Parents/guardians arguably have the most significant influence over their children and consequently play a crucial role in their child's development. Whilst sports coaches have also been identified as being in a position of influence over young people, due to the limited contact time that they have with the young people particularly in grassroots sport, having a strong relationship with the young people's parents/guardians is of particular importance. Consider the average grassroots coach who will see their players for a 1 hour training session and 3 hours on a match day per week. This equates to the coach having contact with his/her players for 2.4% of their week, and therefore emphasises how parents are influential. Despite this, through the many discussions that I have each week with academics, coaches, and mentors one belief continuously emerges, 'We [coaches] don't engage with parents enough'.

The coach-parent-athlete triad (see Figure 1) has been referred to as the “athletic triangle” (Smith, Smoll & Smith, 1989). The nature of the interactions between the members of this triangle can have significant consequences for the psychological development of the child (Davis & Jowett, 2010; Weiss, 2003). Indeed, coaches are in a position to channel parents’ genuine concerns and good intentions in a way that heightens the value of young peoples' sport experiences (Smoll, Cumming & Smith 2011). Further, parents can influence the quality of the coach-athlete relationship through their perceptions of and feelings towards the coach. If parents feel a connection and understanding with the coach they are far more likely to be complementary about them and if parents portray a positive perception of the coach their children are far more likely to possess feelings of trust, closeness, commitment and complementarity which in turn will enhance their confidence and motivation and subsequently increase the likelihood of them continuing in football. More importantly, when the going gets tough and young players experience stressful situations and/or perceived failure, more often than not it's the support of their parents that has the greatest impact on them be it positive or negative.

Figure 1 - The Athletic Triangle

Parents are the main support network for their child and can look out for their own child's best interests. They can be forgiven for only seeing experiences from their own child's viewpoint and can be forgiven for unintentionally forgetting about the other children in the team. After all, we all want what's best for our children. As coaches, we are taught to be inclusive, to understand each players perspective, and to challenge them appropriately based upon their needs so that their learning experience is maximised. This in itself can be tough and when the need to manage the expectations of parents is added its is understandable why so many coaches opt for the easier option of minimal interaction with parents. However, given that the primary objective of both coaches and parents is to provide young people with a positive and fulfilling experience of football (sport) a common sense approach would be to work together. Below I will outline some ideas for engaging with parents and encouraging them to play an active role in their child's development.

Pre-season coach-parent meeting

Holding a pre-season coach-parent meeting to initiate open, healthy communication with them, can
improve parents’ understanding of youth sports and gain cooperation and support for the approach taken by the coach for developing young players. Firstly, it's important to show your gratitude and that you value the parents' contribution. Thank them for their support and the commitment they will show in bringing their children to training and matches throughout the season. If your club has a philosophy this meeting would provide the ideal opportunity to articulate this. For those coaching at a club without a philosophy, outline your coaching philosophy. When doing so consider, what is it I'm trying to do? How will I help their children? What can they expect of me? What do I expect of them and their children? How can they help enhance their child's experience and subsequently learning? Have a 1 page handout containing the key information for parents to take away. Even better would be if this one pager become part of the parents code of conduct.

Make time to speak to parents

After initiating the relationship through the parents meeting, maintain regular communication. Make yourself available to them should they wish to discuss anything but more importantly keep them informed of what's going on in sessions and matches. Be smart in your planning and approach to sessions and you'll have time to speak with parents during sessions which means you don't need to find yet more time. Simple arrival activities that the players' can lead themselves provide an ideal opportunity where coaches can inform parents of the session aim and learning outcomes. Why not share a copy of your session plan with them and take 5 minutes to explain it? This will help parents understand the key messages which may lead to reinforcement of learning away from your session, increasing the impact of 'your messages'.

Include them in team talks/debriefs

This will ensure consistency in the messages you communicate as parents will hear the same information as players directly from you. This can help reduce the instances whereby parents receive contrasting amounts of information that are often told in numerous different ways depending on who communicates the information. Involving parents in team talks can also serve to inform them of the way you are approaching each game, the information being given to each player, and the challenges set for the team, units, and individuals on match day. As a result, parents will hopefully be less likely to 'coach' their children from the touchline or at least it will be far more likely that any instances where this does happen will be reinforcement of and consistent to your information. Therefore, players will receive 'one message' as opposed to several contrasting ones. You can promote this approach through asking parents to only offer encouragement from the touchline (To view a video demonstrating this please click here). In addition having the parents present can be beneficial for helping the players to understand the information your giving. More often than not if players don't understand something it's because we [coaches] haven't explained it well enough. Who better to relay this information in a way that each player understands than their own parents?

Parents providing feedback to their child

However you decide match day challenges, whether you set them for players, you ask the players to set them for themselves, or you set them together it can be difficult to provide meaningful feedback to all players throughout/after each match. Maybe parents have a role to play here? I'm sure many of you have been on the receiving end of a series of questions from your parents after a match like why you didn't pass instead of shooting, dribble instead of passing and such like. Some may have experienced even sterner talks after a game particularly when your team didn't win. Most of the time young children don't remember the instances that this questioning refers to and even when they do concentrating conversation around the negative aspects of a game (if not managed correctly) will often lead to a lack of confidence and subsequently over a prolonged period motivation towards playing. So what can we encourage parents to do?

I have previously asked the parents of my players to observe their child and offer feedback against that
players individual challenge for the game (e.g., if a young player had an individual challenge of successfully taking an opponent on 1v1, his/her parent would record how many times they had managed to do so). The focus then is on successful performance with a view to increasing confidence and each player working to achieve their own challenge as well as their team’s. The conversations between players and parents can then be more meaningful and the feedback offered to the player can serve to set targets for future games (e.g., number of successful take ons), where players aim to beat their last score making learning self-referenced and match day about more than just the score.

In summary, as coaches we must strive to develop strong relationships with the parents of our players through involving them in their child's learning. The above tips are just some of the things that you might do as coaches and the list is by no means exhaustive. When the time comes when many of you are preparing for next season I would urge you to consider how much you involve parents and challenge yourself to try some of the above (Please let me know how you get on!!)

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