



3 Tips for Reducing Parent Conflict

By Stacie Mahoe

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Introduction

Wouldn't it be wonderful if you could have a season with ZERO parent conflict and no parent problems whatsoever? While that may not be the most realistic desire (unless you coach an age group where parents are a "non-issue") there are some things you can do to minimize potential problems with parents. I'll share some ideas with you on just how to do that within this report.

A Story for You

I attended a clinic where Bill Hillhouse, of HouseofPitching.com, talked about "addition by subtraction." Basically what he was showing the pitchers, parents, and coaches how to get more out of their practice by eliminating all the things that weren't helpful. As he mentioned the idea of "eliminating everything that's not helping the pitchers" a coach sitting next to me promptly whispered,

"So how do we eliminate the parents?"

That made me (and some other people around us) laugh, but at the same time I knew it was a somewhat serious remark. Parents, with all their good intentions, can be a real thorn in your side throughout the course of a season if you overlook a few critical steps that can help you reduce these problematic issues. So what can you do to minimize the conflict and problems you have with parents? Here are a 3 tips for reducing parent conflict.

Tip #1: Plan

First and foremost, before you do anything, before you even start the season, sit down and start planning. Here are a few things you'll want to get very clear on if you want to reduce as many parent problems as possible:

- Your coaching philosophy
- Your policies, rules, and guidelines
- Your vision and expectations for the season
- How you will run practice (how many days a week, what time, how long, etc)
- Your expectations of the players
- Your expectations of the parents

The clearer you can get on all of these issues, the easier it will be to go on to the next step.

Tip #2: Share

Share all of the things you wrote down with your coaching staff, better yet, allow them to help you define, develop, and clarify the coaching philosophy, vision, rules, guidelines, etc for the team. It's such a big help when all coaches are on the same page. A united front and cohesiveness among your coaching staff lets parents know that you've really put some thought into the season and gives them the impression that you know what you're doing. This can go a long way in minimizing parent conflict. When your entire staff believes in your coaching philosophy and vision (and the parents know this) they are less likely to try to "help" or make waves.

In addition, when your coaching staff that is on the same page as you, you have the support you need to deal with any issues that may come up. Now I'm not saying to take your whole staff as use them to go into battle with

one parent. That's not the type of support I'm talking about. It's just helpful to know that you are not the only one with the vision, perspective, goals, or values you have. If you don't have that type of cohesiveness among coaches and you're the only one that believes the things you do, it can be tougher to stick with. In spite of the fact that you have other coaches helping you with the team, you may even feel quite alone. It's possible you'll even begin to doubt yourself, your vision, or your values if parents do come to you with questions or concerns with the way you run your team and approach the game. So getting the entire coaching staff together, on one page, sharing the same coaching philosophy and vision for the team is a big help for a couple of key reasons:

- 1) A united front in itself will discourage parents from trying to buck the system or challenge you,
- 2) It gives you the support you need to stand your ground and stay true to your values.

With that said, sharing your "Plan" with your coaching staff is only the beginning. It's crucial to share these issues with your parents as well. A beginning of the season parent meeting is a *must do* if you want to get off to a good start and nip parent problems in the bud. We'll talk a bit more about that in our 3rd tip.

Tip #3: Do

Do Hold a Pre-Season Parent Meeting: It's so important that all the planning you laid out is shared your parents. This way, everyone knows exactly what's going on from Day 1. Everyone knows up front what the expectations are which makes for less surprises, disappointments, and conflict in the future.

Do Stick To It: Whatever it is that you lay out for your parents, make sure you stick with it. Consistency and integrity are so important. Keep your word because once you lose trust with your parents, you're in for a very long season. They will begin questioning you more than ever and you will certainly have more headaches than you'd like. Always keep your word unless some unforeseen Act of God (or some other major circumstance out of your control) prevents you from doing so. But even then, having the "well it wasn't my fault" attitude doesn't cut it. Show your parents that you understand the disappointment or frustration they may be feeling due to your change in plans. Acknowledge that they have the right to feel the way they do and explain how you plan to move forward and correct any problem that may have arisen up because of the fact that you didn't keep your word.

Do Keep Practices Interesting: I can assure you parents will be frustrated and become more non-compliant and unsupportive if it's a big struggle for them to get their child to practice every day because practice is "no fun." You may not want them to make your job any more difficult than it already is, but consider whether or not you're making their job tougher than it needs to be as well. Running interesting, challenging, and fun practices can make your parent's job much easier. If your players want to come to practice, parents won't be in a power struggle with their child whenever softball time rolls around. Work with them and try to do what you can to make things easier for them and they will be more likely to return the favor.

Do Encourage Communication: Encourage parents to come to you with concerns, but also lay out guidelines for that as well. After all, you shouldn't be subject to irate parent calls late at night or early game morning. Give the parents specific times they can come and talk with you.

Do Encourage Player Responsibility: No matter what age group you work with, do encourage your players to be responsible for their own equipment, practice gear, and uniform. I realize that not all 6-8 year-old will remember all of their own equipment all the time, but encouraging them to be more responsible for their own glove, shoes, socks, uniform, water jug, bag, etc. can, again, help make your parent's job easier. Like I said earlier, the easier you make life for your parents, the more likely they will be to try to return the favor.

Other Things to Keep in Mind

Here are a few things I've come to realize about parents and coaches:

- 1) There will **ALWAYS** be **something** that parents aren't happy with or don't necessarily agree with
- 2) Parents will always say something to someone about these issues (others are obviously more outspoken than others and share their opinion with everyone and anyone, others are more controlled and may only talk with their spouse about their observations or feelings)

Why will parents always have something to grumble about? The answer is simple. It's because nobody is perfect and, therefore, the "perfect coach" does not exist. As great a coach as you may be and as much effort as you put in to doing your absolute best for your team, you will still have parents grumbling about one thing or another. After all, it's unlikely that you do *everything* perfectly or make the right decision every single moment of every single game. This lack of perfection is food for debate, comments, and grumbling from parents. Don't take it personally. It comes with the territory.

Let's take Mike Candrea for example. Before the 2008 Olympic Games, he was a very highly regarded coach. Yet after the USA lost the Gold Medal Game, criticism was flying left and right! If even Mike Candrea is subject to criticism and grumbling about his decisions, I guarantee you will be too. Since your parents are most invested in your team (or maybe just in their own child), and closest to the action, they will be the most strongly opinionated and judgmental of your coaching choices. It's not always a personal thing, it's human nature.

With that said however, if you know that you are going your absolute best, you're sticking to your word, you are treating your players well, and truly have their best interests in mind when you coach, you have nothing to be ashamed of. All you can do is your very best. I'm not saying you shouldn't care, I'm just saying don't let parent criticism get you down and discouraged. It happens to all of us.

I've had a parent come up to me after a game we won by the run rule (almost did it in 3 innings). She was upset because I took her daughter out of the game. It was my bad luck that her daughter was up to bat in what may very well have been the last inning of the game. I wanted to get all of our players into the game. So I pulled out, not only her daughter, but everyone else that was in the batting order right after her so that I could roll in all the other players who hadn't played yet.

The worst thing I could have done in that situation was to get defensive. I explained to her that it was in no way a personal act against her daughter, it was just a matter of timing. If her daughter wasn't the one up to bat that inning, she would have stayed in the game and it would have been someone else that got subbed, but it just happened to be her daughter (and 4 others). I assured her that I understood her concern over her daughter's playing time and that I would do my best to see that she received the playing time she deserved during the remainder of the tournament. Of course, she was still upset, but at least she felt like I was willing to listen to her and it never blew up into a big issue.

These types of situations, no matter what you do, will probably never be avoided because that's just the way some parents are. The one thing to remember is that they are probably not trying to attack you personally. Parents can get very emotional (and sometimes irrational) when it comes to their child. I know, because I am one and I can feel very strongly about how my child is being treated. If a parent feels that their child was wronged in any way, I can assure you that they have very strong feelings about the situation. Do your best to stay calm and if that's not possible, simply let the parent know that you have other team issues you must attend to at that very moment and that you will gladly discuss the situation with them the following day. Hopefully, that will give both sides some time to cool off.

Another reason I know that parents will always find something they aren't quite happy with is because it happens with me. As I mentioned earlier, I am a parent as well. As much as I don't like parent interference as a coach and as irrationally as I see parents act during games (which I hope I will never do), it's very difficult to sit on the side and simply go along with anything and everything a coach does. I will always see something that I don't quite like or agree with. It's not necessarily because the coach is a bad coach, it's just that everyone has a slightly different style, approach, or perspective. So as much as I'd like to support coaches 100% with no complaints or grumbles at all because I know how tough it is on the coaching end of the stick, it's just sooooo much easier said than done. It sounds great in theory, but in reality it's not easy to do.

However, as a parent, I realize that there is give and take and some things are just not worth getting all bent out of shape about, especially if there are many other positive attributes about a coach or coaching staff. So while I may have some issues I don't particularly agree with, it's one of those times when you really should pick your battles. Some issues just aren't worth making a big deal about. I may "vent" to my husband (poor guy), but I'm not going to start team drama over it. Just because I don't agree with

everything a coach does or says, it doesn't mean that I sever my support and stop appreciating their time and effort on the field with my children.

Like I said before, the perfect coach doesn't exist. Don't beat yourself up if you're not perfect and if you have parents that grumble here and there. Make sure your intentions are good, you're out there for the right reasons, you're doing your absolute best, and you're treating your players well. But if you want to minimize potential headaches and stress, remember:

Plan, Share, and Do

Have a wonderful season!



Stacie Mahoe

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