

# Role of Parents in High School Activity Programs

BY DAN GERDES

**A**cross most of the spectrum of high school activity programs, there are many opportunities for parental involvement. In most scenarios, parental involvement is an integral piece of the success formula. Parents may offer their professional services, financial support or volunteer their time to make sure that their sons and daughters have an experience that is positive and meaningful.

Since these programs often involve mom and dad's most valuable gift in their lives—their son or daughter—parents feel compelled to closely observe and scrutinize these programs to make sure their child is not going to be hurt in any way.

Without question, parents have a right and a moral obligation to do exactly this. Yet in high school activity programs of all kinds, there are sickening stories in which parents and school leaders have gotten tangled up in a problem, personal and professional boundaries have been crossed, and standards of trust and human decency have been broken. The fall-out oftentimes leaves everyone involved bitter, confused and hurt—not the least of whom the student who is caught in the middle.

So what is the appropriate role of parents in school programs and how can that role be established, communicated and played-out in a healthy way? In basketball, for example, parents can certainly participate in the program by volunteering time and resources to help raise funds for summer camps. But the parents would not be allowed to sit in on coaches meetings during the season as they plan practice or prepare for a game.

Clearly, there are boundaries that need to be articulated and

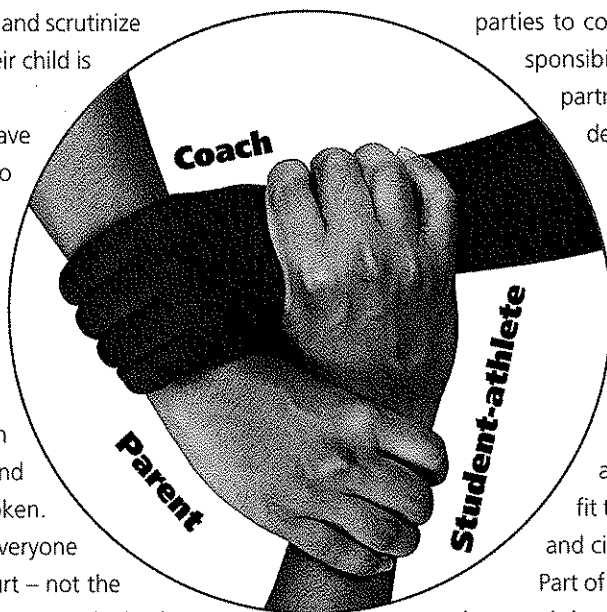
upheld. The coach doesn't get to tell mom or dad how to raise their child, so parents should not be allowed to tell the coach how to run the basketball program. Establishing boundaries becomes a mission-critical element to making the program-student-parent triad work well.

One of the keys to making the relationship work for everyone is to understand the difference between rights and shared responsibilities. Whereas rights usually end up creating a deepened sense of conflict, focusing on shared responsibilities allows the engaged parties to come around common ground. Shared responsibilities are about connecting and building partnership, and promoting flexibility and understanding in the relationship.

Conversely, rights many times are used as tools of entitlement and conflict—relational aspects that promote self-first and rigid behavior. Student-athletes have the privilege of participating in high school athletic programs, but the shared responsibility of the parents and program leaders is to pursue the vision and values of excellence in ways that benefit the student-athletes, the school community and civic culture.

Part of the challenge with the issue of parental involvement is in effective communication. In many ways, effective personal communication has become lost. As social media has proven to be both good and bad in its ongoing evolution, the basic skills of effective personal communication haven't changed. Isn't it startling what people will write about someone on a social media site that they would never say to them personally?

Most everyone still recognizes and appreciates the connection of a friendly face-to-face conversation, a handshake, a smile—none of which can happen through a Twitter feed. Yet program leaders get e-mails and texts from parents regularly about problems or is-



sues that somehow make the coach out to be the problem. Healthy relationships ultimately require much more effort than typing and sending a few thoughts to someone electronically.

Sometimes, parents just need to vent, to express some things that are troubling their minds. Simply listening can be an extremely valuable way to decompress the situation and restore some emotional balance and stability to the relationship.

A coach might say something like, "You know, I'm a parent, too, so I can appreciate what you're saying," or "You know, you're right, I hadn't considered that perspective before." This can bring emotions down and raise trust up. Also asking, "What would you like to see happen," or "What would you like me to do," offers the parent an opportunity to help solve the problem beyond the luxury of just defining the problem. It also offers parents a small sense of program ownership because it challenges them to think in a larger perspective than their own. To be a solution-finder is considerably different than a problem-finder.

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Program leaders do need a thick skin because criticisms of leadership are everywhere, and the voices of parents can be some of the sharpest. Yet wise communication, particularly the practice of wise listening with the heart and not just the ears, can help to restore the sense of rapport, build a heightened sense of trust, and help reset the focus on the shared responsibilities both parents and program leaders have involving kids.

What should be the program standards for the way parents communicate and engage coaches and program leaders?

Human relations experts have offered all sorts of principles and applications for conflict resolution – if not healthy communication. As a general rule, the more personal the situation, the more personal the communication needs to be. Everyone wants to feel truly valued and connected to something important, and parents are certainly no exception in the lives of their kids. In a world of text-messages and sound bites, parents want to know that they mean something to us as leaders beyond simply a squeaky wheel in the machinery of school programming. So establishing "ground rules" for the way communication happens in the program are vital to success.

Consider these 10 practical suggestions for effectively communicating and facilitating a healthy role for parents within high school activity programs. Relationships are never "simple" and especially so in the crucible of pressure-packed activity programs and performances. Nonetheless, these represent some of the basic el-

ements in healthy interaction between program leaders and parents, to help clarify roles and help set program boundaries and standards of conduct.

1. Establish a communication protocol or process if a parent has a grievance concerning the program, such as first point of contact; timing of contacts; when, why and how individual meetings may happen.
2. As a program leader, be proactive to meet individually with parents to share the way you prefer to communicate. Invite them for coffee, or perhaps even meet with them in their home, to build trust and to talk about the deeper things of the program. Parents will feel much more closely connected as a result of that connection.
3. Develop a program handbook for parents and use and/or refer to it often regarding their role as a "program partner." Articulate the boundaries or "ground rules" concerning the interactions of the program-student-parent triad.
4. Conduct formal meetings with a third party present. This offers some objectivity and also a sense of neutrality as the conversation unfolds.
5. Keep supervisors/superiors in the loop. As issues arise, no one likes to be blindsided.
6. Set an expectation for honesty, trust and fairness for everyone associated with the program – and lead by example.
7. Use technology in positive and proactive ways to keep parents in the loop with the need-to-know information about their student and the program. You could text or tweet a weekly team value or standard with a corresponding quote of the day.
8. Articulate what is expected of parents, then give them the tools to fulfill that expectation in a positive way. If you want them to speak positively around the dinner table after practice, help them identify helpful topic areas of conversation they can have with their son or daughter about the team or their performance.
9. Be your own best program ambassador to parents. Practice good people and communication skills wherever you might meet parents. Engage them rather than avoid them, and reach out to let them know you value them at least enough to smile, say "hello" and chat for a minute or two about what's going on in the program, at school or around town.
10. Remember to treat others the way you would like to be treated – and you do it first. Model respect, decency, trustworthiness and humility and it will become infectious when parents realize it's legit. ☺

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