

Out of the Mouths of Babes

By Emily Cohen



Driving the school or sports carpool always affords the opportunity to eavesdrop on what's really happening in kids' lives. While kids may not tell their parents about an embarrassing or unsettling experience with a teacher, a coach, or another authority figure, they'll almost certainly tell each other, especially if they're in the backseat of a car and they don't think the parent is listening.

It was just this situation in which I found myself, driving my daughter and some friends home from a soccer game. In between surfing radio stations, I heard the girls comparing the coaching styles of various coaches. One girl said to the others about a past coach, "One minute, she yelled, 'Go to the right!' The next minute, she yelled, 'Go to the left!' I was so confused, I didn't do anything. I stopped to figure out what she was telling me to do, and the girl with the ball dribbled right by me."

I laughed to myself and wondered if the coach realized that her yelling was completely counterproductive. In fact, I wonder if most coaches really think about how their bellows and screeches from the sideline, which they think of as helpful instructions, are perceived by their players.

If coaches ever stopped to ask players whether instructions yelled from the sidelines motivate the player to do what the coach wants, the collective response would be a resounding "No!"

All but two of the 15 kids -- ages 7 to 17 -- with whom I spoke said that their coach's yelled instructions didn't help them at all. In fact, it made it difficult to focus on what they were doing -- playing soccer. And the two who did say that shouted instructions or directions by the coach helped them perform better qualified their answers by saying that they thought the coaches were trying to help but, when they thought about it, what the coach was trying to explain to them would have been better communicated off the field, during a substitution or at halftime -- or, better yet, at a practice.

But enough of my interpretations. Let's hear it from the kids themselves:

"Getting yelled at by my coach isn't helpful at all because it makes it harder to concentrate. It's more difficult to control the soccer ball when someone's yelling at me."

"When the coach yells at me to mark someone or run somewhere else, I can't focus on the game. I think I make more mistakes because I was listening not playing."

"Both the coaches were screaming instructions. I tried to do what one of the coaches said, but it was hard to figure out, because the coaches were saying different things."

"I hate it when the coach screams at me to 'play better' or 'run harder.' I mean, really, I'm trying my best already and that just makes me feel worse. It doesn't make me play better or run harder."

"Most of the time, when the coach yells something to me, I saw it already and I'm trying to get there. But I can't yell that to them because I'm too busy running!"

And my personal favorite:

"I don't like it when a coach yells at me to do something because I usually figure out what to do on my own."

There it is, in a nutshell. Isn't that really what youth soccer is about? Figuring out how to play the game and gaining a sense of accomplishment from doing just that?

I wonder how many of those screaming coaches could play an hour of soccer (or play a tennis match or a run a 10K race or cycle up a steep grade) with someone yelling at them the entire time to "run harder," "cycle faster" or "play better." Most would likely lose their patience and yell back at the offender.

I just hope the next time one of them coaches a kids' soccer game, he or she thinks twice about yelling at the players and decides to just let them play.

(Emily Cohen is a freelance writer living in Berkeley, Calif. She is the mother of a son, 12, and a daughter, 9, who both play multiple sports. She has been a team manager for her children's soccer, baseball and softball teams.)

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