

## Why and How Parents Can Support Referees in Youth Sport

Have you ever wanted to yell at a referee during your young athlete's big game? Maybe you thought the ref made a bad call or has been favoring the other team for the whole game. But as a parent, how you interact with the referee can make a big impact on your athlete.

[Dr. Amanda Stanec](#), who specializes in physical education and youth development through sport, say that one thing she's noticed, as a parent of three young athletes herself, is that parents need to be more supportive of referees—and the consequences for not supporting the refs can be much worse than you realize.

A recent [Washington Post](#) article highlights a disturbing trend: Referees are becoming harder and harder to hire, thanks to the constant stream of abuse that is regularly leveled on them by angry parents. No referees equal no games, unless that behavior changes.

But beyond that, says Stanec, treating referees poorly and leveling abuse at them when you believe they've made an incorrect call is sending a bad message to your kids. "How we conduct ourselves really matters, and how we're role modeling behavior to children really matters," she says.

In addition to treating people with kindness, parents are also in a position to role model how a child can deal with frustration and anger in their life. "The role modeling of self-regulation is absolutely essential," says Stanec. "Especially since the last two years because, due to COVID, kids have lost many opportunities to practice self-regulation in the sporting arena. So, it's really necessary that we model that excellent behavior. Teaching kids to thank the officials after a game is a great start."

And of course, referees aren't just yelled at and abused by adults. Kids can also be disrespectful, especially when things are particularly heated. Stanec suggests running through an exercise with young athletes ahead of the game. Ask them to imagine being in overtime of a very exciting game, and it's a tie. But then, the ref makes a questionable call in favor of the opponent. Imagine how you would react in that moment. "Kids tend to be impulsive, and get upset in those situations," says Stanec. So do parents! "Ask questions like, 'Would you be okay if that response was filmed and plastered throughout the country? If not, how could you reimagine a behavior that you're okay with being shared throughout the country on the news?'"

In the age of social media, we know that it's possible for a particularly bad reaction to be broadcast virally—so reminding ourselves of that is a great way to inspire more thoughtful reactions. "Give your kids the grace and the opportunity to think about the situation before they're in it," Stanec says. "It's not unlike how we should talk to our kids about consuming alcohol at a party: We talk to them about it before they're in that situation, so they can think through their decisions beforehand and be better prepared." (For coaches reading this, Stanec suggests doing this same exercise with parents at an early season team meeting.)

It's also important to remember that anytime you're tempted to yell at a referee, that's akin to screaming at a restaurant worker or other person in the service industry, one who's likely not

being paid much more than minimum wage—or is even simply refereeing as a volunteer activity! “When you step back and look at the situation of [parents yelling at refs](#), remember that the parents are yelling at people who are stepping up to serve their community, often with little to no pay,” Stanec says.

And as a parent, showing a referee respect and kindness (even when you don’t agree with them) is important because it underscores the reason your athlete should be playing the sport to begin with: because it’s fun and it’s joyful. It isn’t fun and it isn’t joyful to have a [parent in the stands getting in arguments with the referee](#)—and it creates a hostile environment for the players.

“Remember, these young athletes aren’t mini-adults. This is not supposed to be about money, it’s not supposed to be about the win: It’s supposed to be about joy, development, improvement, and working together,” Stanec says.

“Remember, if there is a mishap, it is not the end of the world,” says Stanec. “Personally, anytime I hear a coach or athlete say that they would have won a game if the ref hadn’t made a certain call, I like to respond that a game should never come down to a single mistake made by a human, because humans will make mistakes. So, let’s execute and try to be successful in a way that won’t come down to one or two mistakes.”

If you do notice that there is an issue with a referee making calls you disagree with regularly, Stanec notes that it’s still not your place as a parent to bring the issue up. “It’s usually the coach’s responsibility to respectfully speak to the referee,” she says. “It’s not your job as the parent.”

Lastly, if you notice something happening many times and it seems like the referee doesn’t understand the rules or is favoring the other team, bring it up calmly with the coach a day or so later if you must. But don’t complain about a bad call to your athlete or tell them that the referee ‘caused them to lose.’ Remember, [your job as a parent is to role-model good behavior](#), and showing your young athlete that they can blame others for things going wrong isn’t going to help them later in life.

**TAKEAWAY:** Without referees, games may be canceled and seasons curtailed, but their numbers are shrinking due to stress caused by parents shouting from the sidelines. Young athletes model their behavior after the way that their parents act, not the things that they say, so showing that referees deserve respect and appreciation is critical.



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