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For Kids Only ...

By Mike Voitalla



This column is for the kids. Adults can stop reading now.

Dear Soccer-Playing Children of America,

The fall season is underway and I'm hoping you're having a great time. I'm hoping that you're playing soccer more than you have to stand in line and do drills.

I hope you're falling in love with the soccer ball and keep it with you as much as you can. Juggling it. Kicking it against a wall. Dribbling it around in your backyard.

And I especially hope that your parents aren't screaming at you during your soccer games.

I worry that you probably do get yelled at, because that's what I see at almost all the youth soccer games I go to. Hopefully you just ignore it. But I don't blame you if it bothers you.

No one enjoys getting screamed at. Sure, if you start crossing the street on a red light or throw a toy at your little sister or brother, your parents are justified in raising their voices. But they shouldn't scream at you while you're playing a game.

If they do, it doesn't mean they're bad people. But, unfortunately, sports does something to adults that makes them behave in ways they usually wouldn't.

You may have noticed this if you watch sports on TV. A coach, for example, dresses up in a fancy suit and throws tantrums like a 3-year-old.

Get adults around sports and all of a sudden they forget the same manners they try to teach you. In a way, sports are like driving. A grown-up gets behind the wheel and all of a sudden forgets you're not supposed to pick your nose in public.

And when grown-ups go watch their children play soccer, they, for some reason, think it's OK to scream like maniacs. Perhaps they don't realize what they're doing. Like the nose-pickers on the freeway who think they've suddenly gone invisible.

I hope you're able to block out all the sideline noise. But maybe you do hear their shouts. Telling you when to shoot the ball, when to pass it. Ignore all that!

You need to dribble the ball. Try to dribble past players. If you're dribbling too much, your teammates will let you know. And they'll help you make the decision of when to pass and when to dribble.

You decide when to shoot. When you're dribbling toward the goal and the goalkeeper is 20 yards away, and the adults are screaming at you to shoot, don't pay attention. Because if you get closer to the goal, it will be harder for the goalkeeper to stop your shot.

One of the really cool things about my job is that I get to interview the best coaches in America. And you know what the national team coaches tell me? They say young players are far more likely to become great

players if they're allowed to make their own decisions when they play soccer.

They say that coaches should coach at practice, and when it's game time, it's time for the children to figure things out on their own. It's like at school. The teachers help you learn. Your parents help you with homework. But when you get a test, you're on your own.

That's just an analogy. I'm not saying soccer is school! Soccer is *your* playtime.

I hope you have lots of playtime, on the soccer field and elsewhere. But I bet that you don't have as much time playing without adults around as we did when we were children.

When we were kids we had summer days when we would leave the house in the morning, be only with other children all day, then see our parents when we got back in the late afternoon.

Things have changed. The reasons adults are much more involved in your activities than they were in your parents' when they were children are complicated, and a result of your parents' good attentions.

But sometimes we adults forget how important it is for you to play without us interfering. We love watching you play, especially on the soccer field, because it is such a wonderful sport. But we need to be reminded that it's your playtime.

You should decide. Ignore the shouts if you can. But don't be afraid to say, "I'm trying my best. Please, don't scream at me."

((Mike Voitalla, who coaches youth soccer in Northern California, is the executive editor of Soccer America. His youth articles are archived at YouthSoccerFun.com.)

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