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Safe Learning Environment

A father yells at his son; “Do what I tell you.”

The son hangs his head and averts his eyes. This is not the first time he has had to listen to this speech. The mother tries to intervene and calm the father down. “Stay out of this. I know what’s best,” snarls the father to the mother. She retreats not wanting to escalate the situation.

What is wrong with this picture? It is wrong when it happens in a public place. More so if it happens during a youth basketball game. Even more so when the father is not the coach and the son is on the floor trying to please the coach. This was a situation I recently witnessed at an under 11 years category in a youth basketball game.

Continuing the story, the situation got worse. The son, in his frustration, on the next play scored on his own basket. Luckily in FIBA this is considered a violation. Because of the Equal Participation rule the child had to stay on the floor until his shift was over. When he returned to the bench he sat with a towel over his head. The father steamed trying to get his son’s attention. Other parents tried to calm the father down, but he was to have none of it. During the final time out of the game he sent the wife of the coach over to tell the coach what to do.

At the end of the game the team had won, but you would never have known. Everyone was being held hostage by the emotions of the one father. The son would not talk or even look at his father. The boy immediately went to his mother who sat him on his knee and rocked him back and forth to console him.

This is developmental basketball. Development means learning. We learn best through our own actions, a child must feel safe. Safe means I can make mistakes with no repercussions. I will not be criticized or chastised for trying to do what I think is right. Youth sport is not adult sport played with smaller people. Children need to learn the skills in order to play. It is easier to learn how to play while on a team. I learn how to put on my uniform, when to warm up, when to sit, when to play, when to cheer and when to shake hands at the end. I don’t learn the skills from the game unless it is constructed in such a way to allow for learning. Why in youth sport do we allow the above type of adult behaviour to occur? Are parents allowed in the classroom to yell at their children when they are learning? No! We all understand that it is wrong. My only regret was that I did not intervene on this child’s behalf.

Contrast the above situation with the one that was occurring on the open court immediately behind this game. When the regulation game had finished, the players, after shaking hands, went back on the court to play. They broke into spontaneous games of 1-on-1 or were working on moves against imaginary defenders. This went on for a good 10 minutes before the parents broke up the fun. For most of the players, they got more skill work in this brief 10 minute time than they did in the 32-minute game. The court was now free. It was quickly filled by a group of 14 boys from three different teams. With no adult supervision or direction they suddenly broke into a game of their own invention. With only 1 ball the game developed into a 1-on-13 affair. If you scored you got the ball back. When one of the better players had the ball a better player guarded him. When one of the smaller boys had the ball a smaller player played defence. There was no double teaming, no zone press, it was appropriate for their skill level. They instinctively understood the relationship between skill and challenge. A special moment occurred when a player from another court wandered by. His team was involved in a current game on the adjacent

court. He stopped and watched. You could see the longing in his eyes. He would have much rather of stayed and played this free flowing game. He had to be called back to his team by one of the coaches.

This was a safe learning environment. The players were responsible for their learning. They cared about each other and made sure each player had an opportunity to complete against someone that matched their ability. One of our main jobs as developmental coaches is to create this environment for players. Especially when the players in question are 10 years old.

What can we do about it? Already positive steps are being taken.

Basketball Ontario has had a representative get up before the games at Ontario Cup and remind the spectators of what behaviours are expected. This is a wonderful step to remind people about the difference between development basketball and the NBA. I think it is especially powerful when the people who speak are the players who are playing in the game.

“We want to welcome you to our game and thank you for coming to watch us play. Remember that this is developmental basketball and therefore we require you the spectators to help us create a safe learning environment. We want you to encourage us with positive feedback and withhold your criticism. Allow the coaches and officials to do their job without interruption. If you find you cannot comply with our wishes we ask you to please leave so that we can maintain our safe learning environment. We are not professional and will make lots of mistakes, but we are learning to do our best. Thank you and enjoy the game.”

When I travel across the country almost every gymnasium I go into has some version of the fair play code and appropriate spectator behaviour posted. Bringing this to people’s attention makes it much easier to deal with problems that may arise at a later time.

At our national championships in BC last year we had members of the host committee politely ask an abusive parent to leave and not have the privilege of watching his daughter play. I applaud the action of these committee members. It is not an easy task, but it is one that must be done. Having someone assigned this role is crucial when bringing adults together to watch a youth sporting activity. The plan should also be in place for how to deal with the person if they do not want to change their behaviour. We cannot expect our volunteers to confront someone when their own personal safety may be in question. Most, if not all of our provincial associations have these discipline measures or behaviour policies in place

As part of the new NCCP coaching curriculum a major section is on educating the coach. Research has shown that the coach is the single most important person in rectifying parental behavioural problems. If the coach establishes the acceptable behaviour early in the season it usually solves itself. If the coach does not model this behaviour it gives license to parents and spectators to follow his/her lead. I have seen many coaches talk to the parents during a game about inappropriate behaviour. This is easier done when you some years under your belt. This can be difficult for someone new to the coaching fraternity.

My purpose here is to remind us all who care about the developmental side of the game that we are the most important watchdogs. I have always believed in truth over harmony. If we do not address these issues they can grow out of control.