

An Open Letter to the Out of Control Sports Parent Sitting Next to me in the Stands

(This open letter was written by Karen, a mom and a Changing the Game Project follower who has grown frustrated and disgruntled with the current state of youth sports, and the fact that she cannot go and watch her kids compete in peace. She asked us to publish it and to remain anonymous. We thought it was pretty good advice, so we decided to share. Thanks, Karen, and thanks to all those parents out there who realize that the game is supposed to be for the kids.)

Dear Out of Control Sports Parent,

You.

Yeah, you.

The one shouting "Get the rebound!!!" to your kid. The one with the heart palpitating so loudly that you cannot contain yourself. The one yelling and complaining about the coach. The one hollering at the 13-year-old referee. The one angry at my kid for making a mistake. The one hollering at the kids who made a mistake running the scoreboard in a recreational tournament in a meaningless pool play game.

Yeah, you, the one whose spouse won't sit next to you during the game. The one who is micromanaging every aspect of the game and turning what would be a pleasant normal Saturday into a heightened state of anxiety for all of us, including your fellow parents stuck next to you for today's game, this season, and our kids' childhoods.

PLEASE STOP!

PLEASE CALM DOWN!

Do you notice the Normal Sports Parents sitting next to you who are quiet? Did you even look at us? You probably didn't. Do you know what we are thinking? Well, I've listened to you holler in my ear all game, so now it's my turn.

Your noise pollution is ruining my day and my experience as a parent. You don't have the right to dominate over all of us sitting here watching and cheering like Normal Sports Parents. You don't have the right to keep blocking my view as you jump up to contest another call, or express your frustration at another mistake by an 11-year-old.

Have you ever stopped to consider any of the following things:

1. **You are not helping your kid.** Did you ever think of that? Did any of your advice, ever, help anyone on the court? Did your kid swing better, make the shot, score the goal, or improve in any way because you yelled? Did a referee ever change his call? Did it have any positive effect on the game whatsoever?
2. **You are embarrassing your kid.** Your kid knows he missed the shot. Do you have to criticize him publicly for it? Now your kid is focused on your voice and the coach's voice and his inner voice and it's taking away the ability to think and make decisions and play. No kid likes to be yelled at publicly, in front of his friends. Do you? When was the last time you were yelled at or shamed by your boss in front of the whole company? You know what kids want parents to say on the sidelines? Nothing. No coaching. At most, general cheering.
3. **Don't yell at my kid. EVER. What makes you think that this is even OK?** If you want to screw up your own kid's journey, that is sad, but it's your kid. As for the rest of them, zip it.
4. **No one on the sidelines thinks you are a good parent for yelling like this.** Not even your friends. We are all kind of embarrassed for you, and your child. We are just afraid to say it because your kid is pretty good, and we are not sure if the club will support us in telling you to be quiet.
5. **You had your turn to play when you were young.** Let it go. This will all be over soon, you won't have anyone to drive to practice anymore, and you will have to ask yourself "what was this all for?"
6. **You have it all wrong. We don't need MORE games. We need more practice.** Why so many games anyway? The number of games rivals professional sports. Kids play almost as many games as they do in the NBA and pro athletes don't even go to elementary school. (Read "Does Youth Sports Get the Math All Wrong") You see, in practice, kids take risks, try new things, learn and develop. They need to think and make decisions and they can't do that if you are yelling at them the whole time because you are focused on the scoreboard. I don't want to get in my car again next weekend and drive to another tournament. How about we stay home and just get better, or even play some pickup games?
7. **Before you think I'm going to say the score doesn't matter, I'm not.** The score matters....to our kids, but not as much as it matters to you. In fact, they will be over it by the time they cross the court and ask "what's for lunch?" Kids are not stupid. They also know the team with the taller, faster, and older kids have a better chance. But you are focusing only on the score, and your kid is learning that mistakes are NOT OK. That perfection is

required. That your love is conditional on winning. Don't turn your kid into an anxious hot mess with stomach pains. Look at the rates of anxiety and depression among kids in high school and college. What is your endgame?

8. **We all screw up, but it's never too late to change! Last week, I got caught up in it too. In fact, I wanted my kid's team to beat your kid's team so I could shove it in your face. Then I remembered your kid is a kid. And it didn't feel very good to feel good about your 11-year-old feeling lousy. That didn't seem like an adult thing to do.**

I get it. You are stressed. You are scared your kid might miss out on some opportunity. I feel that too. We work hard so our kids can have advantages that we never had. It's hard to keep up with the Joneses. It's hard to know who to believe. But we never had this kind of pressure back in the 80s when we were kids. Do you even remember the scores from your THIRD-grade games? I don't.

Please, for everyone's sake, but especially your own kids, calm down. Enjoy the moment. Watch them with pride when they succeed, and watch them with pride when they have the courage to fail. If you want to jeer and holler at a game, go to a professional one.

But here, on this sideline, let's remember these are kids. That it is just a game. That referees are human. That no one is turning pro, and no scholarships are being handed out today.

Let's model good behavior and put it all in perspective for our children. They are here learning how to play a game with other kids with all of its ups and downs and trials and life lessons and friendships.

They are not here to boost our self-esteem.

They are not there to entertain us.

They have only one childhood.

Please let kids be kids.

Please let them fall in love with the game.

Please let them play.

And please, just let me watch in peace!

Thanks,

A Normal Sports Parent