



Parents Behaving Badly on the Sidelines

People Who Suffer Road Rage More Likely to Be Angry on the Sidelines, Study Shows

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June 20, 2008 -- Have you ever felt like yelling at the referee at your child's soccer game? Researchers say those angry feelings on the sidelines are similar to road rage and can be tied to your ego.

A new study by Jay D. Goldstein at the University of Maryland looked at how angry or aggressive parents got while watching their children play soccer. It also looked at the root of what triggered those feelings. And keep reading; Goldstein offers tips on how to ease anger.

Most research on spectator rage has looked at crowds in professional sporting events, the researchers write. Goldstein and his team thought that parents watching their children play would be the perfect testing field.

The Players

Three hundred and forty parents of 8- to 15-year-old soccer players were evaluated on personality and ego characteristics, feelings of anger and pressure, and aggressive behavior.

The games took place in 2004, in the Washington, D.C. suburbs. Most of the parents were white, married, and college educated.

Parents were asked to fill out two questionnaires, one at the beginning, and another at the games' end. Researchers defined anger as anything from feeling "mild irritation," to being "fuming mad" or having the "hair on the back of your neck stand up."

The Results

47% of parents reported no anger-causing events while watching their kids play.
53% did get angry.

Of those who did feel anger, what made them flare up?

19% blamed the referee.
15% said they got angry at how their kid's team played.
7% said the opponents behaved badly.

5% reported hostile remarks set them off.
5% blamed coaches.

Researchers concluded that the effect of ego defensiveness and taking things personally was strongly linked to feelings of anger and aggressive actions. Those who were more "control-oriented" were more ego defensive. They viewed actions in the soccer game as attacks against them or their children.

"In general, control-oriented people are the kind who try to 'keep up with the Joneses,'" Goldstein said in a news release.

"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."

Goldstein calls parents who are more even-keeled and able to regulate their emotions "autonomy-oriented parents." They get angry too, he says, and when they do it's because their ego gets in the way.

"While they're more able to control it, once they react to the psychological trigger, the train has already left the station."

To ease anger on the playing field, Goldstein suggests these tips:

- Take deep breaths (inhale for 4 seconds and exhale for 8 seconds).
- Suck on a lollipop. (Occupies your mouth and reminds you that you're there for your child.)
- Visualize a relaxing experience like floating on water.
- Repeat a calm word or phrase.
- Do yoga -like muscle stretches .
- 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 you did not see the game, first ask your child "How did you play?" rather than "Did you win?"
- Praise your child's effort, and then, maybe, comment on the results.
- Use humor, but avoid harsh or sarcastic humor. Picture the referee wearing Elton John glasses.

The study appears in the June issue of the *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*.

SOURCES: Goldstein, J. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 2008; vol 38: pp 1442-1462. Newswise news release.

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