

## UGLY PARENT SYNDROME

### 1. What is it?

- A syndrome where spectating adults, and in particular, parents, become 'ugly', and verbally or physically abuse children, other spectators, coaches or refs;
- Syndrome particularly prevalent in junior sport;
- While it is a documented phenomenon all over the world, it has been dubbed "ugly parent syndrome" in Australia.

Survey USA took a poll of 500 parents in Indianapolis, Ind. in May 2001, asking about views of parent violence in youth sports. The survey found the following:

- 55 percent of parents say they have witnessed other parents engaging in verbal abuse at youth sporting events.
- 21 percent say they've witnessed a physical altercation between other parents at youth sporting events.
- 73 percent of those polled believe that parents who become verbally or physically abusive during games should be banned from youth sports.
- 22 percent would allow aggressive parents to remain in the stands.
- 5 percent aren't sure what to do about parents who are prone to sports-induced tantrums.
- 27 percent think "silent" games are a good idea.



### Examples:

- NSW Basketball said that police had to be called several times to children's matches last season to deal with angry parents.
- In early August 2002, a 20-year-old soccer referee Stephen Thompson was forced to flee a game in Concord pursued by players angry at the award of a penalty. Mr Thompson took refuge in a change room and had to call for a police escort to protect him from the Earlwood team, who now face a possible life ban from soccer competitions.
- In Mackay Queensland (July/August 2002) talented 15-year-old netballers received cruel anonymous letters, believed to be from disgruntled parents whose daughters had not been identified as having special talent
- NSW Amateur Soccer Federation manager Michael Quarmby said that in late August a 17-year-old player was banned for 25 years after pushing a referee and that a spectator had been banned for five years after running on to the pitch to confront a player.
- The father of the tennis player Jelena Dokic is a famous repeat offender. In 2000 he broke a microphone off a reporter's camera before police ordered him to give it back, then bribing the cameraman for the tape. In 1999 he was arrested outside a tournament in England where he had been physically removed by security guards after shouting at spectators and officials during his daughter's match. He then threw himself into the middle

of the road, lying in the path of oncoming traffic before being taken away by police and being cautioned for drunk and disorderly behaviour. One famous episode took place at Wimbledon 2000 when he wrapped a British flag around himself, began shouting at spectators and smashed a journalist's mobile phone. He was then banned from all women's tour events for 6 months.

- AFL player Warwick Capper was banned from attending 4 of his son's under-8 football games and ordered to undergo counselling after being found guilty of slapping and swearing at a junior umpire on the Gold Coast in April this year. He was also ordered to write a letter of apology to the volunteer umpire.
- Canterbury district referee Mal Osman said he had been grabbed by the throat by an enraged parent who stormed on to the pitch after he sent his son off during a recent Under 13s soccer game. "It's just not worth it because of all the shouting and screaming," said Mr Osman.
- Ray Knight, a former Cincinnati Reds third baseman and manager, was charged with simple battery, disorderly conduct and affray (fighting in a public place) after an altercation at a girls' softball game in Albany, Ga., in April 1999. Knight engaged in a heated and profane 15-minute argument with the father of a girl on the team opposing the squad on which Knight's 12-year-old daughter was playing. Knight finally punched the man in the head.
- In October 2000 a Californian football coach, Brett Peabody, was punched and kicked by the relatives of a senior running back on the team who had been relegated to a lesser role with the emergence of a younger player.
- After a hockey game for 11- and 12-year-old boys in New York on 23 January 2000, Matteo Picca struck his son's coach in the face with two hockey sticks. Picca, who was indicted for assault and criminal possession of a weapon and was sued for \$4 million by the coach, had been heard complaining angrily during the game that his son had not improved all season.
- Following a Little League game in Sacramento in April 1999, a man who was coaching his son's team beat up the manager of the opposing team. The assailant, who had been ejected by a 16-year-old umpire for verbally disrupting the game, was convicted of felony assault and sentenced to 180 days of work furlough.
- In Athens Alaska the father of a youth baseball player was charged with assault on another man who had complained that the father was heckling the other 11- and 12-year-old players. A knife was pulled, and one of the dads required more than 100 stitches to his face and back.
- In Port Orange Florida in 2001, a football game ended in a brawl involving over 100 parents, coaches and players. 1 mother was charged for resisting arrest, a player was charged with battery



- At a school soccer match in Ohio in 2000 an abusive spectator finally stood up and yelled "I have a gun". The game was terminated and the man was charged with menacing.
- In Boston, Massachusetts in July 2000, a father beat another father with hockey sticks. The second father died as a result of his injuries and the first father was charged with manslaughter.

## 2. What causes it?

3 major theories:

A. Biological: proposed most notably by Nobel Prize winner Konrad Lorenz, sees aggression as a basic, inherent human characteristic. Within this context, a sport is seen as a socially acceptable way to discharge built-up aggression, a safety valve.

B. Psychological: states that aggression is caused by frustration; it is situational. Frustration results when one's effort to reach a particular goal is blocked. In sports, frustration can be caused by questionable calls by officials, failure to make a particular play, injuries that interfere with optimum performance, heckling from spectators, or taunts by coaches or players. Doctor Patsy Tremayne, a Sports Psychologist and Associate Professor in the School of Psychology at the University of Western Sydney says "a number of parents have a vicarious interest in the performance of their children and it is difficult for them not to be biased, because of their own unmet needs to be competent in a sport. As a spectator there is not always an outlet for their emotion. Added to that is that being part of the crowd allows a parent to lose their identity in a similar way to road rage whereby people do things they might not otherwise do".

Some parents live their lives through their children and derive a sense of social identity and self-esteem through the game. Many parents focus on the results of the match or player's performance.

Some parents compare children and see parenting as an ego thing. Recent concerns raised by the Government's key advisers on family policy note that parents are seeing their children as trophies, as extensions of the cars, homes and professional jobs that they are chasing. While pushing their children to be upwardly mobile, they are putting achievement ahead of their children's needs. Professor Fiona Stanley, head of Perth's Institute for Child Health Research, and member of the Prime Minister's Science, Engineering and Innovation Council has been advocating parenting courses to teach parents to put their children's well-being above their own agendas. (The Sun-Herald September 2002)

C. Social learning: has received the most empirical verification and maintains that aggressive behavior is learned through modeling and reinforced by rewards and punishments. Young athletes take sports heroes as role models and imitate their behavior. Parents, coaches and teammates are also models that may demonstrate support for an aggressive style of play.

## 3. What is being done about it?

- Active Australia is an initiative managed by the Sport Development Group at the Australian Sports Commission (ASC). In the early 90's it introduced Codes of Behaviour for Players, Parents, Teachers, Coaches, Administrators, Officials, Media and Spectators (See Appendix 1).
- ASC makes recommendations called "Violence: Directions for Australia". Recommendation 50 says that "Sporting authorities should refer cases of criminal assault

on the playing field to law enforcement agencies for prosecution”. Recommendations 123-132 provide guidelines for controlling violence in sport. Recommendation 130 says “Younger players, and their parents, should be taught good sportsmanship. Provisions should be made for penalties against the team when parents of young players engage in disrespectful conduct as spectators”.

- The individual states have used the ASC’s code of behaviour as the basis for their own codes.
- In 1986 NSW Department of Education was the first state to introduce their sports code of behaviour. (See Appendix 2) These policies are included in sports program booklets along with the competition rules, draws, playing conditions etc. Many of the guidelines are aimed at spectators, reminding them that the game is for the enjoyment of participants, that they should appreciate the skills of the opposite team, and that they should not criticise, but encourage participants.
- These guidelines do not adequately address spectators’ behaviour and are currently under redevelopment since they are considered outdated in relation to content, issues and language. A more comprehensive code is currently in draft form and is awaiting final approval by state offices at the present moment.
- At present the Department is responsible for disciplinary action against sporting participants, however, it has yet to work through disciplinary issues in relation to parents and spectators.
- The NSW Department of Sport and Recreation has introduced booklets to encourage healthy participation in sport. Of particular relevance is their guide “Kids’ Sport: a Very Real Guide for Grown Ups”.

## Department of Sport and Recreation Publication

### Kids' Sport: a very real guide for grown ups



#### Summary

Practical information for parents on how to be a good sporting parent. Written by author Dennis Baker, the guide will help parents make sure their child get the most out of sport.

Published: June 1, 2000

[http://www.dsr.nsw.gov.au/assets/pubs/kids\\_sport/Ks\\_guide.pdf](http://www.dsr.nsw.gov.au/assets/pubs/kids_sport/Ks_guide.pdf)

- The Athletic Association of GPS Schools (Great Public Schools, NSW) have introduced a Code of Practice which aims to address some of the pressures on school sports, including parents (see Appendix 3).
- The Association of Heads of Independent Girls Schools of New South Wales (IGSSA) Code of Conduct for Inter-School Sport includes a section for parents (see Appendix 4).
- The Adelaide Institute of TAFE, in partnership with the South Australian Government, Equal Opportunity Commission of SA and Office for Recreation and Sport has designed a website [www.playbytherules.net.au](http://www.playbytherules.net.au) which runs online training courses for coaches, administrators, umpires & referees, players, volunteers and participants. The courses encourage participants to act fairly and respectfully towards each other. The site also

provides links to various Discrimination legislation and other relevant legislation such as Children & Young Persons (Care & Protection) Act (NSW) 1998, etc.

- The Victorian Government is in the process of introducing “User Friendly Clubs” which is a code of practice for spectators, players, officials and clubs in response to the syndrome. Sporting clubs will receive financial incentives to adopt the code. It is due to be unveiled in the very near future, if it has not been released recently.
- The QLD AFL has established a program called “Parents for AFL” including compulsory parent information sessions, a zero-tolerance policy on umpire abuse & spectator good conduct awards for behaviour off field.
- Some junior sporting clubs in QLD have introduced rules where parents can clap but are banned from barracking from the sidelines.

### Overseas

- In British Columbia in Canada, many sports groups and associations distribute Parent Contracts at the beginning of the season. The organisation discusses with parents how they can live by the contract and outline disciplinary guidelines before being requested to sign.
- For the last 3 years, the California Interscholastic Federation has had a state-wide program in which they slap yellow cards into the hands of “out of control” adult spectators. These cards warn the adults that they are misbehaving and quietly reminds them to calm down.
- The National Association of Sports Officials in the United States now offers amateur referees “assault insurance”.
- One program in the United States that is gaining widespread appeal is the Parents Association for Youth Sports (PAYS) program offered through the National Alliance for Youth Sports. PAYS is a program for parents that educates and motivates youth league parents to make the sports experience safe and meaningful. One of the most appealing aspects of the program is its emphasis on good sportsmanship, positive reinforcement and keeping sports in its proper perspective.

PAYS is essentially a training program for parents. The parents are required to attend a 30-minute clinic where they view a training video, meet other parents, participate in discussions and sign the Parents' Code of Ethics pledge (See Appendix 5).

Positive slogan buttons are distributed to parents to wear at the games. This is intended to remind other parents to also demonstrate good sportsmanship. A quarterly publication is sent to parents featuring information on ways that parents can help their children experience a rewarding sports experience.

- On September 23, 2000, the Massachusetts Governor's Committee on Physical Fitness and Sports and the National Youth Sports Safety Foundation, Inc. brought together more than 30 heads of Massachusetts' chapters of national sports and medical associations, educational organisations, and professional associations to develop a sport parent code of conduct (See Appendix 6).
- Dr. Clemente, a Professor of Counselling at the University of Northern Iowa, has designed a quiz to assist parents in deciding whether they need help with violence in children's sport (See Appendix 7).

#### 4. How can Lawyers be Involved?

- Assist in drafting policy. There are many various sporting and educational bodies such as the Australian Sports Commission, NSW Department of Education, NSW Department of Sporting and Recreation and other bodies which are continually reviewing and updating policy in relation to behaviour at sporting events. Lawyers are able to raise issues at a formative stage, and assist these bodies with their enforcement.
- Assist in the distribution and explanation of policy. This involves raising awareness and educating organisations, individuals, parents, participants, coaches and referees.
- Sitting on panels, liaising with panel and advising panels before and after they deal with disciplinary issues.
- Suggesting alternative solutions for dealing with ugly parent syndrome. Eg. Contacting the Combined Associated Schools or Greater Public Schools, various sporting bodies like NSW Netball Association, Basketball Australia, Tennis Australia, etc.

## **Appendix 1**

### **Australian Sports Commission's Parents Code of Behaviour:**

- Remember that children participate in sport for their enjoyment, not yours.
- Encourage children to participate, do not force them.
- Focus on the child's efforts and performance rather than winning or losing.
- Encourage children always to play according to the rules and to settle disagreements without resorting to hostility or violence.
- Never ridicule or yell at a child for making a mistake or losing a competition.
- Remember that children learn best by example. Appreciate good performances and skilful plays by all participants.
- Support all efforts to remove verbal and physical abuse from sporting activities.
- Respect officials' decisions and teach children to do likewise.
- Show appreciation for volunteer coaches, officials and administrators. Without them, your child could not participate.
- Respect the rights, dignity and worth of every young person regardless of their gender, ability, cultural background or religion.

## **Appendix 2**

### **NSW Department of Education Sports Code of Behaviour**

#### **Players, Coaches and Spectators Code**

- The goals of the game are to have fun and improve skills. Be modest in success and generous in defeat.
- Play for the fun of it.
- Play by the rules and always respect the decisions of officials.
- Make no criticism either by word or gesture. Deliberately distracting or provoking an opponent or player is not acceptable or permitted in any sport.
- Be a good sport. Applaud good performance and efforts from all individuals and teams. Congratulate all participants on their performance regardless of the game's outcome.
- Condemn unsporting behaviour and promote respect for opponents.
- Condemn the use of violence in any form.
- Respect the rights, dignity and worth of all participants regardless of their gender, ability, cultural background or religion.
- Place the safety and welfare of the participants above all else.

Young people in sport have a right to participate in a safe and supportive environment.



## Appendix 3

### GPS Code of Practice

The Athletic Association of GPS Schools of New South Wales

The attached Code of Practice is a result of discussions among Heads of GPS Schools. It is intended as an affirmation of those matters which historically have been of significance to our schools and which, we believe, should remain so in the decades ahead.

The place of sport in the all round education of the boys of our schools is important and will continue to be so. The GPS Schools continue to use the natural medium of games to achieve educational goals for our students.

However, there are a number of pressures which can detract from our common purpose. Some of these have led to the development of the Code of Practice. They include:

- \* parents who expect professional levels of coaching in sports
- \* Old Boys who measure success of their school in terms of sporting wins
- \* Council members who recognise the potential marketing value of sporting success
- \* Heads, staff and coaches who may feel pressure to succeed in sporting competition
- \* the media, whose purposes are not always synonymous with our own.

It is in this context that we commend for your attention this statement of the principles and consequent practices of the GPS Schools. We seek your support for your school and for its obligations as a valued member of the GPS Association.

Dr KA Jaggar, Principal

### GPS Schools of New South Wales Code of Practice

#### A. Introduction

The AAGPS was established to provide organised games between schools of similar aspiration. The motto of the Association is Unity in Diversity. The following features of the Association have developed over a long period:

1. Provision of well organised fixtures at appropriate venues
2. Competition held in good spirit with high expectations of conduct and sportsmanship
3. Management and coaching of teams conducted as far as possible by schoolmasters
4. Lively and active communication among member schools in a forum ideal for the discussion of matters of common importance.
5. A spirit of cooperation in the context of the healthy competition between our schools.

The Association is chaired and run by schoolmaster members of the staffs of schools, with final responsibility being borne by Headmasters.

#### B. Common Principles

The Headmasters of the GPS Schools have reaffirmed their commitment to the following principles:

1. We believe that all GPS sport is valuable. It exists for the benefit of the boys and must assume its proper place alongside academic, spiritual, cultural and social development
2. Success at sport involves more than mere winning, which - while enjoyable and worthwhile - is only one of the potential benefits.
3. We all value our membership of the GPS. The Heads are committed to maintaining the strength of the Association and recognise that any action taken by an individual school against the spirit of the GPS Code of Practice will have adverse consequences both on the Association as a whole, and on individual members.

### C. Code of Practice

In the light of these principles, the GPS Headmasters affirm the following code of practice:

1. No inducements such as sporting scholarships, whether direct, disguised or at arm's length, shall be offered by any member school. Financial assistance to talented sportsmen shall not form part of the enrolment strategy of any member school.
2. We affirm that the Headmaster of each school is responsible for knowing the special circumstances relating to the admission of boys to his school.
3. In the selection and training of boys in teams or crews, the good of the individual boy shall remain paramount.
4. While allowing for some exceptional circumstances, we believe that it is poor educational practice for a boy to engage in a single sport throughout the year.

The Headmasters of the GPS Schools of New South Wales August, 2000.

## **Appendix 4**

### **IGSAA Code of Conduct**

#### **PART IV: PARENTS**

*Parents are asked to bear these things in mind:*

First, inter-school sport is only inter-school sport. International levels of ability should not be expected of schoolgirls. School sport should be seen in proper perspective and girls should be allowed to enjoy their sport, make their mistakes and learn from them. This is especially true of girls in their first season in a sport.

Second, sport is well worth playing at any ability level in any grade.

Third, the benefits of playing sport are available to girls whether they win or lose. The Association sees winning games, events, meetings and competitions as less important and less valuable than the benefits of participating.

Fourth, the practical problems and difficulties involved in organising sporting competitions for more than 5500 girls and some hundreds of teams from 28 schools at up to fifty venues are enormous. There is usually a good reason for arrangements and decisions (such as draws, venues and times) which may seem puzzling. The patience and understanding of parents is requested in these matters.

## **Appendix 5**

### **PAYS Code of Ethics (United States)**

I hereby pledge to provide positive support, care, and encouragement for my child participating in youth sports by following this Parents' Code of Ethics:

I will encourage good sportsmanship by demonstrating positive support for all players, coaches, and officials at every game, practice or other youth sports event.

I will place the emotional and physical well being of my child ahead of my personal desire to win.

I will insist that my child play in a safe and healthy environment.

I will require that my child's coach be trained in the responsibilities of being a youth sports coach and that the coach upholds the Coaches' Code of Ethics.

I will support coaches and officials working with my child, in order to encourage a positive and enjoyable experience for all.

I will demand a sports environment for my child that is free from drugs, tobacco and alcohol and will refrain from their use at all youth sports events.

I will remember that the game is for youth - not adults.

I will do my very best to make youth sports fun for my child.

I will ask my child to treat other players, coaches, fans and officials with respect regardless of race, sex, creed or ability.

I will help my child enjoy the youth sports experience by doing whatever I can, such as being a respectful fan, assisting with coaching, or providing transportation.

I will read the National Standards For Youth Sports and do what I can to help all youth sports organizations implement and enforce them.

## Appendix 6

### Sport Parent Code of Conduct (Massachusetts, USA)

#### Preamble

The essential elements of character-building and ethics in sports are embodied in the concept of sportsmanship and six core principles: trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and good citizenship. The highest potential of sports is achieved when competition reflects these "six pillars of character."

I therefore agree:

1. I will not force my child to participate in sports.
2. I will remember that children participate to have fun and that the game is for youth, not adults.
3. I will inform the coach of any physical disability or ailment that may affect the safety of my child or the safety of others.
4. I will learn the rules of the game and the policies of the league.
5. I (and my guests) will be a positive role model for my child and encourage sportsmanship by showing respect and courtesy and by demonstrating positive support for all players, coaches, officials and spectators at every game, practice or other sporting event.
6. I (and my guests) will not engage in any kind of unsportsmanlike conduct with any official, coach, player, or parent such as booing and taunting; refusing to shake hands; or using profane language or gestures.
7. I will not encourage any behaviors or practices that would endanger the health and wellbeing of the athletes.
8. I will teach my child to play by the rules and to resolve conflicts without resorting to hostility or violence.
9. I will demand that my child treat other players, coaches, officials and spectators with respect regardless of race, creed, color, sex or ability.
10. I will teach my child that doing one's best is more important than winning, so that my child will never feel defeated by the outcome of a game or his/her performance.
11. I will praise my child for competing fairly and trying hard, and make my child feel like a winner every time.
12. I will never ridicule or yell at my child or other participant for making a mistake or losing a competition.

13. I will emphasize skill development and practices and how they benefit my child over winning. I will also deemphasize games and competition in the lower age groups.
14. I will promote the emotional and physical well-being of the athletes ahead of any personal desire I may have for my child to win.
15. I will respect the officials and their authority during games and will never question, discuss, or confront coaches at the game field, and will take time to speak with coaches at an agreed upon time and place.
16. I will demand a sports environment for my child that is free from drugs, tobacco, and alcohol and I will refrain from their use at all sports events.
17. I will refrain from coaching my child or other players during games and practices, unless I am one of the official coaches of the team.

I also agree that if I fail to abide by the aforementioned rules and guidelines, I will be subject to disciplinary action that could include, but is not limited to the following:

- Ø Verbal warning by official, head coach, and/or head of league organization
- Ø Written warning
- Ø Parental game suspension with written documentation of incident kept on file by organizations involved
- Ø Game forfeit through the official or coach
- Ø Parental season suspension

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Parent/Guardian Signature

## **Appendix 7**

### **Survey by Dr. Clemente**

If you wonder if your children's sports activities have become too big and important a part of your family's life, try answering true or false to the following questions:

1. My family's life revolves around my children's sports activities.
2. My mood swings are often directly linked with the outcome of my children's competitions.
3. When my children win, I reward them with gifts, verbal praise and words of love.
4. When my children lose, I withhold physical or emotional affection, may tease or put them down, or may even not speak to them.
5. I give more of my time and attention to my children's sports than their academic endeavors.
6. I "push" my children to train harder all the time and encourage them not to be "lazy."
7. When my children lose, I label the coach as inept, incompetent, and weak.
8. I make fun of kids who don't win or are not at my children's level.
9. I brag about and discuss my kid's sport's abilities and accomplishments all the time.
10. I will say: "WE are playing against ..." not, "My son or daughter is playing against ...."
11. I have verbally abused other parents during sport activities.
12. I have felt like getting into a physical fight with parents from the other team after a loss.
13. I have often called in sick or lied to miss work to attend to my children's sport events.
14. Before my children's competitions, I am cranky, nervous, and anxious.

If you answer true to more than a couple of these questions, you may be putting too much emphasis on your children's athletic activities. It's time to readjust your perspective regarding what you see on TV, your own expectations and your children's sports. Try talking with your child's school counsellor, or a local mental health counsellor about the issue. It's quite possible to reestablish a healthy emotional balance between sports and your parenting style. A professional counselor can help point you in the right directions.