

## Don't tolerate coaches who bully children

Parents can take steps to bring the issue out of the shadows and protect kids

By Erik Little

A track and field coach, determined to teach his kids better hurdling techniques, brings a contraption made of two-by-fours to practice one day. In order to get the right "lean" over a hurdle, there's a piece of wood the runners have to duck under before leaping. If they misjudge, well ...

A junior hockey coach, upon hearing that an opposing coach has held a three-hour practice, promptly calls a four-hour one for his team, and then calls the other team to gloat. He routinely holds extra practices for players who don't "measure up." When dehydration becomes a problem among players and the team starts to lose more and more games, he blames it on their laziness.

An up-and-coming young women's volleyball player is on a team with growing success and good potential. The problem is, anyone who mentions their responsibility to academics, piano lessons or any other interests is benched. The message: devote "120 per cent" of your time to the team or you're out.

Is your child's coach a bully? The answer isn't always as clear as in the actual examples that I've come across, as described above. But it's important to ask the question. Actually, I should rephrase it to include not just the coach but also support staff and all coach/volunteers.

If you don't know, aren't sure or if you have concerns about any of your child's coaches, then keep reading.

Bullying has been, is, and will be a societal issue. Everywhere. It involves repeat and systematic efforts to undermine confidence and competency. For your child, as hurt becomes harm, this may translate into avoidance routines, frequent errors and clumsiness, chronic illness, fragmented sleep, changes in mood and character, or death. A bullied person, in addition to experiencing lingering anxiety and depression, may spend up to half of their productive time worrying, creating defence strategies, or replaying "what-if" scenarios in their head. This is serious business.

In sport, the role of coach can be abused by a bully who wants to exert power. Typically, there is no remorse and they see their behaviours as justified. Challenging that abuse may be quite difficult, as there are numerous myths and taboos about asserting your position to the authority figure.

Make no mistake, bullying is not leadership, it is not effective coaching, and it is not a good way to keep children involved, although you may hear it and even believe it.

In sport, some forms of bullying such as teasing and taunts may be so commonplace as to be part of the atmosphere, while others such as belittling, humiliating and isolating are less common.

What is key is that bullying is an undercurrent to harassment, abuse, prejudice and discrimination. It seeks to hurt. It may start as a vague put-down or shared tease, but can soon escalate into things much more serious. And while the obvious stereotype of the large, raging, intimidating hulk can be found, most bullying is hard to label and therefore harder to deal with.

Consider the following list of bullying behaviours with respect to the sporting organization you deal with.

Does the coach use:

- Repetitive criticism without constructive feedback.
- Nit-picking and fault-finding in front of others.
- Ridicule or dismissal to overrule opinions or observations.
- Information secrecy and select coaching for "the few."

- Glaring looks, the silent treatment or ignoring in order to isolate players.
- Mockery and centring-out to "punish" errors.
- Teasing and sarcastic remarks to get an angry or tearful response.
- Vague threats about being "cut" or benched without cause.
- Unrealistic challenges/expectations to taunt and put down groups or individuals.

The reason for short-listing these behaviours has nothing to do with bully-hunting. Awareness is the objective.

Increased awareness may stimulate action to set up preventive measures. It also may help break down the walls of silence that enable continued (or escalated) abuse.

Better awareness may inspire establishment of a zero-tolerance policy toward behaviours that erode dignity. And in a larger sense, learning to deal with bullying in a sporting activity bestows life skills that endure.

If you answered yes to any number of the behaviours, you may wonder what you can do. Every situation is different, and bullies can be remarkable in their efforts to avoid exposure. But here are a few guidelines:

Before you even sign up for the sport, check whether the league or organization has a code of conduct clause that includes bullying. And would they act on it? You can't arrest someone for being mean-spirited or nasty, but a code of conduct that can be used as a framework gets around some of the evasive moves that bullies will use to avoid confession. If there is no policy because it's never been a problem, you may be dealing with an organization that will deny, deflect and avoid dealing with the issue.

Before you sign up, look at the record for the coach and team. Is there a high turnover rate? Do young athletes seem to drop out of sport altogether after being on certain teams? Are there unrealistic training demands that challenge school, family and social life because of a desire to win, win, win? Are dropouts or transfers dismissed or labelled as weak or inadequate? While factors such as turnover are complex, it can be an indicator of bullying and other abuses.

During the season, does the coach debrief each session and encourage feedback from all participants? Open communication is an ongoing process, not something that is suddenly expected or imposed.

During the season, do you regularly talk to your children about how things are progressing? Feeling alone because of bullying can be made worse with sudden probes and interrogation. We all need to learn how to listen as well as tell our side of the story.

If there are concerns with performance, mood shifts, fatigue, and avoidance routines, is the coach open to a shared session that is constructive and child-centred (rather than team-centred or coach-centred)? The earlier the concerns are identified and addressed the better since bullying can become a destructive spiral if allowed to continue.

If you are concerned, perhaps others are, too. Research and articles on bullying and countermeasures are readily available so you can get informed. Familiarize yourself with the language and strategies before you accuse or judge.

As bullying comes out of the shadows, we as a society are beginning to realize the tremendous costs of not acting against the impact of teasing, spreading rumours, invalidating and shaming.

With bullying, silence is not golden- it's destructive.

If our children could learn to recognize the behaviours that can undermine them and assert their own position, just imagine how it might change their performance in sport, at school and within society.

Participation in sport is one aspect of cultural expression which provides that learning and leadership potential.

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### BookLore's Top 7 Books about Bullying

1. the bully, the bullied and the bystander - Barbara Coloroso (adult reading)
2. Don't Pick on Me - Rosem Stones (adult reading)
3. Thank You Mr. Falker - Patricia Polacco (picture book)
4. Don't Laugh at Me - Steve Seskin (picture book & CD)
5. Feather Boy - Nicky Sargent (juvenile novel)
6. Facing the Schoolyard Bully - Kim Zarzour
7. Bullies: From the Playground to the Boardroom - Jane Middleton-Moz and Mary Lee Zawadski

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