

# PHGSA Hints and Tips

## Soccer Parents: Why They Rage

Results from a study of Soccer parents but applies to all child sports.

ScienceDaily (Jun. 18, 2008) — Wonder if you could be one of “those” parents who rant and rage at their kid’s xxxxxx game? Well, you don’t have to look much farther than your car’s rearview mirror for clues.

According to a new study if you have a tendency to become upset while driving, you’re more likely to be the kind of parent who explodes in anger at your kids’ sports matches.

Research by kinesiology Ph.D student Jay Goldstein of the University of Maryland School of Public Health found that ego defensiveness, one of the triggers that ignites road rage, also kicks off parental “sideline rage,” and that a parent with a control-oriented personality is more likely to react to that trigger by becoming angry and aggressive.

By surveying parents at youth soccer games in suburban Washington, D.C., Goldstein found that parents became angry when their ego got in the way. “When they perceived something that happened during the game to be personally directed at them or their child, they got angry.” says Goldstein. “That’s consistent with findings on road rage.”

And the parents who Goldstein defines as control-oriented were far more likely to take something personally and flare up at referees, opposing players, and even their own kids, than autonomy-oriented parents, who take greater responsibility for their own behavior.

“In general, control-oriented people are the kind who try to ‘keep up with the Joneses,’” Goldstein says. “They have a harder time controlling their reactions. They more quickly become one of ‘those’ parents than the parents who are able to separate their ego from their kids and events on the field.”

However, Goldstein says, even autonomy-oriented parents get angry, and when they do, ego defensiveness is the trigger. “While they’re more able to control it, once they react to the psychological trigger, the train has already left the station.”

### **Effect on Kids**

Fan rage in professional sports has been studied, but there is little data on why parents erupt in anger at their kids’ sports matches, something that’s happening more often, according to coaches.

“What effect does that have on the kids? Parents have tremendous influence over how their child interprets an experience by what parents do and say,” says Goldstein, who once ran youth soccer events professionally. His interest in finding out more about parental anger started with an incident at one of those tournaments.

“A parent snapped and struck a child, not her own. I thought ‘there’s more to this than being a bad parent.’ What would trigger that kind of reaction?”

### **Getting Angry**

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In 2004, Goldstein enlisted voluntary input from 340 parents attending their kids' soccer games in the Washington suburbs. Before the game, parents filled out a questionnaire that would identify them as either control or autonomy oriented.

As soon as the game ended, parents answered another questionnaire that revolved around what, if anything, during the course of the game may have caused them to become angry, defined as "an emotional state that varies in intensity from mild irritation to intense fury and rage."

More than half of the parents, 53 percent, reported getting angry, to some degree, during the game. The sources of the anger were most often the referee and their own children's teams. Most parents reported getting only slightly angry for less than two minutes.

About 40 percent of the parents reported responding to their anger with actions that ranged from muttering to themselves to yelling and walking toward the field.

"Regardless of their personality type, all parents were susceptible to becoming more aggressive as a result of viewing actions on the field as affronts to them or their kids," said Goldstein. "However, that being said, it took autonomy-oriented parents longer to get there as compared to the control-oriented parents."

### **Interventions**

Goldstein hopes to follow with more studies that look at other geographic areas, populations and sports. "This study was predominantly white middle class parents," he says.

He also hopes to study effects of sideline rage on the kids. "Parents won't change until they realize they're hurting their children."

Goldstein's goal is to use his findings to develop interventions that can help parents recognize the onset of anger triggers and control their reactions.

Co-author on the paper is Seppo E. Iso-Ahola, professor in the kinesiology department of the University Of Maryland School Of Public Health.

### **Jay Goldstein's tips for not becoming one of those parents**

When you feel your anger rising at something you see on the field:

- ◆ Controlled deep breathing exercises (inhale for 4 seconds and exhale for 8 seconds)
- ◆ Suck on a lollipop (Occupies your mouth and reminds you that you're there for your child.)
- ◆ Visualize a relaxing experience like floating on water.
- ◆ Repeat a calm word or phrase.

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- ◆ Do yoga-like muscle stretches.
- ◆ Replace angry thoughts with rational ones, such as “This is my child’s game, not mine,” or “Mistakes are opportunities to learn.”
- ◆ Don’t say the first thing that comes into your head. Count to 10 and think about possible responses.
- ◆ If you did not see the game, first ask your child “How did you play?” rather than “Did you win?”
- ◆ Praise your child’s effort, then, maybe, comment on the results.
- ◆ Use humor, but avoid harsh or sarcastic humor. Picture the referee wearing Elton John glasses.

This research was recently published in the June issue of the Journal of Applied Social Psychology.

"I think the behavior of parents is getting worse -- the hollering and such," Rupp said. **"If I could give them one piece of advice, it would be this: The game is for the kids, so just let them play."**