

The Ten Commandments of a Soccer Parent

What every soccer mom and dad should know

by Nicholas Farrell

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Today's soccer moms and dads are more than just mini-van-driving chauffeurs or first-aid-kit-toting amateur medics. Braving inclement weather and constant traveling, they are out each weekend, cheering young athletes on to a hopeful victory and offering advice and instruction. However, even when proud parents mean well, they might actually be doing more harm than good. This handy and practical guide of five "thou shalt" and five "thou shalt not" will assist you in honing in on behaviors that soccer coaches love to see from parents — while also identifying and removing the bad ones.

1. Thou shalt not shout commands at the player with the ball.

It's easy to think that the player with the ball is, for the moment, the most important player on the field. But for young players, this is the most stressful position to be in. "You've got defenders trying to get the ball away from you and teammates shouting for the ball to be passed to them," says Darryl Towers, a boys' and girls' coach from the Cedarburg Soccer Club. "In this situation, the last thing a child needs is parents shouting instructions from the sideline, which only adds to the stress." Instead, Towers recommends directing instruction to players not directly involved in the play. "Letting other players know where they need to be is acceptable, but the player on the ball must learn to think and make quick decisions for him or herself."

2. Thou shalt not use the phrases "kick it" or "boot the ball."

Of course it's thrilling to see your child boot the ball as far as he can downfield. But soccer isn't all about long kicks. Even at the earliest ages, soccer coaches emphasize possession as the name of the game. Towers understands that parents see long kicks as a way to move down the field quickly but insists that keeping the ball is more important. "Phrases such as 'kick it' or 'boot it' actually go against everything that we are trying to teach because they tend to encourage a kick that is wild and panicked instead of a simple pass to a teammate," Towers says. Instead, he reiterates that the preferred advice from parents should focus less on the player with the ball and more on instructing other players to make themselves available for passing.

3. Thou shalt not try to control the game from the sidelines.

On the sidelines, a parent's passion and energy can sometimes be misdirected into controlling coaching. It seems impossible to direct a child's every move, right? The same goes for soccer, says Mark Yeandle, a former All-American collegiate player and a youth soccer coach and camp director for Mequon Soccer Club. "Unlike a lot of other sports, soccer isn't a sport in which instruction from the sideline plays a crucial role in the flow of the game," says Yeandle. "It is ultimately controlled and coached on the field by the players themselves."

4. Thou shalt not coach thy child against the coach's orders.

Looking for a way to get under the coach's skin? "Giving instructions or orders that contradict those of the coach is a surefire way to get us to pull our hair out," says Yeandle. While parents may disagree with the coach's tactics, such as the position a child plays or the amount of playing time he receives, it's important to remember that the coaches are in their position for a reason. "When a parent doesn't agree with a coach, they should speak to them privately," declares Yeandle. "But instructing a child to disobey his coach will only teach selfishness and likely produce negative results on the field."

5. Thou shalt not disrespect referees or the opponent.

Don't be *that* parent who embarrasses her child by hollering at referees or insulting players from the other team. Yeandle notes that referees make mistakes just as players do and should not be abused because of it. "The referee and the opponent are simply a part of the game and should be respected as such," he says. Towers agrees and urges parents to put their best foot forward at all times. "Setting a good example for your child and other parents is probably the most important thing you can do."

1.**Thou shalt encourage players to put what they learn into practice.**

Soccer coaches teach their players new skills and tactics in practice. The ultimate goal is to see them used on the field, says Craig Charlton, a girls' coach at New Berlin Soccer Club and a former player for the Milwaukee Rampage. "One of the biggest things I ask of parents is to try

and get the kids to take what they learn at practice and attempt to use it in games," says Charlton. "They might struggle with it at first, but it's the best way for them to develop and improve as players." In the long run, the small price of minor mistakes will be worth the progress.

2.**Thou shalt ask thy child's coach what you can be doing with him at home to help sharpen his skills.**

Just because parents may be too busy to be at every one of their child's practices doesn't mean that they can't play a role in their child's development, says Charlton. "Asking a coach how to help their child improve at home and then following through with it will have a massive amount of benefits for both the child and parent," he says. "Just a few minutes in the evenings or on weekends will go a long way toward improvement."

3.**Thou shalt offer as much positive feedback as possible, even in the event of a bad performance.**

Playing badly isn't an easy situation for most kids to cope with. In addition to dealing with her own emotions, your child may receive some verbal backlash from fellow teammates. Kevin Brennan, a Milwaukee Wave youth camp director and assistant coach at Viterbo University, has seen it happen many times. "When your child is put down by teammates, and possibly even coaches, what she needs is to be picked back up again at home." He adds that if parents offer praise consistently, no matter how well or poorly their child plays, the support will boost confidence and assure the child that they are always behind her efforts.

4.**Thou shalt always demonstrate good sportsmanship.**

In the heat of a close game, it's easy to lose your cool. Unfortunately, even a temporary display of poor sportsmanship will often give the entire team, including the coaches and parents, a bad image. Brennan agrees, noting the importance of doing the right thing as a spectator — even if you're the only one in the crowd not behaving badly. "Even if other parents around you are getting on the referee's back or showing other forms of bad sportsmanship, use it as an opportunity to show proper behavior," says Brennan. "Your example will be contagious."

5.**Thou shalt volunteer to help if you have time.**

No great coach, whether in the professional ranks or at the youth level, has ever done it all on his own. And while your child's coach undoubtedly won't need help deciding which formation to play or who the starters should be, there are other ways parents can lend a hand. Providing a light snack, such as oranges or granola bars, and water at halftime is a great way to show your support of the team. The players and coach will love this! Also, if you feel inclined, offer your help at practice, setting up cones or supervising simple drills. The bottom line is simple: If you have a little spare time, any coach will appreciate your offer to assist.