

THE PARENT TRAP By Rick Gruneau

No I don't mean the movie with Hayley Mills, nor the more recent remake with Lindsey Lohan. I'm referring to youth soccer. Anyone who has ever spent any time in youth soccer has seen parents who have fallen into the trap. We've seen the dads and mom's who constantly complain aloud to anyone who'll listen that the coach is playing the wrong formation, doesn't have the right players in the right positions, or isn't training the team properly. We've seen the negative parents who think their child can do no wrong, but can find fault with many of the other players on the team and are happy to share their discontent with other parents who become allies in negativity. The soccer parent trap also includes the sideline screamers and armchair referees; the parents who think their son or daughter is going to be the next Freddy Adu or Kara Lang and insinuate themselves into every club, team, or soccer school in order to promote their child's interests over anything else; the parents who get so over-involved with their child's soccer that they can't bear to leave them on their own for a moment, even to the point of sitting on the sidelines in practices, watching and judging every drill and small-sided game like they were watching the World Cup. Finally, the parent trap includes those parents who make the car ride home after every youth soccer game into an opportunity to analyze and re-analyze every mistake their child made in the game. No wonder that in a national survey of former young athletes in the United States a very high percentage of the respondents highlighted 'the ride home' as one of their most negative memories of their youth sport experience. Of course, there are thousands of parents who don't fall into the trap parents who manage to love the game and to support their child's team, club, and soccer development, but in a balanced way. I say balanced because these parents have been able to maintain a sense of proportion about their child's involvement in soccer. They are serious about their child's involvement in youth soccer without taking themselves too seriously. They know, in the end, that soccer is just a game, and that the vast majority of players will not end up on national teams, or in professional careers. These parents have learned to love the game for its own sake and to promote it as a life activity that may be enjoyed at almost any age level. They've learned that disciplined achievement, even at the highest levels, always has to be balanced with an emphasis on fun, personal empowerment, and learning life skills. If this balance isn't there, youth sport just becomes another zone of stress and oppression something to dread or to escape rather than something to embrace with passion and commitment. There is no guaranteed formula to insure that well-meaning soccer parents will be able to avoid the parent trap. But, based on my experience, and for what its worth, here are some ideas that might help.

1) Don't rush your son or daughter into the game before they are ready. You will hear people say that if your child isn't on a 'development' team by, say, U10 their soccer career is over. That's nonsense. Take them out, kick a ball around a bit with them, and then let them watch their friends play on the neighbourhood team. It's the friendships that matter most early on. When they say they want to give it a go. Sign them up. But, don't feel the need to rush things.

2) Talk to your son or daughter's coach about maintaining a sense of proportion about the importance of youth games. A good coach will be happy to discuss his or her philosophy with you. All youth coaches at the youngest levels should be striving to create a positive environment with a balanced emphasis on fun and skill acquisition. If the coach is a screamer, talk to him or her about it early on, in a non-threatening way. If the coach isn't interested in what you have to say, move your child to a more positive atmosphere.

3) As your child moves up the age ladder, remember to keep a balanced view of how children develop at different rates. It sometimes happens that the big early developer who scores 50 goals in a soccer season is not even one of the top 10 players on select teams in the late high school years. In too many instances when other children begin to catch up to these U12 or U13 'stars,' the former stars lose their interest and drop out of the game. So if your U9 or U10 son or daughter is ripping up the local circuit, don't lose your sense of proportion about it all. Your child may well go on to develop into a great player. But a lot of young stars don't develop. So keep things in perspective.

4) If you get your child on a team with committed coaches and a positive environment that builds players' confidence, don't undermine their good work by criticizing your child's weaknesses all the time: 'Sally, you just have to learn to be more aggressive!! Try harder!!' Instead, praise your child's strengths and accomplishments and let the coach quietly work on improving the weaknesses.

5) Remember that one of the most important life lessons your child can learn in sport is to work hard to contribute to and belong to something bigger than himself or herself. Teach your child to be a team player and to respect his or her team-mates. Under no circumstances should you ever say something like: 'Well, if it wasn't for your scoring your team would be hopeless. Your defence is a joke. Really, you are the whole team.' After the U.S. women's national team won the 1999 world cup, Mia Hamm was quoted as telling her team-mates that she didn't become the player she was until she learned that she was playing FOR her team-mates more than for herself. More youth players and parents, especially at higher levels, should learn that lesson.

6) As your child moves up in soccer levels, remember that individual, career-oriented, objectives always have to be balanced against team commitment. At the high school ages it is very common for players to jump from one select team to another, looking for the best coaching, the most successful program, and the team that will best prepare the player for selection to provincial teams or to university soccer programs. Sometimes, a player needs to move to take his or her game to the highest level. That is how soccer works. But, there is also too much of jumping from team to team in youth soccer, as select team coaches and ambitious parents quietly work to build super teams at the highest levels. If your child is on a successful high level team, with good coaching, and strong friendships, think very seriously before moving your child from this environment. Ask yourself what lessons your child will learn from the move? What will be gained? What will be lost?

7) Work hard to model the kind of behaviours you would expect for your own child. For example, you can't expect your child to learn much about sportsmanship if you can't control your own temper on the sidelines. Similarly, if all you do is slag the coaches, or the other players in your child's presence, what lessons are you teaching? Instead, make an effort to teach your child the value of respect: respect for team-mates, for coaches, for referees, and for opponents.

8) You can start an argument on a street corner in Europe or South America in a heartbeat by making a tactical observation about a coach, or about a team's favourite formation, system or style of play. In Sao Paulo just try to say something publically like: 'Brazilian soccer is too undisciplined. With your skill if you Brazilians played a much more disciplined or organized style, you'd win everything all the time.' Or stand up in a group of Manchester United fans and say something like: 'Our team has really gone down hill since we gave up Beckham and started playing that damn 4-4-1-1 system.' My point is that every coach has an idea about a preferred playing style, formation and system. As a parent or fan, you might not like his or her choices. But, remember how hard it is to get a consensus on this kind of thing at any level of soccer. Someone, somewhere, will always take issue with any decision a coach makes. On high level teams, if a coach teaches zonal defending, some parents will believe the team would do better with a man-marking system. If the coach teaches man-marking defence, some parents will think that coach is doing the players a disservice by not teaching the principles of zonal defending. When it comes to soccer playing styles, formations and systems, the best thing a parent can do is to respect the time and effort put in by the coach. If you have reservations, pass them on in a constructive way and let the coach get on with coaching. If you are absolutely convinced the issue is a major problem, be quiet about it over the course of the season and move on to another team for the following year. But, if nothing ever seems good enough, ask yourself if the issue lies more with you than with your child's coaches.

9) Because soccer games usually end up in a situation where there is a winner and a loser, all coaches, players and parents have to confront problems arising from winning and losing. It is no fun to play on a team that never wins. On these teams, losing becomes a cancer: players get

discouraged, parents get grumpy and critical, and coaches get depressed. And, sometimes, on these teams the need to win gets so strong that the weaker players start to see less and less playing time. Something similar can even happen on successful high level youth select teams, where the need to win against good competition makes coaches and parents tend to emphasize winning over player development. As a parent you should take the position that from the beginning of organized soccer to at least grade 8 or 9 the major emphasis for teams should be on player development. That means that players and teams should be playing at the level that is best for development and where everyone gets played fairly. The best level is the level where a team wins enough to feel good about itself, but also loses a fair share of games by challenging itself to play better teams. As a parent don't get too caught up in the soccer 'status' game...If your child is likely to be the weakest player on an A level team, consider a B level team where your child might get more playing time, have more fun, and develop faster. If your child's team is winning all their games by a huge margin talk to the coach about having the team move up a level. If moving up a level is not a possibility, talk to the coach and to the other parents about using tournaments as a way to play higher level teams. While it isn't healthy for a team to lose all the time, it is also not healthy to win all the time either. Just remember to try to keep your child's team's record in perspective, and remember that in youth soccer player development should be a greater priority than a team's win-loss record.

10) Think to the future as a way of maintaining perspective and keeping your feet on the ground about your child's youth soccer experiences. For many players organized competitive soccer will end in the high school years as other interests develop. For the majority of those who play organized soccer through high school, U18 will be the end of the line until some return to recreational play later in life. A small number of players will move on to College and University teams, or to under 21 teams or to women's premiere teams, and will continue to play at a high level. In girls' soccer, especially, University soccer is the pinnacle of the game for all but a tiny handful of athletes. And, even then, at 21 or 22 years of age, after 4 years of play, it is over. Knowing that to be the case, ask yourself what you want your son or daughter to get out of his or her playing days. Be honest. Now, having thought ahead, rethink your actions and behaviours in the present in respect to your son or daughter's current team. In the end, at 30 years of age, your child will not likely remember if they won or lost a league cup at U14. What they'll remember, hopefully, is the fun, the friendships, and the trips, as well as the life lessons learned about setting goals collectively and trying to achieve them, being a part of something larger than yourself, the challenges of discipline and training, and the values of fitness and healthy lifestyles. As a parent if you can keep your focus on these things you are unlikely to fall into the soccer parent trap.

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Article Courtesy PlaySOCCER Magazine,
Special Parent's Guide to Soccer Edition 2005.