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Hockey Rink Etiquette for Parents

Though most of us are hoping for many more weeks of nice weather, the shorter days mean the 2005-'06 youth hockey season is around the corner.

From house-league to the highest competitive levels of all-star or AAA "rep" teams, players — and their parents — have already gone through a tryout process, often jockeying to see which team they will represent over the next several months.

Youth hockey is an intense game on the ice, and sometimes it can be just as intense — and tense— off the ice.

There, we see parents jawing at each other, at players, at coaches, at game officials. The temperature is a little too high in the building, and some of us parents can be a little too tightly wound.

While we all say it's about "fun", watching our own kids play can bring out the worst instincts that we have.

We all want our sons and daughters to play, to play hard, to play well, and — there's that phrase again— have fun. We want them to be well-coached, play on a team that is competitive in their category, and benefit in a host of ways from being involved in competitive athletics.

Yet we, as parents, sometimes undercut how much fun our kids really have, and how much they will actually benefit.

This happens by and through our often toxic behaviour, especially during games.

Unfortunately, many of us don't recognize our own negative behaviour. We only see it in others!

So here is a primer, a reminder, of little things that we can do at and around the rink this fall and winter to make the new hockey season more pleasant for all concerned — most importantly, for the kids.

15 things to keep in mind while watching from the stands this winter:

1. Let the coaches' coach. If you are telling your son or daughter — or any other player for that matter — to do something different from what their coach is telling them, you create distraction and confusion.
2. It is very unnerving for many young players to try and perform difficult tasks on the ice on the spur of the moment when parents are yelling at them from the sidelines. Let the kids play. If they have been well coached, they should know what to do on the ice. If they make a mistake, chances are they will learn from it.
3. Do not discuss the play of specific young players in front of other parents. How many times do you hear comments such as, "I don't know how that boy made this team...." or "she's just not fast enough...". Too many parents act as though their own child is a 'star', and the problem is someone else's kid. Negative comments and attitudes are hurtful and totally unnecessary and kill parent harmony, which is often essential to youth team success.
4. Discourage such toxic behaviour by listening patiently to any negative comments that might be made, then address issues in a thoughtful, positive way. Speak to the positive qualities of a player, family or coach. It tends to make the outspoken critics back off, at least temporarily.
5. Do your level best not to complain about your son or daughter's coaches to other parents. Once that starts, it is like a disease that spreads. Before you know it, parents are talking constantly in a negative way behind a coach's back. (As an aside, if you have what you truly feel is a legitimate beef with your child's coach — either regarding game strategy or playing time, arrange an appointment to meet privately, away from the rink and other parents.)
6. Make only positive comments from the stands. Be encouraging. Young athletes do not need to be reminded constantly about their perceived errors or mistakes. Their coaches will instruct them, either during the game or between periods, and during practices. You can often see a young player make that extra effort when they hear encouraging words from the stands about their hustle.
7. Avoid making any negative comments about players on the other team. This should be simple: we are talking about youngsters, not adults who are being paid to play professionally. I recall being at a 'rep' baseball game some years ago, when parent on one team loudly made comments about errors made by a particular young player on the other team. People on the other side of the diamond were stunned— not to mention hurt and angry, and rightfully so.

Besides being tasteless and classless, these kinds of comments can be hurtful to the young person involved and to their family as well.

8. Try to keep interaction with parents on the other team as healthy and positive as possible. Who's kidding whom? You want your child's team to win. So do they. But that should not make us take leave of our senses, especially our common sense. Be courteous 'till it hurts; avoid the 'tit for tat' syndrome.
9. Parents on the 'other' team are not the enemy. Neither are the boys or girls on the other team. We should work to check any negative feelings at the door before we hit the arena.
10. What is the easiest thing to do in the youth sports world? Criticize the referees. Oh, there are times when calls are missed, absolutely. And that can, unfortunately, directly affect the outcome of a contest. That said, by and large those who officiate at youth hockey games are a) hardly over-compensated, and b) give it an honest — and often quite competent — effort. At worst, they usually at least try to be fair and objective.
11. On that note, outbursts from parents on the sideline made toward the referees only signal to our on children on the ice that they can blame the refs for anything that goes wrong. Learning early in life to make excuses and to blame others is not a formula for success in sports — or life.
12. Yelling out comments such as "Good call, ref" or "Thanks ref" may only serve to alienate an official. The ref always assumes they made the proper call, that's why they made it. Trying to show superficial support because the call went 'your' way is simply annoying to the officials, and to anyone within earshot.
13. The stands are for enjoying watching your child play, and the companionship of other parents— not for negative behaviour. If you want to coach, obtain your coaching certification and then apply for a job.
14. We all feel things and are apt to be tempted to say things to others — fellow parents, officials, our own kids — in the 'heat of the moment'. But we don't excuse athletes for doing inappropriate things in the 'heat of the moment' (there are penalties, suspensions, etc.) so we should apply similar standards to our own behaviour at the rink. Make yourself pause and quickly check yourself and ask: Will I be proud of what I am about to say or do when I reflect on it tomorrow?
15. The parking lot is not the time to 'fan the flames'. Whether it is a coach's decision, a referee's call, a comment that was made, let it go. Don't harass the coach or an official or a parent on the other team after the game is over. Go home, relax, and unwind. Talk positively with your child. Many of us have

made the mistake of “chewing out” our own son or daughter on the way home for perceived poor play. The ride home is sometimes as important as the game itself. Make that time a good memory for your son or daughter by discussing as many positives as you can about him/her, their coach and their teammates.

Michael Langlois, founder of Prospect Communications Inc., is the author of the book, “A Guide to Better Communication for Minor (Youth) Hockey Coaches”. Prospect’s web site is located at <http://www.beyondthegame.net>