



Handling Parents' Complaints About Playing Time

This resource stems from a question submitted to the Ask PCA blog. Responses come from our experts including PCA Trainers, who lead live group workshops for coaches, parents, administrators and student-athletes.

"I coach an 11-year-old travel team. Before the season, I told parents that players would not necessarily receive equal playing time the way they do in our house league. The parents say OK to my face or in e-mail, but mid-season, some parents are complaining about their children's playing time.

"One parent asked why his son sat out 2 of the 6 innings, while another player didn't sit out at all, and I explained the only player who did not sit out was the catcher because our other catcher was injured. One player's parents cause a scene, asking their son from behind the bench, 'Why are you sitting out again? If you're sitting out again, we're going home.' I don't have any problems with the kids. How do I deal with the parents?"

PCA Response by Joe Scally, PCA Trainer–Chicago

When setting expectations with the team in your pre-season meeting, it's important to make sure that your criteria for playing time apply to everyone. It is easy for parents to smile and nod about limited playing time when they believe the rules do not apply to their children. Your written parent pledge (see PCA's sample on the Coach's Tools in the "Free Tips and Tools" section of our website) could include a section on playing time.

Nearing the end of an intense tournament game I was coaching a few years ago, I was talking to a player on the bench when her father approached and said, "If they don't want to play you we're going home." He walked away, and before I could say anything further, his daughter followed.

She was a starter on a lower level team whom we had invited to play with us, but she was used to playing whole games. While she had been on the bench for about 15 minutes at the point when her father came over, she already had played about half of the game...as much time as most of our regular players. I was about to send her back in and was telling her what to expect in the closing minutes. She had played well in a game that was exciting and a lot of fun.

At the time I was angry with her father for acting inappropriately by coming to the bench to take his daughter away. He gave her the wrong message by encouraging her to disrespect her coach and teammates. He embarrassed her and soured a good experience.

continues

Your situation got me reflecting on how I could have better handled mine. Most importantly, in the course of elevating that player to our team, I could have taken more time to tell the dad why I asked his daughter to play and what to expect. I could have told him that this was an opportunity for his daughter to learn by practicing and playing with committed players of equal or greater talent. That different coaches would give her some valuable new perspectives. That on our team, everyone played significant minutes, but very few played the whole game. That many factors determined playing time, including effort, attitude, skill, and the needs of the team, and that those criteria would apply to his daughter. That we wanted to teach some life lessons along with soccer skills. We coaches had told the player these things, and she understood, but we assumed incorrectly that her father also understood.

I should also have told him that parents may not approach the bench during games. That it's best to discuss matters with the coach at a scheduled time, in private, away from the field. That as a coach, I'm open to discussing any issues, but would prefer that players, not parents, raise issues about playing time, because a player learning how to ask a coach about playing time learns a great life lesson. That a parent shouldn't put a child in the middle by openly criticizing the coach's decisions. Some parents need to hear these messages over and over. It's the coach's job to educate the parents for the benefit of the players.

PCA Trainer Joe Scally is a longtime soccer coach based in the Chicago area. Joe spent several years as PCA's national director of training.

To read more questions and answers like this, or to submit your own question to the Ask PCA blog, visit:

www.positivecoach.org/our-tools/ask-pca