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Listen to parents, then react without emotion

Ask Thelma THELMA DOMENICI For the Journal

Dear Thelma: I am a volunteer coach of my daughter's soccer team. I am often confronted by parents with no knowledge of the game or team play who are upset over minor issues. What's the best way to handle this?

A: Deal with those situations as unemotionally as possible. All parents feel an intense desire to see their child appreciated and cared for and kept from harm. If you can take the emotion out of your response to their complaint, the volatility of the situation should diminish.

Truly listen to the grievance. If it's appropriate for you to apologize, then do so sincerely. If time is needed to let emotions cool, you might consider a response like: "I've heard what you've said. I will think about it and get back to you tomorrow." Then follow through.

As for parents, remember that your volunteer coaches aren't paid experts in a particular sport or in child psychology. They need your help to model what being a team player means and to motivate your child to give his or her best.

The most important part of a child's athletic experience will take place at practices. That's where all the instruction takes place and all the learning is done. Observe the instruction given at practice so you can reinforce it at home. Study how your child behaves and whether he or she needs motivation from home. If your child runs a lot of laps during practice, it's most likely because he or she isn't paying attention to what's being taught or said. Discuss that with the child.

Games are the test at the end of the week. If children have prepared well in practice they'll be able to do their best at the games. If they have arrived late, missed practice or not paid attention during it, it will show at the game in how well they do and in what opportunities they are given.

Dear Thelma: My son started his football season this month. Parents can get absolutely crazy on the sidelines. It's not just your favorite team out there, it's your superstar kid and your community pride on the line. It's a volatile mix. Please give us some advice on fan etiquette.

A: As you approach the field, remind yourself that the other team's players, their parents and coaches, and the referees aren't your sworn enemies. Make a point to look at people as you approach — see a dad tying his kid's shoe or a mom sneaking in a quick kiss before the player hits the field. Seek out the good and what you have in common.

Keep the idea of "us versus them" in perspective. These are families and people who, just like you, are going to take their kids out for ice cream after the game, and who over the course of a season are going to laugh and high-five one day and need hugs and a shoulder for tears another.

If you're a yeller, think seriously about whether it's really benefitting anyone. You might decide for one game to silent yourself. Simply watch the game, enjoy the game, clap or cheer with the entire group when appropriate. That kind of focus may give you the chance to observe some precious moments you may have missed before and help you break the yelling habit.

If you know you should but just can't seem to control it, sit yourself as far back from the field as possible. There, if you choose to yell, your yelling won't bother anyone. With such positioning, you may find yelling pointless and won't even want to do it.

From the field of play to the sidelines, good manners never go out of style.

Have a question about etiquette? You can ask it at askthelma.com. Thelma Domenici is CEO of Thelma Domenici & Associates, offering corporate coaching and contemporary social skills development programs to all ages.

