

# How to Talk To A Coach

*By Jeannette Twomey*

- Create a positive setting
- Practice active listening
- Deliver an assertive, not an aggressive, message
- Be flexible

Sue Mason is heartsick and angry. For the third game in a row, her Jason is on the sideline - benched in favor of a new shortstop. Fred Levin is confused when an unexpected bill for his son's lacrosse equipment arrives in the mail. Mary Young is frightened about the change in her 14 year-old's [eating habits](#) when his wrestling season started. Each of these parents is headed for a talk with the coach - and each runs the risk of making things worse instead of better.

Few of us have a clear idea of how to approach a tense situation in the coach-parent relationship to get the best results. Here are some not-so-obvious techniques that will help get your message across and get the coach working with you to find a solution:

## **Create a positive setting.**

Any time or place for a conversation is okay, so long as there's no immediate crisis and there are no distractions. Don't underestimate the power of an inviting environment. A setting that's hassle-free, calm, and quiet helps a listener be more receptive. Face-to-face conversation, with good eye contact and a respectful demeanor, is better than telephone or e-mail communication, which can be misinterpreted too easily. Good food helps, too: it's hard to be mad when you're eating something yummy.

## **Practice active listening.**

Too often, coaches are braced for a flood of complaints from a parent who comes to talk. Fight your impulse to unload! Defy stereotypes! Introduce your concern briefly and, then, sit back and listen to the response . . . without rebutting or interrupting. Just listen and summarize out loud what you've heard. Watch how the intensity of the situation melts away, as the coach feels respected, rather than attacked. Assume that he has something important to say, and that your first and foremost objective is to hear it. In the beginning, put much more effort into listening and understanding the coach's perspective, than into persuading and explaining your own.

## **Deliver an assertive, not an aggressive, message.**

You want the coach to hear you, believe you, and help resolve an important problem. Yet, common communication techniques almost guarantee the opposite result. Too often, we lead with personal attacks, exaggerations, and pre-judgments. Opening salvos such as "You told Allison that she would be the starting midfielder," or "Bobby never would have played on this team if you'd told us how expensive it was going to be" are guaranteed conversation-stoppers. They beg for debate and rebuttal, rather than inviting problem solving and empathy. Instead, send a powerful message that can get through the defensive walls because it focuses on the problem, not the person:

1. **Describe** the situation in non-judgmental terms;
2. **Explain** how it affects you and your child; and then
3. **State** a preference for how it should be resolved.

This technique describes the problem, but it doesn't mix in judgments about the person. Mary might say something like this: "Coach Jones, this is my first year as the parent of a high

school wrestler. Mark seems to have stopped eating regular meals since practice started two weeks ago, and his energy level is way below what it used to be. I'm concerned about his health and his overall well-being. I'd like to know more about your philosophy and about the effects of the food supplements he's taking."

### **Be flexible.**

Usually, we think we have the solution all figured out, before we know enough about the problem. For instance, Fred might tell the coach that "There's no way I'm paying for any more hockey equipment" when he wasn't aware that the team bus was flooded in a torrential rain and his payment would be refunded as soon as the insurance claim was processed. Making a single, non-negotiable demand prevents discussion of other creative options and makes it harder to back down in favor of a better idea. A more constructive approach is to accept that there are many ways to solve a problem. Then, generate as many options as possible that combine the coach's interests and your own.

For example, "What if we get the insurance company to expedite the claim?" Or, "I know another hockey coach - maybe we could borrow some used equipment temporarily." Or, "Maybe the sporting goods company will give us the equipment on credit." Or, "I don't have the cash to pay for equipment now, but I'm in the cleaning business . . . what if I clean up the team bus for free?"

Whatever the situation, using these techniques will improve your chances of having a productive discussion with the coach. Granted, it takes a lot of practice to change communication habits. But if you can make listening your first priority and stay focused on the problem, you can build stronger, more positive relationships for parents, coaches and players.