

# A Basketball Coaching Guide - How to Work with Parents the "Right Way" and Avoid Unpleasant Problems

- By Jeff Haefner

As a coach, working with parents just comes with the territory. But, handling overzealous parents is never fun. And you know what we're talking about here. These are the parents who show up at practice demanding to know why their son or daughter isn't getting more playing time. Or, the ones that come up to you at halftime to let you know the combinations you used during the first half aren't working, and they had some ideas that might win the game during the second half if you wanted to hear them.

You know, *those* parents.

Although working with these parents is never going to be our favorite thing, it is something that we have to learn to get better at. The good news is that there *are* steps you can take to cut down on the number of unpleasant instances during a season.

These steps and tips can help you not only retain your authority and credibility as basketball coach, but help improve communication between you, your players, and their parents. And open communication is the most important tool you have when it comes to working with parents.

## **The Details Depend on Your Situation**

Below you will find excellent strategies to prevent parent problems and actually get parents on your side.

However, the exact details of your strategies will depend on the age of your players, the type of league you are in, and your coaching philosophy.

For example, a youth team that allows for equal playing time will use a completely different parent letter than a high school varsity team that is expected to win. So choose the tips below that apply to your situation.

And although this report teaches how to handle difficult parents, it's important to realize that you can't, and shouldn't try, to please everyone. It's vital that you stand up for what you believe in and stay true to the coaching techniques you think work best. After all, *you're* the coach, not the parents.

So, let's jump in and learn how to make our coaching season go a bit smoother!

# 20 Surefire Strategies to Work with Difficult Parents (And Avoid Problems Before They Arise)

## 1. Have a Parent Meeting Before the Season Starts

You can nip a lot of problems in the bud simply by meeting with parents at the start of the season. Get to know them, and spend some time talking about your past coaching experience and how you're going to manage this season. Make sure you go over what you expect from players, and what kind of practice schedule you're going to keep.

### What else should you bring up in the pre-season meeting?

- **What you expect from the parents** . They need to understand that they have the responsibility to get their child to practice on time, that their child will need equipment to play (like shoes, uniform, etc.), that they need to support their child by attending games, praising their hard work, etc. Make them understand that they're part of the team, too.
- **Review your guidelines for playing time.** If you make sure all the kids get equal minutes, let the parents know. If you base playing time on attendance, work ethic, off season participation, skill level, or anything of those things, let the parents know. Lay down the law now and avoid issues in the future.
- **Go over your school's athletic department policy.** If there are any fees or rules parents need to know about, now is the time to go over them. As an example, player eligibility is an important topic to cover.
- **Go over your own rules and expectations.** What are your rules about being late to practice or missing practice? What are your rules about communication? Do you require players to always approach you with issues before the parents? Do you allow parents to talk with you before or after games? Go over all these things so parents know what to expect.
- **Make it clear you can't drop off players.** You're the coach, not the carpool service. Make sure parents understand that they must be there to pick their kids up after practice. Dropping off your players isn't part of your job.
- **Set guidelines for game days.** Make sure parents understand that you expect them to behave on game days. This means positive cheering, not putting down other players, no yelling at the refs, and no criticizing you or other coaches. And, put your foot down about "sideline coaching" from parents. This only confuses their child. Some coaches even create a "parent code of conduct", that lists rules for how parents should conduct themselves through the season.
- **Review the key points of your documents.** You'll want to review the key points of your player handbook and parent letter. You might even want to read it to them. The point is that you want to be sure each parent has been exposed to your rules more than once. (Samples of player handbooks and parent letters can be found below.)
- **Review your team goals, priorities, and philosophy.** If your goals are to focus on your player's basketball development and personal development, then tell the parents. Explain what this means. Tell them about the fundamentals required to improve players in the long run. Tell them you are trying to teach honesty, work ethic, teamwork, and things that will

help your kids be successful in the future and at the most important game of all - the game of life. What are your priorities as a coach? What are your priorities for the team?

## **2. Explain Your Coaching Philosophy**

Parents and players both need to understand that playing time isn't a right, it's a privilege. So make sure this is clearly explained in the pre-season meeting with parents. Lay out exactly how you dole out playing time. Yes, it's probably going to go to the hardest workers, but what do players really have to do to earn playing time? What do they have to know? Spell it out so that there's no confusion.

If you coach a youth team and playing time is equal, parents need to know that. If not, you'll get parents that think their kids should be playing more than others (so they can win the game).

Coach Koran Godwin, of [www.JumpStartHoops.com](http://www.JumpStartHoops.com) and author of "Everyone Hates a Ball Hog but They All Love a Scorer", says that it's important to tell parents how much you truly love all the kids on the team. Emphasize that the lessons you'll be teaching them over the next few months will not only develop them as players, but as men and women. Bringing this up will help them remember that the biggest benefit of the sport isn't about winning or playing time, it's about personal development.

It's also important to explain how you feel about things like sportsmanship, honesty, and ethical behavior. These values are important in sports, and parents should know that you'll be on the lookout for these things in their kids.

It's critically important for parents to understand your philosophy. This will eliminate countless problems down the road.

## **3. Require Players to Talk With You First**

It's important to explain that if someone has a problem with their lack of playing time, the player, not the parent, should talk with you *first*. In the real world, people must know how to communicate. And, this is a skill your players have to learn on the team.

This should be a rule that you explain during your first parent meeting, put it in your handbook, and remind parents during the year.

Parents and players also need to know that you're going to be treating their kids like young men and women. Many younger players are used to having their parents "take care of things" for them (like calling the coach to get them more playing time!). Again, however, you need to make it clear that players need to speak with you first about any issues they have. If a player feels they deserve more playing time, then they should bring it up with you.

## **4. Create A Player Handbook**

If your school or sports program doesn't have any kind of player handbook created, then you need to make one before the season starts. The handbook needs to explain the rules of behavior, punishments, scheduling, and practices times. It also needs to detail game day

expectations. For instance, will your players be required to dress up for travel to and from games? Will travel with the team on the bus to and from games be mandatory?

The more players and parents know about what you expect, the fewer problems you'll have later on. See the next tip for some sample handbooks.

## 5. Create A Contract

After you create the player handbook, you need to create a contract for players and parents to sign. The contract will say that the players and their parents have read through the handbook, and promise to abide by the rules you've laid out.

Here are links to a few sample contracts and player handbooks for you to take a look at. You can use these contracts as examples and then change them to fit the needs of your athletic program.

[www.breakthroughbasketball.com/coaching/mustangtryoutpacket.pdf](http://www.breakthroughbasketball.com/coaching/mustangtryoutpacket.pdf) (Provided by Shane Matzen of [www.mustanggroundball.com](http://www.mustanggroundball.com))

[www.mahoopsters.org/mahpages/info/pdf/mahhandbook.pdf](http://www.mahoopsters.org/mahpages/info/pdf/mahhandbook.pdf)

## 6. The Coaches Constitution

Coach Koran Godwin has an interesting way to handle these issues in the pre-season. Some of these suggestions have already been mentioned in this report, but I think he has a very interesting approach to attack the problem. Here's how it works in his own words:

*In the pre-season every parent is happy. Their son just made the high school team and no one (including the kids) knows who is going to get the bulk of the playing time. This is the perfect time to let the parents and players know your philosophy and guidelines.*

*a. My number one goal was to show the parents that I love each and every one of the kids the same and that playing time has nothing to do with my personal views on a kid. I emphasize my will to develop them as young men and the lessons that they will learn over the next few months will prepare them for life.*

*b. After I dispel the myth that coach just doesn't like or care about my son, I give the parent the Law of the land. **"Do not call me about any playing time issues unless your kid talks to me first!"** I explain to the parents that in order to prepare these kids for the future, the player has to be willing to communicate with adults and ask what they can do to earn more playing time. As parents they only see 10% of what their kid is doing. The 90% is in practice where John has to compete for playing time everyday. He knows exactly why Larry is getting more playing time than him but he doesn't want to tell his parents he isn't working as hard.*

*c. I tell players that I am going to treat them like young men and allow them to compete for playing time. If at any point in the season they feel that they deserve more, please approach me after practice and state your case. The player knows that once he states his case, the spotlight is now on him to perform and compete with the person in front of them. This method is especially effective for those kids who are used to having their parents get things done for them.*

*d. The coaches' constitution fosters an environment of accountability and responsibility. I let the parents know that growth in these two areas will help mature their kids into productive members of society. I have had many conversations with kids over the years that have thanked me for giving them a platform to compete and mature as men.*

## **7. Send a Parent Letter**

You should write up a good parent letter (or maybe even contract) and send it to everyone. Not only can this prevent problems down the road, but this can also be a powerful tool that you can refer to when parents start complaining. The important thing is to document the proper things and give them to the parents so you can refer to the guidelines at a later date.

Here are a few good sample letters for you to consider:

[Positivecoach.org/uploadedFiles/Free\\_Tips\\_and\\_Tools/Coaches\\_Tools/ParentLetter.pdf](http://Positivecoach.org/uploadedFiles/Free_Tips_and_Tools/Coaches_Tools/ParentLetter.pdf)

[www.positivecoach.org/ConPics/Con79/parent\\_pledge.pdf](http://www.positivecoach.org/ConPics/Con79/parent_pledge.pdf)

<http://www.qcbaseball.com/tools/Parentletter1.aspx>

## **8. Implement the Value Point System**

For experienced and more competitive teams (NOT early youth teams), one of the best ways to get parents to stop complaining about playing time is the implement the Value Point System. It's a simple statistical system used in conjunction with simple coaching tactics and practice drills to improve player performance.

The system is a coach's dream because it puts an end to disagreements about playing time. If someone does not agree with your decisions, simply show them the player's rating.

The players will all know why they are not getting playing time. If parents don't like the amount of time their child is getting, just tell them, "All your son or daughter needs to do is raise their VPS score. Here it is right here. If he/she does, then I'll find them minutes."

To learn more about the system check out this link:

<https://www.breakthroughbasketball.com/pr/value-point-system.html>

## **9. Know Your System**

Before you start your first practice make sure you clearly understand the rules and policies that are in place in your school district and athletic department. How do they enforce school policy and behavioral problems? Do any of the rules/procedures you have in your handbook conflict with school district or athletic department rules?

You need to have complete support from the administration if you're going to be handling parental complaints. If a parent goes over your head, then your administration needs to refer them right back to you.

## **10. Let Parents Watch Practice**

Now this might sound like a recipe for disaster, but it's not. Letting interested parents watch practice time will enable them to see how you run the show, how players behave, how you critique, and how you make decisions about who gets to play and who doesn't.

Most importantly, parents will begin to "buy in" to your philosophy and tactics. As we all know, a big part of coaching is selling. And while you are selling your players on your philosophy, with enough repetitions, the parents will get sold on your philosophies and on you as a coach. Sometimes they just need to get to know you, understand you, and learn about your program. Letting them watch your practices is a great way to do that.

If you let them watch, however, make sure they understand that they have to be quiet.

## **11. Sell Your System**

You want to know who your *biggest* fans are? Your players. If they trust you and believe in what you're doing, then they're going to defend you against their over-zealous parents. So, make sure your players understand why you're doing things the way you are. Sell your system to them, and they'll sell it to their parents.

## **12. Get Tough On Complaints**

Coach Don Kelbick, of [www.donkelbickbasketball.com](http://www.donkelbickbasketball.com), has been coaching for over 20 years. He says that it's vital coaches lay down the law.

Although it's important to listen to what parents have to say, it's also important to stand up for what you're doing. Remember, **you're the coach**. If parents don't like what you're doing, then they can put their child in another school system to play under another coach.

Sound extreme? Well, sometimes giving parents a dose of reality can help bring them back down to earth.

## **13. Promote the Family Atmosphere**

Many coaches try to promote a family atmosphere during games. If you want to, and you can pull it off, it could very well endear you to many of the parents. So, let them attend practice, and create a special section for them to sit in during games. This extra effort on your part might go much further than you think.

## **14. Find Opportunities and Playing Time for the Second Team**

If you're in a situation where you are not able to get everyone playing time, then you need to find opportunities for everyone. As a [basketball coach](#), you owe it to the players on the team to get opportunities.

Find more JV games. Play a 5<sup>th</sup> quarter with the second group. Contact other coaches to arrange "2<sup>nd</sup> team" games. Arrange scrimmages.

Some kids just need an opportunity and need confidence. You'd be amazed how many players develop late and you never know who those kids will be.

If you never play these kids you are taking away their opportunity. If they bust their butts in practice, then you owe it to them to find them games! Not enough coaches make the effort needed to get all their players plenty of experience.

### **15. Designate A Parent Liaison**

Coach Koran Godwin says that having a parent liaison is vital. Think about it; you're basically the end-all, be-all of the team. A parent can start talking to you after practice about the upcoming holiday schedule and end up screaming at you because their kid isn't getting enough playing time.

This is why you should assign one parent, preferably the parent of a kid who plays a lot, to be your point of contact. Any communication from parents needs to go through your liaison first. He or she filters out the fluff and then sends the rest on to you.

### **16. Provide Parents with Tips to Contribute**

Simply offering parents some tips and guidance can improve the attitude and moral of everyone involved. All most all parents truly want to help but they don't usually know how. By educating them you can divert their energy towards things that will be positive to your program. Here's an example of some parent tips that you can offer:

[www.championsofcharacter.org/d/NAIACHampionsofCharacter\\_TipsForParents.pdf](http://www.championsofcharacter.org/d/NAIACHampionsofCharacter_TipsForParents.pdf)

### **17. Stay Out of the Stands**

Coach Godwin also recommends that you stay out of the stands during the season. After all, plenty of parents will want to talk with you before or after games. But, is this really where your attention needs to be?

Probably not. You need to be focusing on your players, not their parents. If you want to get to know your players' parents, then summer and fall leagues are the best time to do it since those are generally looser and almost everyone has a chance to play.

### **18. No Talking on Game Days**

You should establish a rule that parents are not allowed to speak with you about playing time or any issues on "game day". Those conversations must be scheduled for another day. Emotions are too high during game time and these issues can be handled much more effectively at a different time.

So, make it a rule that you won't talk with any parents before or after games unless it's an emergency. And, it's smart to bring this up in your initial parent meeting, as well as putting it in your handbook. Remind parents the reason for this: you're there to help their children become better players.

### **19. Schedule A Private Meeting**

If a parent comes to you and wants to start yelling on the court, absolutely insist they set up a private meeting with you the next day. It's not good for the players, and the other parents, to witness an argument. So, take it off the court. Setting up a next-day meeting will also give you time to prepare.

Before you meet with that parent, spend some time thinking about why they might be upset. Is it their child's playing time? Is there a conflict with another player? Coming up with various scenarios can help you see things from that parent's point of view.

It's also a good idea if you can get someone else (like an assistant coach or athletic director) to sit in on the meeting as well. This might help the parent be more objective, as well as providing you with another set of ears.

## **20. Calmly Handle Blowouts**

No matter how hard you work to prevent it, there are always going to be some irate or overzealous parents to handle. It just comes with the territory of being a coach. So how can you handle the big blowouts when they happen?

First, *listen*. Let the parent have their say and don't interrupt them.

When it's your turn to speak, then explain your point of view slowly and clearly. And, keep your focus on their child. *Don't* do comparisons between their child and another player.

If the parent starts raising their voice, then resist the urge to match their tone. Keep speaking in a calm voice at normal volume. And, try to keep your comments on the positive end.

You can even offer to allow the parent to come to practice so they can see what is actually happening. Besides, how can the parent have an opinion unless they have been to all the practices?

At the end of the meeting, make sure you thank the parent for voicing their concerns with you, and let them know you'll take them under consideration. After the parent has left, ask the person who sat in on the meeting how they thought you did. Was there anything you could have done better or differently? Getting this honest feedback can really help you handle these challenging situations in the future.

## **Coaches / Resources Contributing to this Report**

Here's a list of coaches and resources that have somewhere along the way contributed or given us ideas for this report.

Coach Koran Godwin - [www.JumpStartHoops.com](http://www.JumpStartHoops.com)

Don Kelbick - [www.breakthroughbasketball.com/aboutus.html#DonKelbick](http://www.breakthroughbasketball.com/aboutus.html#DonKelbick)

Shane Matzen - [www.mustanggroundball.com](http://www.mustanggroundball.com)

Jim McGannon - <http://mybasketballbasics.com>

Ronn Wyckoff - [www.top-basketball-coaching.com](http://www.top-basketball-coaching.com)

[Positive Coaching Alliance](#)

Ken Sartini