

PEDIATRICS PERSPECTIVES

Bullying Behavior by Athletic Coaches

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A parent recently sought help addressing an individual bullying her child. When she provided more details, it became apparent the bully was not another student, but rather a high school basketball coach. One afternoon, the mother was early picking up her daughter from practice, so she went into the gym. She found the head coach screaming at the team that they lacked intelligence and were lazy because they had not executed a play properly. Horrified by this behavior, the mother waited until practice was over, then confronted the coach, telling him what she had observed and how upset she was by the screaming and name-calling. The coach responded by refocusing the conversation on the mother's own transgression: parents knew that no one was allowed in the gym during practice "for safety reasons." The mother felt as though she had to defend her own behavior. After the incident, she began asking around and discovered this coach had a long history of intimidating his athletes. She was not just witnessing a "bad day," so she reported her concerns to the school and, again, was confused by the response. The principal told her he had spoken to the coach and the coach had apologized. He explained that the coach was very successful and won a state title last year, but sometimes got "overexcited." Confused and angered by the school's and coach's reactions, she went to her pediatrician for advice.

Although the study of bullying has made considerable strides over the last 2 decades, the definition remains vague. Bullying is generally defined as a systematic abuse of power, in which a stronger individual exhibits a pattern of intimidating behavior against someone weaker or less powerful.¹ Although most research addresses peer-to-peer bullying, nothing in the definition requires a peer-to-peer relationship, only 1 individual with perceived power over another. The coach-athlete relationship involves an inherent imbalance of power; that is, a coach holds authority over his players by nature of his role. Bullying can have dramatic and long-lasting effects on its victims. It can impair social and emotional development and cause substantial harm to mental health.^{1,2} When the bullying occurs in an athletic setting, those harmful effects are augmented by the stress kids often feel as a result of athletic competition.³

Although plenty of coaches use affirming and encouraging coaching styles, bullying behavior such as demeaning, shaming, and name-calling remains a common aspect of coaching in sports at any level.³ More than 6000 young adults ages 18 to 22 years were interviewed about their experiences in sports earlier in adolescence. Three-quarters of respondents

reported at least 1 incident of emotional harm during their sports tenure. Of those who reported at least 1 incident, nearly one-third pinpointed their coach as the main source of harm.² Another study found that 45% of children reported verbal misconduct by coaches, including name-calling and insulting them during play.⁴

One difficulty in correcting behavior by coaches is that behavior is a continuum from positive to negative; therefore, judging when a coach has “crossed the line” is somewhat subjective. Some authors state that bullying is determined partially by whether the behavior makes the victim feel intimidated or bullied, further stating that although an interaction might be perceived as bullying in some circumstances, it might be considered acceptable in others.¹ However, pervasive demeaning, name-calling, and insulting by a teacher/coach is inexcusable; such outdated patterns of behavior are no longer acceptable. Pediatricians should counsel parents to observe practices, obtain reports of locker room behavior, and pay attention to a coach’s behavior at games to gauge the negativity and prevalence of the behavior.

A second difficulty in correcting bullying behavior by coaches is a series of defensive techniques that we have observed that rationalize and minimize others’ negative perceptions of the bullying behavior. Below we outline 4 such defensive techniques.

The first technique is moral justification, in which the bully attempts to portray the behavior as socially acceptable.⁵ Moral justification manifests itself through normalization statements, like “all coaches lose it once in a while” or “this is how we’ve always done things and we win games.” By arguing that the behavior is normal,

they invoke the logical fallacy that common and good are equivalent. Unfortunately, when a culture of bullying is accepted within the team or in the school, then it may actually seem normal, and bullying of athletes tends to be rationalized and ignored.

The second technique is the “backhand apology.” A typical bully apology might sound like, “I am really sorry; I got a little carried away, but we really need to work on fundamentals if we are going to win.” There are 2 problems presented. First, the coach is minimizing the harm by saying “a little”; second, he places the blame on the victims. By implying that if the team had mastered fundamentals he would not have acted in such a manner, he attempts to deflect responsibility and thereby excuse his behavior.⁵ The apology becomes part of the bullying behavior cycle because it is a power play that belittles the victim.

The third technique is the use of advantageous comparisons. When bullying behavior is compared with a more severe act, the standard shifts, allowing the coach’s behavior to seem more trivial.⁵ For example, the girl’s basketball coach said, “I never push them around or lay a finger on them.” Even though physical violence was not the concern, the coach shifts the standard of what might be considered inappropriate to downplay the severity of his actual misconduct.

The fourth technique is escalation. In escalation, the “stakes” are raised, until the person who has the grievance gives up. Here, the bully essentially “bluffs” the person making the complaint into backing down. With athletes, the coach may make statements like, “If you don’t like the way I do things, you can quit the team.” The bully is not necessarily escalating his bullying behavior, but escalating the

situation by presenting the secondary consequences a victim might face by fighting back.⁶

In our experience, bullying behavior by coaches is an under-acknowledged but frequent experience. Pediatricians are often asked about bullying, and both parents and pediatricians are often confused by the response from the coaches, athletic departments, and school administrators. Identifying defensive techniques allows pediatricians to better counsel parents and to educate school officials to look for these techniques so that the issue is refocused on the behavior that needs to be addressed. Concerned parents, students, and community members should also ensure that a code of conduct applies, not only to students, but to teachers and coaches as well. When a coach bullies a child individually, it should be reported immediately to school officials. Reporting the behavior to Child Protective Services may also be warranted. Most state laws describe emotional abuse as injury to the emotional stability of a child, as evidenced by an appreciable change in behavior, cognition, or emotional response. It is important to remain cognizant of specific text in state laws, because exact definitions may vary.⁷ There are no clear guidelines regarding verbal bullying aimed at a team rather than at an individual child. Nevertheless, such behavior is unacceptable and coaches should face consequences for verbal misconduct including demeaning, name-calling, and insulting young athletes.

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