Improving Your Skills as Spectator Stacy DeBroff

 At almost any game, you are bound to hear some parents yelling loudly from the sidelines, their voices carrying over the others. You'll see parents screaming at the ref, shouting out instructions to their children (such as "run faster" or "down the left side"), hollering, gesturing, and jumping out of their seats. You'll also, no doubt, experience parents berating their children from the sidelines ("Focus, Sam!") or being ecstatic depending on the play of the moment, and in general, modeling inappropriate and immature behavior. Also, in the anonymity of a crowd, you'll often hear parents screaming things that they might otherwise never say. Many team coaches have resorted to insisting that parents sit sequestered on the opposite side of the playing field from the kids.

 Given the tremendous amount of anxiety and ambition parents bring to the table when it comes to their child's activities, it's not surprising that parents are losing their cool on the sidelines at youth sporting events. In many areas of America, this behavior has gotten out of hand. Take, for instance, an argument between two fathers after a youth hockey practice in Massachusetts that cost one of them his life. In Florida, a furious parent shot a referee at a child's soccer match. In California, a baseball coach for 8-year-olds went into the stands wielding an aluminum bat to silence a hostile crowd during a game.

 Theoretically, it all sounds perfectly easy to stay calm and positive, until one kid on the opposing team elbows your 6-year-old in the ribs for the third time during a soccer game. It's hard not to lose yourself in the tension of your child's competition.

 The word fan is short for fanatic, and at times, you will inevitably find yourself struggling to keep from acting angry, frustrated, or emotionally out of control at your child's games or meets.

 For some coaches and leagues, their toughest job has become training parents to act appropriately. Many youth leagues have adopted "zero-tolerance" policies in which a referee can stop a game at any time to demand that a verbally abusive parent leave the premises. Over 14 states have passed laws imposing stiffer penalties for assaulting an amateur sports official. In addition to issuing codes of conduct for parents, many leagues have volunteer parents serving as "culture keepers" to keep the peace at competitive games.

 Just like an athlete who needs improvement, you can refine your performance on the sidelines.

 Let the coach be the only one giving instructions to the team or individual players. Leave it up to your coach to talk with your child on the sidelines when she takes a break in the action. When your child hears you calling out instructions to her on the field, she may easily think you are yelling at instead of trying to help her. Games typically get competitive enough without having numerous adults screaming out conflicting instructions.

 Figure out what really gets to you as a spectator at your child's games, whether it's seeing your child get pushed, a bad or missed call by the referee, your child not playing well, your child constantly sitting out, or feeling impatient with your child's lack of skill development.

 Anticipate these inevitably frustrating moments so that you can modulate your response. Empathize with the referee, who's most likely trying his best, and acknowledge that your child's team may be simply outmatched in a particular game, your child may just be having a bad day, or the opposing players have resorted to rough play because they're losing.

 Your child learns self-control by watching you display it on the sidelines. Actions speak louder than words. Your child will be constantly observing and learning how to react during competitions from you. If you're a poor sport, your child will surely follow suit. Being calm and positive will set the standards for your child, who will often rely more on how you act than how you tell her to behave. If you tell your child to display self-control and be respectful and gracious to opponents, but then she sees you losing your cool or yelling at a game, your efforts will be completely undermined.

Sideline Do's and Don'ts

DO's

 Be your child's biggest fan by attending as many games as you can, offering support and encouragement.

 Make your job on the sidelines that of your child's unconditional positive supporter, especially when he's having a tough game. Let the coach be the one to offer up any criticism, skill pointers, or game strategy.

 Becoming angry or letting your disappointment show when your child doesn't perform well will leave her questioning whether this means you love her less. Instead, be supportive and help your child keep the competition in perspective.

 Cheer and call out encouragement instead of directions. Cheer enthusiastically for great skills, not just for scoring.

 Always cheer positively. Root for all the kids on the team, not just your own, and not against their opponents. "Sam, get the ball!" from the sidelines becomes, "Go Vipers" or "Go defense."

 Limit yourself to a few generic words of praise, such as "Great goal" "Nice pass" or "Go Panthers!" Doing so will not only take pressure off your child, but it will also inspire other parents to tone it down as well.

 Smile, show confidence and faith in your child. Your child will watch you closely during a performance and will feel dejected by your cries of frustration, or shouts to try harder.

 Thank the coaches, referees, or umpire at the end of the competition for their hard work.

DON’T

 Don’t yell at your child from the sidelines, as it only serves to confuse and potentially embarrass her. Doing so destroys your child’s concentration. Moreover, you put her in a no-win situation if you end up yelling out advice that contradicts that of her coach.

 Do not lose your temper no matter how bad a call from a referee is or what your child’s opponent or their parents do or say. Walk off the stress or leave. Getting angry accomplishes nothing. Just as you don’t want your child to embarrass you, don’t embarrass her.

 If you get more worked up and excited than your child, something’s wrong. Take a break from attending a game to regroup and gain perspective. Watch nonverbal disapproving signals you give your child, particularly looks of disappointment or disgust. In addition, realize that being silent or not giving your child any feedback after a game will likely be taken as implicit criticism.

 Put away your video camera, as it takes competitive performance pressure off your child and can make him feel self-conscious in the midst of a game.

 Don’t shower your child with extravagant praise. Your child will quickly pick up on it, when you’re cheering madly and all she did was pass the ball once to a teammate.

 Don’t offer your own negative critique about your child’s performance after a game. Your child most likely already feels badly about any mistakes she made.

Copyright 2005, MomCentral, Inc., all rights reserved.A dynamic national speaker, consultant, corporate spokesperson, and writer, Stacy DeBroff is President and founder of Mom Central, Inc., a company devoted to providing pragmatic tips and advice to strengthen busy families and enhance the home environment. Stacy has also written several best-selling books on household and family organization including *The Mom Book: 4,278 Tips for Moms* and *Sign Me Up! The Parent’s Complete Guide to Sports, Activities, and Extracurriculars*. Stacy is a renowned parenting guru and has shared her advice on New England Cable News as their in-house expert, producing her own live weekly segment for the morning news, and has also appeared on network television including NBC’s *Today Show* and the CBS *Early Show.* Stacy holds a B.A. in Psychology and Comparative Literature from Brown University, and a J.D. from Georgetown University.