

Opinion: Can winning be attained without resorting to bullying?

By Lisa L. Lewis, Washington Post, adapted by Newsela staff on 01.08.18

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Ta'Quan Roberson (center) with the ball during a Non-Public Group 3 High School Final State Championship football game on December 2, 2017, in Union, New Jersey. Photo by: AP Photo/Gregory Payan

In the cellphone video, a teenage boy stands at the front of the classroom as his football teammates laugh. The coach closes the door. "We don't want no witnesses," he says, to more laughter. After hesitating, the boy complies with the coach's orders to close his eyes and clasp his hands behind his head. Then the coach punches him in the stomach. The boy doubles over and falls to the floor as his teammates laugh.

The video, shot at California's Beaumont High School, made headlines after it was turned over to local police in October. Equally shocking, however, were the expressions of support by many of the players and their parents, who downplayed the incident. They lauded the coach, Will Martin, for his guiding influence. "If it's so bad, why are the kids laughing?" one mom asked. Another parent called Martin a "man of God."

Martin's behavior may be an extreme example. However, physical and emotional bullying by youth coaches is often still defended. Many view it as a way to improve performance and build character.

Four Percent Received Physical Abuse

Some coaches use exercise as punishment. One coach in Iowa was later fired for this in 2012. Verbal abuse by coaches such as name-calling happens at all levels of sports. In one study of 800 youth athletes, more than a third said their coaches had yelled at a kid angrily for a mistake. Four percent said the coach had hit, kicked or slapped someone on the team. (If this percentage is applied to all youth athletes, it means almost 2 million kids receive this type of physical bullying each year.)

In any other setting, that behavior would be considered physical abuse, noted Jennifer Fraser, the author of "Teaching Bullies: Zero Tolerance on the Court or in the Classroom." "Imagine two women in a staff meeting," she suggested. "Would this be seen as motivating? Would she (the victim) be a better employee as a result?"

In many cases, coaches are replicating what was done to them. Or, they may be taking out their frustration on players. "When a coach is yelling like that, they're modeling poor emotional control," said Kristen Dieffenbach, a professor of athletic coaching education at West Virginia University. "When I coach soccer and hockey, I yell -- sometimes you need to in order to get the kids to pay attention to you. But there's a difference between high energy" and cursing at a kid, she said.

For youth, the effect of being yelled at, slapped, kicked or punched by a coach is long-lasting. (Even though most research looks at peer-to-peer bullying, the relationship in coach-player bullying is similar to the power imbalance generally defined as bullying.)

Many Players And Parents Hesitant To Speak Up

Players may hesitate to speak up for fear of retaliation. And, Fraser noted, parents who do so risk being seen as helicopter parents or overly involved.

No evidence suggests bullying by coaches creates winning teams. Instead, coaches who use positive methods have a better track record. They keep kids from dropping out of youth sports, increase player engagement and develop skills and character. These methods help teams win. The nonprofit Positive Coaching Alliance, based in Mountain View, California, features an all-star advisory board lineup of winning coaches, such as Phil Jackson, Bruce Bochy and Steve Mariucci. This group calls it double-goal coaching. Double-goal coaching focuses on winning but even more on teaching life lessons.

Similarly, experts like Dieffenbach believe the best way to combat old-school coaching is education. Dieffenbach said coaches often get frustrated and resort to dictatorial methods because they lack other tools. She believes coaches must learn to lead and develop athletes rather than control.

Requirements for high school coaches vary by state. In Illinois, for example, prospective coaches only need coaching certification if they don't already have an Illinois teaching, school counseling or similar certificate. And in Hawaii, high school coaches participating in state championship events have two years to take a "Fundamentals of Coaching" course, even though they're coaching players already.

Coaches Must Model Character Building

In addition to educating coaches, though, we need to look at the broader culture. It has made these bullying behaviors seem acceptable. Excusing it through a "win at all costs" mindset or accepting that it's embedded in competitive sports -- particularly in more physical ones like football -- only continues it. Joe Ehrmann, is a former National Football League player who spent most of his career with the Baltimore Colts in Maryland and is now a minister. Ehrmann said, "The great myth in America today is that sports builds character . . . (but) sports doesn't build character unless the coach models it."

Of course, most coaches are hard-working, well-meaning and passionate about sports.

But when coaches bully players, we have a responsibility to avoid defending it. I have a son who plays high school football, and I was sickened not just by the clip of the Beaumont High School coach but by the parents who defended his behavior. A teen who's been punched in the stomach by his coach has already been failed once by an adult. He doesn't need to be failed by adults again.