

Monkey see, monkey do: How sideline sports behaviors affect kids

February 12 2024



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For children's sports, there's no doubt that parents are essential—they're the free ferry service, the half-time orange supplier, and the local cheer

squad. But when it comes to sideline behavior, some parents can behave badly, and when this happens it's often a case of "monkey see, monkey do."

In a new study from the University of South Australia, researchers found a link between parents' sideline conduct and athletes' behaviors. The findings are [published](#) in the journal *Frontiers in Sports and Active Living*.

When parents behaved well—applauding good play, encouraging players, and enjoying the game—their [child](#) was more likely to project positive behavior. But the more a parent behaved poorly—being overly critical, second guessing the referee, or yelling abuse—this was related to greater antisocial behaviors in their child.

In Australia, about 13 million adults and 3 million children take part in sport each year.

The study assessed the perceptions of 67 Australian youth athletes (aged 12–17 years) participating in team-based sports. Athletes were asked to report their parents' positive and negative sideline behavior, as well as reflect on their own sporting behaviors.

Specifically, the study assessed five negative behaviors. It found that:

- 32% of participants reported never seeing any negative behaviors from their parents.
- 69% reported some form of negative behavior from their parents (even if rarely).
- 18% said their parents sometimes or often said bad things about the way they played.
- 17% said their parents sometimes to very often yelled at the referee during the game after a bad call was made.

UniSA's Dr. Alyson Crozier says parents' sideline actions can predict children's on-field sports behaviors.

"Most parents are [role models](#) for their children, with children looking to their parents to learn about acceptable behavior. So, it's natural for them to copy the behaviors they observe," Dr. Crozier says.

"In our research, we found that when a player perceives positive support from a parent, the player also reported having positive sports attitudes and behaviors. Yet, when a parent engages in antisocial behaviors, their child will more likely behave similarly, potentially as frustration and aggression to their teammates and opponents.

"Encouragingly, most players in this study reported frequent positive parent behaviors, and negative parent behaviors as rare."

Dr. Crozier says that good sportsmanship is the cornerstone of a positive sports experience.

"Children get far more enjoyment from playing sport when a parent is present, encouraging, and supportive. Such behaviors also help build a child's self-esteem, and improve their [life skills](#) and well-being," Dr. Crozier says.

"Yet poor parent behaviors can reduce a player's confidence and damage their emotional and physiological well-being. In some cases, they can even lead to a child withdrawing from a sport altogether.

"Sport is an important part of life in Australia. If we can encourage respect, sportsmanship, and fun, we can ensure that sport continues to be a positive experience for everyone."

Top tips for positive parent behavior

- Be a positive role model for your child—be courteous and respectful to coaches, referees, players, and spectators.
- Avoid shouting instructions—unless you are an official coach, focus on words of encouragement. Don't "coach the coach."
- Keep comments about your child and others positive—whether you're at the sporting field, on the car ride home, or at home, don't bad mouth other players, parents, coaches, or game officials.
- Prioritize having fun—remember, children want to play sport to have fun and socialize. Winning isn't everything. Have fun yourself, and help your child enjoy sport by creating positive memories.

More information: Liam P. McCabe et al, Monkey see, monkey do? Exploring parent-athlete behaviours from youth athletes' perspective, *Frontiers in Sports and Active Living* (2024). [DOI: 10.3389/fspor.2023.1292812](https://doi.org/10.3389/fspor.2023.1292812)

Provided by University of South Australia

Citation: Monkey see, monkey do: How sideline sports behaviors affect kids (2024, February 12) retrieved 11 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2024-02-monkey-sideline-sports-behaviors-affect.html>

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