

“Zero Tolerance” Eliminating Problem Parent Behavior During Sanctioned Junior Tournament Play

Recently a well-written article was passed on to me about problem parent behavior in youth sports by the organization “Changing the Game Project” (changingthegameproject.com). In essence, the article suggests that parents must know their role (as spectators) and refrain from behaviors more aligned with coaching and officiating, and that *zero tolerance* of overt displays of behavior falling outside of this defined role must be enforced and supported by youth sport governing bodies, and possibly state law.

Those familiar with my research may recall such a recommendation contained in a Quality Management Report (QMR) presented to the Chicago District Tennis Association (CDTA). This report, resulting from my investigation of sanctioned junior tournament tennis in our district was submitted to the CDTA for review in 2017. Included was a substantial amount of information revealing the genesis of such behavior as well as its negative effect on the junior tournament tennis experience (QMR pg. 11).

The report generated only a modicum of interest; subsequently, little discussion surrounding its recommendation and accompanying research-supported rationale ensued. However, incentivized by this article, I have chosen to revisit this topic and share my view on why zero tolerance is necessary and why educative initiatives in and of themselves may be ineffectual in eliminating problem parent behavior during sanctioned junior tournament play.

Unlike many well-intended attempts to address this issue that seemingly appeal to a sense of emotion within the sanctioned junior tournament community my view represents an appeal to a sense of reason in our community by addressing this malaise within a psychosocial and socioenvironmental theoretical framework. I caution that in order for this view to be appreciated and understood, emotion must be set aside (temporarily, at least), and its content dissected through the fullest use of one’s rational faculty.

I begin by addressing a theme central to the mission of Changing the Game Project (CTGP) and similar organizations seeking to improve the organized youth sports experience.

Visit any such website and what will be found is a plethora of initiatives and information geared toward educating parents about their role and how they should behave during their child’s sporting event. Such education initiatives are also supported by empirical studies related to problem parent behavior and how it might be addressed. I am certain such efforts have elicited positive change in the behavior of some youth sports parents. Yet, the problem such as depicted in the video on CTGP’s website continues to surface.

The persistence of problem parent behavior during junior tournament play, in spite of on-site parent-centered education initiatives regarding proper behavior such as signage, pre-tournament speeches, parent pledges etc. has led me to conclude that such initiatives may have little measurable (positive) impact on the *intended* audience. What follows is an explanation as to why “good parents” often behave “badly” during sanctioned junior tournament play and appear to be impervious to such initiatives.

Behaviorally, two conditions present themselves during sanctioned junior tournament play, conditions which lead to and sustain problem parent behavior. The first is *global aspirational amnesia*, a condition conceptualized and modeled after Kahn's theory of *environmental generational amnesia* (2002). Environmental generational amnesia evolved from a child study of pollution in Houston Texas, where findings suggested that, even growing up in one of the most polluted cities in the United States and possessing a fair amount of knowledge of its harmful environmental effect, a disproportionate number of children in the study failed to acknowledge this effect on their health. It is theorized that gradual increased exposure to such conditions over time led to a gradual change in children's perceptions about their immediate environment, *resulting in a normative shift in terms of what once constituted clean air* (Kahn, 2002).

I theorize a similar effect may be true with junior tennis parents who exhibit problem behavior during tournament play. Global aspirational amnesia describes the temporal effect of *repeated exposure to experiences shaped by an outcome-centered model on the normative behavior of a well-meaning parent*. Under this influence, a parent's behavioral reference point once centered on a child's (global) developmental needs gradually shifts towards those centered on performance outcome i.e. winning, leading to an uncompromising need for justice with line calls, score disputes, officiating decisions etc.

This serves to explain expectations and behavior exhibited during tournament play far different from that which shapes parental values on a global level. At the outset, well-meaning parents encourage and support participation in sanctioned tournament tennis in part because of a child's expressed interest in doing so, as well as seeing this as a healthy activity that can enhance socialization development. Initially, winning matches has relative importance; yet, even when repeated failure and conflict i.e. questionable line calls or officiating decisions occur, such conditions are considered part and parcel to the competitive experience and essential to adolescent development and socialization. Hence, at this stage of participation, global and competitive aspirations exist harmoniously. However, over time, as a junior's improved ability leads to better outcomes i.e. wins, I suspect repeated exposure to performance models e.g. professional tennis and other youth sports where uniformity in officiating exists leads to growing intolerance with unfavorable opponent/officiating decisions which may affect the trajectory of a match; hence the global aspirational amnesia effect.

The second condition, *habituation*, serves to explain why parent behavior resulting from global aspirational amnesia may be impervious to the intended effect of education initiatives. This imperviousness relates to *plasticity* which is our ability to transform new information into new knowledge i.e. behavior by means of cognitive flexibility or executive function (Dewey, 2004). Subsequently, this ability allows us to manipulate or control our environment through the formation of *habits* or *predispositions*, which are simply preset responses to oft repeated experiences.

In our daily lives habits become compartmentalized into three types. *Active* habits tend to be those over which we exert the most control and, typically, consistently conform to the convention of reason. It is at this level of cognitive function where plasticity is most operational. *Routine* or *unthinking* habits reflect a level of cognitive function where control is gradually relinquished and, subsequently, plasticity arrested. And as this control is relinquished, some

unthinking habits turn *bad* such that they become *disconnected from intelligence or reasoned decision-making*.

This explains problem parent behavior during tournament play. A parent's negative reaction to, say, a line call overtly directed towards a child or official is simply a good person who has temporarily succumb to the influence of global aspirational amnesia and habituation.

It is the confluence of these two conditions I contend makes zero tolerance the most effective antidote for eliminating problem parent behavior. With the possibility of self-auditing and self-initiated change temporarily suspended, no viable alternative exists. And for tournament directors who choose to cling to the notion that the constitution of a parent afflicted by these conditions might still be altered by some educative influence, I ask that such notion be supported empirically by citing examples of positive behavioral change in known problem parents who have visited your club during the past six months that can be attributed to on-site educative initiatives.

For those of you seeking further evidence in support of zero tolerance with problem parent behavior during junior tournament play, I will briefly address the role of youth sports and education within a social and global developmental framework.

As a species, our highest aim (as adults) must be that of maintaining social continuity by means of self-renewal (Dewey, 2004). Through various educative social forums the transmission of knowledge must take place from adults to youth in order that social order within civil society is sustained. In a global sense sanctioned junior tournament tennis is such a forum. Tournament play facilitates development of initiative and self-regulatory efficacy as well helping juniors learn how to resolve conflict, socialization tools which serve as the hallmark of adulthood.

Along with self-renewal, consistency with the transmission of knowledge across and within social settings is a key tenet of social continuity. The behavior of significant adults in the lives of youth, most importantly parents, looms large in terms of behaviors deemed appropriate to emulate. And inconsistency with adult messaging, such as reflected by (atypical) problem parent behavior during sanctioned junior tournament play, potentially serves to confuse youth as they continually seek (adult) guidance – through social modeling – in terms of what constitutes prosocial behavior (Bandura, 2005). Thus, consistency with adult behavior both during and away from tournament play becomes critical in terms of sustaining the fidelity of social order.

As an educative forum, the developmental needs of juniors are nurtured by creation of environmental conditions conducive to growth. This process entails (adults) manipulating conditions which promote movement toward social continuity while removing those which hinder such movement (Dewey, 2004).

The importance of this process is heightened by the *social dynamic* within the environment and how the activity of any one entity interacts with and subsequently affects the activities of all others (Dewey, 2004). Parents viewing play become an entity within the sanctioned junior tournament (social) environment and subsequently, their behavior interacts with and directly affects the activity of players (and officials) and either strengthens or weakens the fidelity of

social order. As an example, a parent's overt negative reaction to a line call made by a player or official impacts player trust behavior. Due to the socioemotional maturity level of some juniors, belief in an opponent's intent and an official's decision-making is often fragile and, due to *parent-child attachment*, easily influenced by a parent's reaction (e.g. a junior's glance into the stands after a questionable call). Often the parent's overt negative reaction subsequently leads to a junior's belief shifting from *suspicion* to *certainty* that an opponent's call was incorrect. And, unfortunately, such repeated parent behavior incentivizes a downward spiral of player trust behavior.

As a bidirectional phenomenon, parent-child attachment theory (Bowlby, 2012) suggests that even as a parent encourages a child's emerging autonomy, they still, in various ways, continue to provide a *secure base* when he is exposed to physical or emotional harm e.g. score dispute or perceived incorrect line call in tennis. As alluded to above, trust in others is strongly influenced by interaction with the environment. And in the case of a questioned line call, the parent overt reaction – positive or negative – again becomes a part of this environment. With trust in an opponent's or official's decision already in doubt, a parent's overt negative reaction (ostensibly) supports such doubt and (invariably) elevates the level of emotional distress being felt.

(An aside to the above, I suspect that negative parent behavior during play may stem in part from the effect of global aspirational amnesia. Under this influence, the drama of the moment may skew the inbred instinct to protect i.e. secure base in such a way that *a parent genuinely believes displaying negative behavior serves the best interest of their child.*)

Such overt behavior also impacts officials. A survey of USTA officials in the Chicago District conducted 4 years ago revealed that 47% expressed inappropriate parent behavior as one of the most disliked aspects of roving, possibly affecting morale, incentive to work, even retention.

If education means creating conditions conducive to growth, and this process requires removing conditions whose presence potentially alters the trajectory of such movement, I contend problem parent behavior during sanctioned junior tournament play meets the standard of proof needed to be considered a condition which much be removed.

Lastly, I draw attention to the potential socioenvironmental impact of problem parent behavior on the socioemotional or prosocial trajectory of juniors. A substantial body of literature exists suggesting that behaviorally, the trajectory of youth development is influenced by what is experienced temporally across a variety of social settings and that *the socialization activities of parents are scrutinized by youth and play a role in shaping sport-related beliefs, participation levels and enjoyment* (Kanters et al, 2008).

The presence of such evidence linking parent behavior to youth sport participation outcomes is resoundingly clear. What is not so clear, however, is the extent to which problem parent behavior during sanctioned junior tournament play contributes to negative youth behavioral outcomes. To substantiate such a link I call upon USTA leadership, with encouragement from the CDTA, to commission a (longitudinal) study to provide scientific and empirical evidence as to the impact problem parent behavior may have on junior tournament participants. (The comprehensive research study examining competitive junior tennis recently conducted by UCF was meaningful

insofar as the competitive dynamic; yet findings and initiatives related to the psychosocial and socioenvironmental impact of parent behavior on youth outcomes was scant.)

The results of such a study, which should encompass current and former junior participants, may prove to be the tipping point that will incentivize adult leadership in sanctioned junior tournament tennis to take decisive action against problem parent behavior during tournament play and be at the forefront of a movement in youth sports participation that clearly says “enough is enough.”

References

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