

October 5, 2008 Sunday

SECTION: FAMILY; M14

HEADLINE: Rage on the sidelines;  
Study links driving, sports anger

BYLINE: By Karen Goldberg Goff, THE WASHINGTON TIMES

See that guy in front of you in traffic, ranting at the slow drivers? Better hope your kids are not on the same soccer team. Even better, hope it's not you.

Jay Goldstein, a researcher at the University of Maryland, says that if you have a tendency to become upset while driving, you are more likely to be the kind of parent who explodes in anger at your children's sporting events.

The study, which appeared in June's *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, found that ego defensiveness, one of the triggers that ignites road rage, also kicks off parental "sideline rage," and that a parent with a control-oriented personality is more likely to react to that trigger by becoming angry and aggressive.

Mr. Goldstein surveyed Washington-area parents at youth soccer games and found that parents became angry when their ego got in the way.

More than half of the 340 parents Mr. Goldstein interviewed admitted getting angry during a game. Of that number, more than one-third said their anger was directed toward the referee. Most parents who reported getting angry said they were only slightly angry for less than two minutes, while about 40 percent reported responding to their anger with actions that ranged from muttering to themselves to yelling and walking toward the field.

"This comes as no great surprise to anyone who has witnessed a game," Mr. Goldstein says. "But a more disturbing fact is that more than a quarter said their anger was directed at a child or the team. When they perceived something that happened during the game to be personally directed at them or their child, they got angry. That's consistent with findings on road rage."

Obviously, certain personality types have a quicker trigger than others, whether it is in traffic, at the workplace, in the home or on the sidelines, Mr. Goldstein says. The Type-A personalities - the kind that line Washington's power corridors - are more likely to take things personally and flare up at referees, players, even their own child.

"Control-oriented people are the kind who try to 'keep up with the Joneses,' " Mr. Goldstein says. "They have a harder time controlling their reactions. They more quickly become one of 'those' parents than the parents who are able to separate their ego from their kids and events on the field."

However, Mr. Goldstein says, even autonomy-oriented parents get angry, and when they do, ego defensiveness is the trigger.

"No personality is really free," he says. "It just takes calmer people longer to get there. While they're more able to control it, once they react to the psychological trigger, the train has already left the station."

An increasing trend

Mr. Goldstein has been involved with youth sports leagues for nearly two decades as a promoter, and now a researcher. During that time, he has noticed the changing landscape. Youth leagues for many kinds of sports - hockey, baseball, soccer and football, among them - are no longer just weekend recreation

activities. Children are getting involved in sports earlier and playing on select teams where more is riding on the child's performance. As the stakes get higher, parental emotions get testier. One only needs to look to news reports of fistfights between dads in the stands or check the number of books on the subject to see this trend.

"We now know that this is an issue," Mr. Goldstein says. "We read about the brawls, but what is really going on? How is this impacting the kids? I have to believe we will see some detrimental impact on them."

Baseball legend Cal Ripken Jr. says in his 2006 book "Parenting Young Athletes the Ripken Way," that parents on the sidelines should think of themselves as older and wiser and remove themselves from the emotional aspects of the game - if possible.

"I would say to think of yourself as a grandparent or a great-grandparent, if you want, where you've lived life and you've seen just about everything and nothing's going to surprise you on the baseball field," Mr. Ripken writes. "So I wouldn't overreact to the positive, and I wouldn't overreact to the negative. Just be there and watch and allow the game to unfold to the kids because, after all, they are the ones out there enjoying it.

"The things we do on the sidelines, whether it's over cheering or calling out their names or reacting negatively when something happens, all those are potential areas that can cause pressure," Mr. Ripken writes. "So if we just act like we are almost invisible, but support the right way by putting our arms around the kids when they need it and kind of encouraging them in a small way, I think that's the best way to watch."

Sometimes, that is easier said than done, though. That's why Mr. Goldstein is working with Parents for Good Sports, one of many sports parenting organizations that have sprung up to teach good behavior in today's pressurized environment for young athletes and their parents.

Mr. Goldstein is conducting Parents for Good Sports workshops with youth sports teams in Fairfax County.

Jesse Ellis, supervisor of community youth for Fairfax County's Community and Recreation Services, says that the Parents for Good Sports model is unusual because it does not tell parents how to behave. The parents have probably heard all that advice, but it is all forgotten in competition, when it is their child who is fouled.

"Parents for Good Sports gets parents, coaches and kids together to discuss what are their goals and how they can work to get there together," Mr. Ellis says. "It's really simple. We work on trying to get kids to communicate; kids can say how they feel, such as 'I really hate it when you yell during the game.' "

Mr. Ellis says it probably is the sports climate - and not the parents themselves - that has changed with the times. A generation ago, certain parents were indeed probably on a short fuse on the sidelines. Today, with the stakes much higher much earlier, emotions are on edge.

"There certainly is a lot more pressure on young athletes," he says. "The opportunities to participate at a higher level at a younger age have increased."

Just calm down

One interesting exercise from the Parents for Good Sports program: Parents "adopt" a different team member for the course of a game. They concentrate on the performance (and the coaching and refereeing) of their child's teammate as a way to gain new perspective on how their child plays in the context of the team as well as temporarily taking away the high-octane emotions.

"By the end of the game, you haven't paid as much attention to your own kid," Mr. Ellis says. "If you are watching someone else's kid, you are much less likely to say something negative."

Mr. Goldstein, a kinesiologist, says that in the short term, there are things parents can do to check themselves on the sidelines: controlled, deep-breathing exercises (inhale for four seconds and exhale for eight seconds); suck on a lollipop (it occupies your mouth and reminds you that you're there for your

child), replace angry thoughts with rational ones, such as "This is my child's game, not mine," or "Mistakes are opportunities to learn" ; don't say the first thing that comes into your head, count to 10 and think about possible responses.

If all else fails, parents always can watch from the car. That will literally and figuratively put some distance between themselves and the game.

Just remember the pointers, and count to 10 before pulling out into stop-and-go traffic.