

## **Some Sports Parents Are 'Out of Bounds'**

*Published May 19, 2006*

FRIDAY, May 19 (HealthDay News) -- Enthusiastic parents who line the bleachers or sidelines at youth sporting events are critical to their children's development.

Unfortunately, not all of them are critical in a good way, according to a new survey.

"Parents who are more active tend to have kids who are more active," said study author Daniel Gould, director of the Institute for the Study of Youth Sports at Michigan State University. "At the same time, it's really easy to fall into the trap of focusing only on winning."

Added Jonathan F. Katz, a sports psychologist and managing partner of High Performance Associates in Hastings-on-Hudson, N.Y.: "There's a delicate balance between encouraging your kid's athletic involvement and achievement, and playing out your own sense of longing to vicariously live out your own desires with them. That's a big issue."

While some parents are content to shout encouragement from the sidelines, there have been some egregious examples of parental misconduct. In 2000, a Massachusetts father was charged with beating another father to death after the two men argued over rough play at their sons' hockey practice.

"Coaches and athletic directors are noting increasing problems with parents. Parents are driving coaches and administrators nuts," Gould said. "At the same time, a good deal of research shows that kids who end up elite athletes don't get there without involved parents. It seems to be a paradox."

To try to sort out the paradox, the United States Tennis Association (USTA) Sport Science Committee funded a three-part project to look at parents' role in tennis talent development. This paper, which appears in the current issue of the *British Journal of Sports Medicine*, is the second phase of that project.

For the study, Gould and his colleagues surveyed 132 professional junior tennis coaches in the United States. They had spent an average of 17 years in the profession. Coaches were asked to score the positive or negative impact of parental involvement in a child's sports performance.

Overall, the coaches felt that parents played an important role in a child's athletic development.

The coaches said more than half (59 percent) of parents they had worked with had a positive influence on a child's development. Positive parental behaviors included providing logistical, financial and social-emotional support.

On the other hand, the coaches felt that 36 percent of parents negatively influenced their child's development with such behaviors as overemphasizing winning, criticizing the child and having unrealistic expectations.

"Roughly one-third negatively influence their children," said John Heil, a sports psychologist with Psychological Health Roanoke, in Virginia. "That's a disturbingly high number."

The coaches rated overemphasis on winning, criticism and lack of emotional control the most serious of the problems.

"Kids pick up very significantly on what parents are feeling and thinking," Katz added. "There is a tendency for a lot of criticism so the experience often can become less than joyful for kids."

Different parental skills are needed at different phases of a child's athletic development, Gould said.

"First is fun and fundamentals," he said. "They've got to fall in love with the game."

Next comes learning how to train and, later, becoming an elite competitor.

"What we find is happening in all sports in America is that the fun and fundamental phase is getting lost. It's the Tiger Woods-Venus Williams effect," Gould said. "Kids need to be playing multiple sports, trying different things and having a good time. They have to fall in love with the activity first because we know it'll take them 10 years to get really, really good."

And parents also need to stick to being parents, which is what the positive behavior is all about, Heil said.

"Parents, when they're acting like parents, do a good job," he said. "When the parent moves into a coaching role, that's when things really start to go wrong."