Nautilus
Behavioral Health

Get Your Kids in the Game, Coach!

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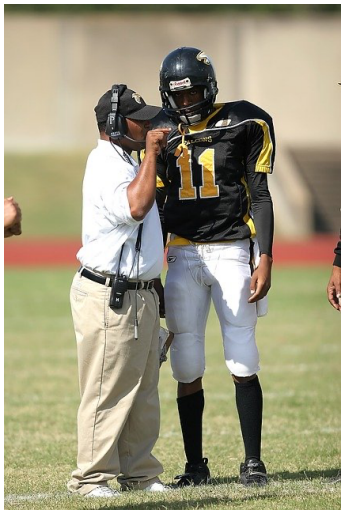
Have your kids ever come to you when they're having problems with friends? Are you ever concerned about your kids' friendships? Many of the kids Sarah and I work with have difficulties with some aspect of their social relationships. What's interesting is that their parents—*even socially savvy parents*—are often at a loss about how to help them. A lot of their uncertainty stems from the fact that social problems are not as straightforward to address and parents getting directly involved is typically not the best solution. Does this conundrum sound familiar?

So, what do you do? Instead of viewing yourself as your kid's champion, consider yourself as your kids' coach- not on the field, but in the social arena. (I do love a good sports analogy). Like a coach, you aren't the one responsible for executing the plays or scoring the touchdowns. Instead, you see the big picture and guide your kids toward the best outcomes. You have a great vantage point to recognize many potential pitfalls and you can coach your kids on how to avoid or deal with them. You help them to understand how best to use the skills they already have and to shore up skills that are not as well developed.



To continue with the sports analogy, your role as a coach changes as your kids get older. For younger kids, you have to actively teach them the skills they need. So, just like a kid playing football for the first time has to learn the rules of the game and learn basic skills, your toddlers

and preschoolers have to learn the basics of how to interact with people (sharing, taking turns, keeping their hands to themselves, etc.).

As they move up to the next league, they keep practicing the basics, but are also ready to learn new skills. You still have to actively teach them how to play the game, but at this point, they have a foundation and their natural instincts and talents have started to emerge. At this point, you start to balance teaching them new skills and helping them figure out how to apply previously learned skills. In this way, your elementary school age kids will need reminders of the basics of how to treat people, but they generally get it. At this age, you're helping them figure out how to make and keep friends, how to share their friends' attention, how to handle disagreements, how to deal with bullies, etc. They take charge more, but still need and are generally receptive to input from you about how to handle things.

Around middle school, your kids hit an interesting stage. Social expectations take a big leap- parents/adults have less oversight over peer interactions, peer relationships become trickier, many kids are jockeying for position in their social circles, and kids start trying to figure out who they are. They also want to be more independent so stop sharing as many details about their social relationships with you. As their parent, it can be tempting to run interference and try to "reteach" skills when you see your kids struggling. But, think about what happens when a Little League coach tries to reteach a skill to a kid who has been playing a certain way for years. If not handled correctly, it can undermine a kid's confidence and make positive change less likely. Instead of just telling a kid, "Hey, you're doing that wrong" or giving a lot of negative feedback, it's much more effective to focus on one portion of the skill and help them make adjustments. As you see your kids struggling with particular aspects of their social relationships, rather than

offering unsolicited advice or telling them how to “fix” it, you can instead get their perspective on what’s going on and help them problem-solve about how to address the issue. They begin to learn how to evaluate their own relationships and social behavior and develop more confidence in their own skills and judgment.

As your kids progress to JV & Varsity teams, coaching becomes less and less about teaching specific skills and more about helping them refine their skills and put them to best use. In the same way, your high schoolers don’t need as much directive coaching from you. Frankly, they’re also a lot less likely to listen to you than when they were in kindergarten. As a parent, it can be very tempting to dive in and tell them what to do. Have you ever found yourself saying things like, “You shouldn’t hang out with those kids” or “You shouldn’t care what other kids think of you”? There are a ton of examples I could come up with that are all intended to help, but these comments actually miss the thing your kids are struggling with the most. These comments also typically serve to tell your kids that you don’t understand them and that you don’t trust them to handle their own problems. Not what you intended, right?

If you think about this like a coach, how would you best help your older kids? Well, my most helpful track coaches in high school and college took the approach of having me break down what went right and what went wrong at practices and at meets *before* they gave me their input. Sometimes their questions helped me recognize where improvements could be made and other times I had no idea, but that was okay. In addition to teaching me to think about what I was doing, these coaches were preparing me to learn. Since my coaches started by asking me what I thought was happening, I became more receptive to their feedback.

You can do the same thing as your kids' relationship coach. When they are talking about their relationships, ask them questions to help them see where problems are coming from and how they might be resolved. Any conclusions they come to are going to make a bigger impact than if you just told them what to do. For instance, if your kid is talking about a disagreement with a friend, you might recognize many signs that this person is not really your kid's friend. What's going to be more effective- *telling* your kid that their peer is a bad friend or *asking* your kid questions about how they want to be treated and what qualities they look for in a friend?

No matter your child's age, remember to steer clear of making these conversations a lecture or turning them into "teachable moments." Keep it conversational and, most importantly, really listen to your kid. Even if you don't agree with their line of thinking or you see some holes in their reasoning, resist the urge to immediately correct them. Instead, ask more questions. Your goal in these interactions is to make sure your kid feels understood and to make sure they know that you believe that their thoughts, feelings and perceptions have merit. As a coach, you want your kids to develop *their own* style of interacting, not just adopt yours. Your kids get to decide what kinds of relationships they want to have. Remember, you're the coach. Your job is to help your kid analyze what's happening, shore up their skills, and figure out how they want to handle a situation. The coach may call the plays, but the players have to figure out how to execute it.

I can't give you a step-by-step plan for how to coach your kids, but I can give you some tips that you can apply to your situation. First, you have to know your kids and their social skills/style of social interactions. Pay attention to how your kids interact with their peers, with family members and with you. Notice whether they tend to be more introverted or more extroverted. Think about how they typically approach problems in their social relationships.

Second, use the information you gather about your kid's style to make decisions about how best to guide them. For instance, if you have a non-confrontational kid, you're probably not going to get very far if your first suggestion for resolving a problem with a friend is for them to confront the friend, right? You may be able to get them on board with a version of that plan, but you have to talk them through options to one that they think would be effective *and* that they would actually do. Knowing your kids will also help you figure out how hands-on you need to be. Some kids are fine with just some problem-solving or even just talking about an issue, while others need to practice or role-play before they're comfortable entering a particular social situation. If you're paying attention, asking questions, and truly listening to the answers, you'll be a more effective coach.

Third, follow up with your kids. If you and your kids have discussed an issue, follow up to see how things went. In some cases, you'll be able to observe their actions, but usually you'll hear about it after the fact. Following up sends the message that you care about your kids' social lives and that you are there to support them. If things went well, great. If not, you have another opportunity to show them that you are there to help.

Lastly, I know you want the best for your kids. But, remember, you have limited control over making that happen in your kids' social lives. And as they get older, your kids can and will have more say in what's best for them. You're the coach but, in the end, they're the ones out there on the field.