

Parental Wrath

Written by Jenni Person, BT Contributor
May 2018

A basketball mom is shocked at behavior in the stands



I've been thinking a lot lately about the issue my co-columnist, Stuart Sheldon, addressed a few years ago in this space: "No more meaningless rewards and praise unless the kids truly earn it." The entitlement and self-righteousness bred by the trend of "participation awards" is bad for our culture and for future generations.

Stuart goes on to outline how through this practice we are "overpraising and trying to keep our kids happy all the time, and 'protecting' them from life...when they never grasp the concept of having to do something in order to get a reward or praise."

Meanwhile, having now become a basketball mom, I'm seeing the complete opposite happening. While I don't really understand a whole lot about the game, I'm still pretty sure that what I see is a lot of parents behaving *really* badly in the stands.

At tournaments I attend in South Florida, there's always at least one or two parents being particularly hard on their kids from the sidelines. At more far-flung tournaments, I don't recall seeing it at all, but at home league games, that's where it's the worst. I cringe inside when I hear the way some parents berate their kids from the stands with criticism and name-calling, exclaiming expletives as they express their own frustration.

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In some cases these are the same parents who overprotect these same kids in other ways. How can a parent coddle a kid by, for example, not letting that kid walk the six blocks to basketball from school by himself or herself (building independence, self-confidence, and self-esteem) because the kid is so precious and fragile, and then turn around and treat that kid like garbage?

A few years back I witnessed a dad of one of the boys in my son's social group call to a few of them he was driving home. He was ready to leave a birthday party so he needed to gather them, "Let's go, *girls!*" he called out to alert three or four boys as they delayed departure while tossing a football around the adults as we stood and chatted.

I was appalled by this level of misogyny and homophobia from my own generation and community, but I was also appalled because this dad was a part of a family that was well known to be *the* most overprotective at the time, the most overly coddling of their kids. This was an "our kids don't drive with anyone but us, apply hand sanitizer before getting in our car and then again before entering our house, our kids don't do sleepovers" kind of family. They were definitely the kind of family of the participation-award mentality. And yet here was this dad mentally abusing his (and other people's) kids. I heard him do this again and again, and every time as the hairs on my back stood up, I was flummoxed by this contradiction.

It's definitely one thing -- and quite necessarily -- to abandon the practice of participation awards and overpraise to move away from insulating our kids from the realities of life. They need to learn how to cope and manage with failures and disappointments and imperfections and surprises on the bumpy road of life. This is how they learn to be successful, as Stuart underscored in his column.

But the opposite extreme is problematic as well. We can't express violent anger and disappointment so lightly and normally, either. We want them to learn how to succeed in the name of success, not simply in order to avoid their parents' wrath or demeaning verbal attacks. Also, trust me, if your kids screw up on the basketball court (or anywhere else for that matter), they are feeling badly enough about themselves already. That comes naturally with kid-hood, especially for tweens and teens.

As I said above, I don't really know a lot about this game. Thus, now that I find myself spending a lot of time watching basketball unprepared, thanks to the tennis and field hockey of my own youth, I have developed the approach of just watching the movement. And it's all beautiful,

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whether or not a single point is ever scored.

These human bodies, created by other human bodies and nurtured by our love, are stunning in motion. And I'm pretty sure my son knows I feel that way. He gives me a lot to cheer about in the traditional ways on the court, too, and he knows I'm proud of his particular baller prowess. He also knows the tremendous joy I get from witnessing a reverse layup -- because of the choreography.

So please, fellow parents, just watch your kids soar and leap and create beautiful shapes and rhythm on the court. That's all you need to do. Shut up and enjoy the grace and the wonder of it all.

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