

SPORTS UPDATE

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National

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Ugly Parent Syndrome

Ugly Parent Syndrome (UPS) is not a new phenomena in Australian sport, the issue has been discussed for years. Despite this fact it is debatable whether we progressed in relation to managing the dreaded syndrome.

The aim of this Update is to acknowledge the severity of the implications of UPS on sport and ascertain how sporting organisations and clubs can implement effective measures to address the problem.

1. What is UPS?

UPS is simply parents behaving poorly or in an unacceptable manner whilst attending junior sporting events. Such behaviour includes belittling, abusive and threatening attributes.

A recently reported example of UPS involved a retired AFL player who was accused of slapping and swearing at a volunteer junior umpire refereeing his son's under-8 football game.

At its most extreme, UPS has resulted in the death of a spectator. In the United States of America (where UPS is referred to as "sideline rage") a parent was convicted of murdering another spectator parent as a result of an incident at a junior ice-hockey practice match.

2. Why do we need to address UPS? – The Effects of UPS.

UPS is unacceptable behaviour in any context. Apart from being offensive, intimidating and possibly physically injurious, it is detrimental to sport.

Those affected by UPS include the children, coaches, officials, referees and other spectators ("Participants").

Sporting activities provide children with enjoyment through participation as well as fostering physical and life skills. It is important that children are encouraged to participate in sporting activities rather than being discouraged as a result of unacceptable parental behaviour.

It is necessary to recognise that UPS can lead to the loss of Participants in sport.

At junior level sport, most coaches, officials and referees are volunteers. Without the involvement of volunteers, sport, particularly at grass roots level, will suffer.

There are many issues which may deter people volunteering their time in sport. At present many volunteers are reassessing whether it is worth it given their potential legal liability in the event an injury arises.

This issue is being addressed in part by many state governments through the introduction of legislation to protect volunteer from potential liability. However, how do we protect those involved in sport from UPS?

3. Measures to overcome UPS - Things to consider.

Many sporting organisations have adopted a Code of Conduct for parents and spectators, which is an essential first step to dealing with UPS.

Such a Code will typically set out what is and what is not acceptable behaviour in terms of do's ("Do provide positive encouragement from the sideline") and don't's ("Don't interfere with the official's decisions").

However, no matter how tightly worded a Code of Conduct is, it is rendered virtually useless unless it has application to the parent group or spectators to which it is directed.

The effectiveness of a Code relies on the ability of the sporting organisation or club to enforce penalties and discipline parents for contravening the Code.

The most important thing to consider when developing a Code of Conduct is how the Code can be enforced.

An effective Code of Conduct must:

- i) impose penalties or some type of disciplinary action on offending parents; and
- ii) be binding on parents and require them to comply with the Code.

Where a parent has no connection with the sporting organisation or club (other than having a child participating in the sport) there will be no enforceable means to penalise or discipline the parent for contravening a Code of Conduct.

In order for a Code of Conduct to have effect the sporting organisation or club must have the authority to impose penalties on the parent (such authority will typically be found in its constitution) and there must be a binding relationship between the parent and the sporting organisation or club (this will typically be a contractual relationship). Without this contractual link, a Code of Conduct may not be enforceable.

It is worthwhile involving parents in the drafting of the Code of Conduct. This will enable them to provide practical feedback on what should be included in the Code and how it should operate. Including parents in the development of the Code will also provide them with some ownership over the Code, which should encourage them to accept and comply with the Code.

Implementation of a Code of Conduct is essential to the fight against UPS. Once an appropriate enforceable Code is developed it is necessary to educate Participants of its existence and purpose.

It is essential to recognise that the ultimate aim in dealing with UPS is to retain Participants in the sport.

In developing the penalties to be imposed on offending parents it is necessary to consider the possible flow on effect on their children. For example a Code of Conduct which bans contravening parents attending any activities conducted by the sporting organisation or club may result in the child being removed from the activities by the parents.

10 Steps to developing and implementing an effective Code of Conduct:

1. Clearly state who the Code applies to.
2. Specify what is acceptable and unacceptable behaviour.
3. Determine what authority the club or organisation has to enforce the Code (constitution).
4. Ascertain how parents will be bound by the Code (contractual relationship, ie membership or registration forms).
5. Establish the penalties for contravening the Code.
6. Establish who will deal with offending parents.
7. State the procedure to deal with persons contravening the code.
8. Consider how the parents will be educated about the Code.
9. Encourage parents to be actively involved in implementing the Code (ie: sideline monitor to encourage positive support from spectators).
10. Consider the impact on the children participating!

For further information please contact Selina Ross at Rigby Cooke on (03) 9321 7887.

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