

Yelling, Directing and Other Unhelpful Sideline Antics

By Sarah Straton

Youth sport is supposed to be all about fostering a love of the game. It is supposed to be about letting kids discover how great it feels when they push their bodies further than they thought possible, to relish in learning and mastering new skills. It's supposed to be filled with fun and joy and play.

Unfortunately, the experience is often tainted by yelling: yelling from the coach; yelling from parents. They're giving directions, corrections, suggestions, and downright criticism and shaming. They're yelling at players, at referees, at opposing coaches. I see players with slumped shoulders and heads hanging down after being yelled at by a coach. I know it's not intentional. I know the adults think they're helping, but in the long term (and usually in the short term) it does the exact opposite.

I'm going to bust a few myths about talking to your kids from the sidelines. This is for both coaches and parents.

MYTH #1: I'm helping my players by giving them directions from the sidelines.

FACT: Kids learn to make good decisions by having the opportunity to make decisions. It is much easier for kids if they're told what to do. They don't have to think! The problem is that it doesn't help them grow. We want them to be able to look around the court and make a decision about what to do based on the circumstances.

Giving directions is easier for the adult, too because they feel as though they have some control of the outcome. Kids learn the most from making errors (and reflecting on them), not by having someone shield them from errors by telling them what to do. The message players get by being given directions is that they can't be trusted to work it out for themselves. They gain confidence by making their own decisions and working through their struggles.

MYTH #2: I need to give players instant feedback so they know what they've done wrong.

FACT: Players know when they've made a mistake. They get instant feedback by way of a turnover, a missed shot, or inability to gain position. They don't need parents or coaches to rub it in. Given the opportunity to reflect for themselves they'll make adjustments. It may be frustrating to wait through the learning curve, but the message they'll get is that you trust them. If they make the same mistake several times over, mention it at a time-out and ask what they might do differently (resist the urge to give them the answer).

MYTH #3: Yelling at a player will motivate them to play better

FACT: It's really hard to do well when you feel bad. From all the brain science, we know that when a child (or anyone, in fact) is feeling fear or shame, they have less access to the higher area of their brain

This is the part responsible for creativity, decision-making and learning- all crucial elements of great athletic performance. Yelling and shaming also undermines a player's confidence as they start to think of themselves as the terrible player they are being told they are.

MYTH #4: When I call a kid's name, it helps them to play better because they know I'm there, watching and supporting

FACT: Playing any sport, particularly a game like basketball, requires a great deal of focus. There are nine other players to be aware of and any number of scenarios playing out. Hearing yelling from the sidelines takes the player's attention away from the task at hand. They may look up to see why the adult is trying to get their attention and wham! they're out of the zone. All of a sudden they've lost focus on the game and it takes a significant amount of time and energy to get it back. When we yell out to them to help, we're actually reducing their chances of success!

MYTH #5: Yelling at referees helps them make better calls and helps the players know that sometimes things are out of their control

FACT: Referees make better calls when they can use the higher part of their brain. When they are being yelled at, the stress limits their decision-making abilities. Inexperienced referees will learn by reflecting on their mistakes, not by being shamed and screamed at. By hearing the referees being criticized, players are getting the message that they can look outside of themselves for excuses as to why they weren't successful. It takes away their power, leading to frustration and helplessness.

One of the hardest things we will do as parents and coaches is to allow young people to make mistakes and learn from them without stepping in to fix things. If we get caught up in the desperation to win, we lose patience for the process of learning. We need to keep the big picture in mind- the goals of player development, of joy and love of the game. It just might change the way we support our kids on the court.

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