participating in team sports can build self-esteem, confidence and a sense of belonging. Socialisation in the early years is much more important than skill acquisition.

**But here's the catch:** When adults project their own fears, frustrations, or ambitions onto the game, these benefits can be lost. Kids burn out. Confidence drops. Love for the game fades.

I**N SHORT:** Sport stops being a space for play and growth, and becomes a stage for performance and approval.

## WHY KIDS DROP OUT OF SPORT

- **It Stops Being Fun:** Sport becomes too serious, too competitive, or overly structured, making it feel like a job rather than a joy.
- **Too Much Pressure:** Children feel pressure to perform from coaches, parents, or themselves, which leads to anxiety and burnout.
- **Lack of Play Time or Progression:** Kids may not get enough game time or feel like they're not improving, which hurts motivation.
- **Overemphasis on Winning:** When winning becomes the focus instead of participation and enjoyment, many kids feel discouraged or left out.
- **Poor Coaching or Negative Experiences:** Harsh, overly critical, or unengaged coaches can make any sport a negative experience.
- **Loss of Autonomy:** When kids don't feel they have a choice or voice in their sport, they disengage.
- **Social Changes:** Teen years bring new priorities (friends, school, part-time work), and sport can lose out if it's no longer enjoyable or socially rewarding.
- **Injury or Physical Struggles:** Ongoing injuries or feeling less competent than peers can lead to dropout.
- **The Coach is Obsessed with Winning:** The number one reason kids enjoy sport in the early years is for socialisation reasons. They want to be with their friends. Winning is a by-product of this.
- **No Sense of Belonging:** When the more talented children are acknowledged and recognised to the exclusion of the lesser talented players, any sense of belonging or being a valued member of the team is lost, so they quit!
- **A Lack of Playing Time:** Children soon tire of just being a spectator at a game and not getting enough game time. It only reinforces they are not very good and hence are not much value to the team.
- **Bodily Insecurities:** Especially in young girls, who may feel awkward or susceptible to teasing or body shaming.
- **Team Incompatibilities:** Every Coach owns the team climate of their team. It should be safe, welcoming, inclusive and fun for all, not just the talented players. This also includes how parents act and behave on game day!

*None of this is new. It is long known. Indeed, it was researched in the 1960's and 1970's by academics including A.V. Carron (1979) D. Gould D, T Horn, D. Feltz, & M. Weiss (1978), T. Tutko, B Ogilvie, & R Lyon (1969), J Coakley (1978), D Parkin (1976)*

## 5 PRINCIPLES FOR COACHING YOUR KIDS WITHOUT OVERSTEPPING

**1. Be a Parent First, not a Coach**

Even if you've played at a high level or have coaching experience, your first job is to be their safe base. When kids know that your love is not conditional on performance, they're more likely to take risks, bounce back from setbacks, and stay in sport longer.

- **Instead of:** "Why didn't you pass the ball?"
- **Try:** "I loved watching you play today. What did you enjoy most?"
- **Lesson:** Emotional safety fuels confidence.

**2. Focus on Effort, Not Outcome**

Praise what they control: their attitude, effort, and sportsmanship. Not stats, scores, or trophies. The world already ranks, measures, and evaluates them. Be the one who sees the invisible wins, like the courage to show up, the decision to share the ball, the bounce-back after a mistake.

Say things like:

- "I'm proud of how hard you worked today."
- That was brave how you kept going after that fall."
- "I noticed you encouraged a teammate; that's leadership."
- **Lesson:** Positive shaping builds intrinsic motivation and resilience.

**3. Respect the Coach-Athlete Relationship**

Every team needs clear leadership. If you're constantly contradicting the coach from the sidelines, you're not helping, you're confusing. Even if you disagree with a strategy, resist the urge to undermine the coach. Let your child build their muscle of adapting to different coaching styles and finding their own voice within the team.

Ask:

- "What's something you're learning from your coach?"
- "How do you think you can apply that in the next game?"
- **Lesson:** Clarity trumps control. Let the coach "coach." You stay in your lane.

**4. Ditch the Post-Game Debrief**

This might be the hardest one. The game ends. Emotions are still raw. You're tempted to break it all down on the drive home. But research shows that the car ride home is often the most stressful part of sport for young athletes, not the competition itself. Kids dread the thought "what is dad or mum going to say" after a game. Instead, give them space to process. Let them bring it up if they want to.

Try this post-game sequence:

- "I loved watching you play."
- "Want to get something to eat?"
- Later on you can ask them…. "How did you feel about the game?"
- **Lesson:** This shows your child that they're more important than their performance, and that sport is not a pressure test.

**5. Play the Long Game**

Remember: It's not about the weekend win, it's about their 10-year development journey. Will they become elite players? Probably not. But that's not the point. The point is to help them discover themselves:

- Discover what they're capable of, and what their passions are
- Learn how to handle failure
- Become a good teammate and a reliable person
- Build life skills
- **Lesson:** Winning is great. But character lasts longer than any medals.

Ask:

- "What's one thing sport is teaching you about life?"
- "What are you proud of in yourself this week?"
- **Lesson:** These conversations build self-awareness, not ego.

## THE SIGNS YOU'RE BECOMING "THAT PARENT" — AND HOW TO SHIFT

**Here's a check list. If you find yourself doing these regularly, take a breath and reset:**

- Yelling at referees or opposing players
- Giving constant sideline instructions
- Rehashing every mistake on the way home
- Comparing your child to others
- Feeling more upset than your child after a loss
- Arguing with opposition parents
- Taking over the coaching role at breaks
- Offering the Coach your unwanted advice
- Zeroing in on your child's game day mistakes when you get home

**Shift Your Energy to:**

- Focus on connection, not correction
- Model grace, not blame
- Celebrate courage, not just winning
- Show you enjoyed watching them play
- Catch your child doing things right
- Applaud the opposition
- Praise all the players in the team, not just your child's
- Keep things in perspective, it is only a game

**A Powerful Reframe: From Pressure to Partnership:**

What your child wants more than anything is to feel **seen, supported, and safe**. When you shift from trying to manage their performance to being their trusted partner in growth, you unlock a much richer experience, for both of you. Imagine sport as a campfire:

- **The Coach** adds the fuel.
- **The Child** brings the spark.
- **You?** You protect the flame from wind, judgment, and burnout.

## CONNECTION, COMPETENCE, CHARACTER: THE LEGACY YOU LEAVE

In twenty years' time, your child will not remember the scores. But they'll remember **how you made them feel.** Did they feel proud or pressured? Encouraged or critiqued? Backed or belittled? Your voice becomes their inner voice.

**So let it be a voice that says:**

- "I believe in you."
- "I love watching you play."
- "You've got what it takes — on and off the field."

**Lesson:** Sport is a gift. Let's make sure we give it, not weaponise it.

Many coaches and psychologists recommend the **"3 Cs"** parenting model:

• Create **Connection** with your child
• Build **Competence and Confidence** in their skills by practicing with them
• Develop **Character** by letting them win, lose, or draw.

Build these, and you'll raise not just an athlete, but a thriving young person.

## Tips to Build the Three C's:

**Create Connection with your child by:**

- Making sure you both treat sport in the early years as a social outing where the primary purpose is to meet and interact with each other, and other people
- Make it FUN. Something you both enjoy doing
- Watching sport together and discussing tactics and strategies

**Build Competence and Confidence in their skills by:**

- Make time for practice regularly – together
- Make practice fun, and focused on just a couple of skills
- Play fun games during practice, rather than onerous training drills
- Positive shaping through your feedback. Focus on what to do, and what they do well, not what they are not doing

**Develop Character by Letting Them.....**

- Let them have a go and try
- Let them experience the feeling of winning and losing, and being OK with that
- Let them participate with their friends, free of your influence
- Let them be kids. Having Fun and Socialising is more important than winning!

**Lesson:** Resilience is acquired by responding to setbacks. It is not taught in a classroom or via a lecture in the car home

**SEVEN PARENTING / COACHING TIPS FOR PARENTS**

- **Keep it Fun:** Prioritise joy, friendships, and the love of movement. Fun is the #1 motivator for kids.
- **Praise Effort, Not Outcome:** Focus on improvement, teamwork, and resilience, not just wins or performance stats.
- **Let Kids Make their Own Choices:** What sport they play, how often they practice, and when to take breaks.
- **Don't Relive Your Dreams Through Them:** Your child's sport is not your second chance, it's their journey, not yours.
- **Watch for Burnout Signs:** If they're dreading practice, constantly tired, or anxious about games, step back and reassess.
- **Value All Roles:** Whether your child is a star or just a participant, celebrate their participation and growth.
- **Model Healthy Perspective:** Be a calm and a supportive presence, rather than a sideline critic.

In short: Children stay in sport when it feels like play, not pressure. Parents play a huge role in protecting that experience. Remember, it is the social aspect that is more important than the result!

## SOME PERSPECTIVES FROM WELL KNOWN COACHES:

**Craig Foster AM:** *"Sport should never compromise the wellbeing of children; it should uplift them."*

Former Socceroo and player advocate; now a broadcaster and human rights campaigner. He is a strong advocate for values-based sport, inclusion, and the bigger role sport plays in society. He often speaks on parental behaviour, youth sport pressure, and the ethics of coaching.

**Dr. Richard Keegan – University of Canberra:** "*When parents focus on effort and enjoyment, kids stay longer in sport — and perform better too."*

An expert in motivation, confidence, and sport psychology, especially in youth sport settings. He has developed resources for Sport Australia on positive parental behaviours and intrinsic motivation.

**Tony Roche:** ***"****The best players are usually the best listeners. That starts with parents letting the child own their journey."*

Tennis legend. Coached Lleyton Hewitt, Ivan Lendl, Pat Rafter, and Roger Federer. Former Grand Slam champion himself. Known for his calm, respectful coaching style, and long-term player development.

**Darren Cahill:** *"Let the kids fall in love with the game before you burden them with expectations."*

Coached Lleyton Hewitt, Simona Halep, Andre Agassi, Janek Sinner. Known for his emphasis on emotional control, player autonomy, and life balance.

**Judy Murray:** *"Your role as a parent is to provide the love, the food, the taxi service, and the hugs, not the tactical plan."*

Mother of Andy and Jamie Murray, whilst being an elite tennis player on the Women's Circuit, and coach of Fed Cup Teams. An advocate for positive parenting, encouraging independence, and enjoyment first. A Great example of a parent who found a balance between coaching and nurturing.

**David Parkin:** *"The most important thing a young athlete can learn is how to be a better person. Sport is just the classroom."*

Captain Hawthorn Football Club and 1971 Premiership. Premiership-winning AFL coach with Hawthorn and Carlton. Also, a respected academic (former lecturer at Deakin University). Lifelong advocate of holistic athlete development. He is a strong voice against early specialisation and over-coaching of young players. He encourages parents to focus on values, relationships, and resilience in youth sport.

## FINAL WORD

How you act and behave with your children during a game and off the field becomes an important parenting lesson to your child. If your child chooses to pursue an elite sport career, be the taxi driver, the food supplier, the supportive fan, or the shoulder to cry on. Be there to encourage the practice, to teach the how, and model good character. Never be the critic on the sidelines, or the loud ugly parent. If your child chooses not to pursue an elite sporting career, that is OK. Raise a child who is of good character, responsible for their actions, and above all resilient to the ups and downs of life. Sport is a wonderful canvas upon which to explore life and important life lessons. This is for a child to explore and a parent to encourage and support.

### Leadership Lesson:

***Parents who cross over the line between parenting and coaching will always have a lasting negative impact on their child. A child will forget what you say to them, but they will never forget how you made them feel on match day.***

## Facta Non-Verba – Deeds Not Words

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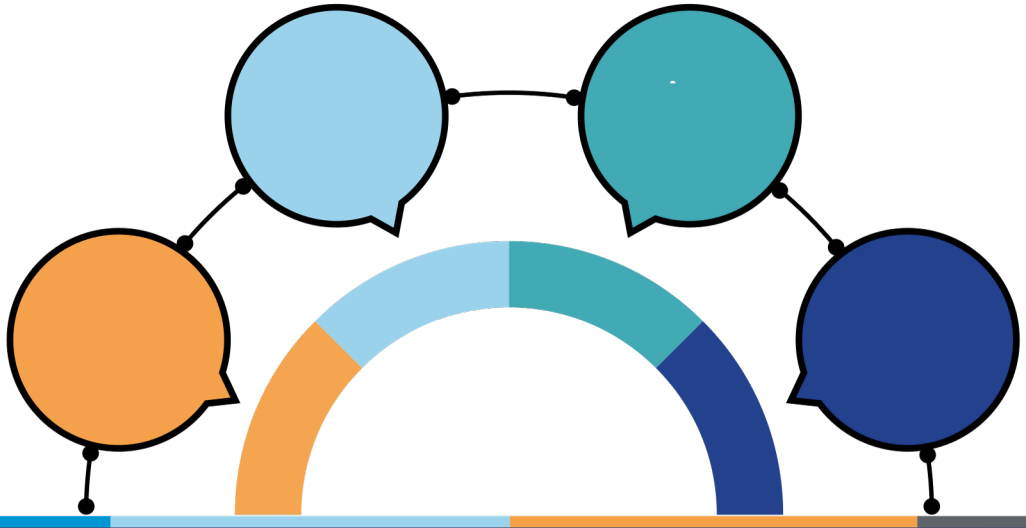

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