

THE HOCKEY MOM

By Christie Casciano Burns

Bouncing Bullies From The Game Is A Team Effort

A HEARTBREAKING STORY CAME IN FROM A HOCKEY MOM who was wishing to remain anonymous given the circumstances.

Her family had just moved to town, and for some reason their son became the target of a relentless bully. (As if moving wasn't stressful enough.) After one practice, she found her teen sitting in a ditch, hiding, and fighting back tears. That time in the bully's crosshairs had convinced him that he was tired of playing hockey and just didn't want to do it anymore.

The telltale signs of bullying aren't always visible. Kids may say they're too sick to skate, come up with reasons to skip practices or games, or withdraw during a team drill.

"When these behaviors are observed, parents and coaches need to immediately open lines of communication," says Charice Paoli, Illinois' Glacier Ice Arena's Learn To Play director.

Paoli sets the strict zero-tolerance tone before the first practice of the season. All players have to sign contracts before the season starts, and acknowledge they will not bully a player, parent or referee during their time as a hockey player. If it happens, a suspension or removal from the team will be enforced.

"Setting clear expectations and describing the consequences to breaking team rules will set a strong foundation for a successful season," Paoli says.

Rules—along with meaningful conversations—can go a long way toward raising what USA Hockey's SafeSport Program Manager Don Pino calls, "emotionally intelligent children."



"For example, coaches could have a team meeting, talk to their players about respect, and define for them what attitude, friendship and kindness mean," Pino says. "If the coach talks to them and develops really good communication, then he or she can help solve bullying."

"Setting clear expectations is key. Zero tolerance for yelling, cussing, cyberbullying, racial abuse, theft, things like that—and if it happens, guess what? You're going to be cut from the team."

It's probably no surprise to learn that the teen who was bullied took the brunt of the abuse in the locker room, where there adults presence may not be readily available. Bullying, hazing, abuse and harassment can be minimized by having a monitor present at all times.

"A locker room monitor can be a parent, assistant coach or a team manager who is SafeSport trained and has gone through background screening," Pino says.

Coaches also need to monitor the pulse of the team, keeping an ear to the ground, whether it's on the bench or in the locker room to foster an atmosphere of trust and respect.

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OCTOBER IS NATIONAL BULLYING PREVENTION MONTH, a time to focus and raise awareness on bullying. To learn more go to StopBullying.gov.

"If a coach maintains a positive and enthusiastic attitude, it will be infectious to players," Paoli adds. "Once players feel safe, then the fun can take place."

Among the many maxims of the legendary coach John Wooden was, "happiness begins where selfishness ends." Unfortunately, at its core, bullying is just a residual of selfishness.

It's important to have conversations with our children about bullying, and why it isn't enough to just not-be-the-bully, but also stand up for those being bullied. It's another form of strengthening the team.

Or, as Coach Wooden liked to put it, "If you don't have time to do it right, when will you have time to do it over?"

That applies not only to drills in practice, but to everyday life. ☆

▶ Safe Sport Resources About Bullying: usahockey.com/resourcesanddownloads