Parental Involvement in Children’s High School Athletics

by

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A Statement of the Problem

In my nearly 20 years spent in the sports broadcasting business, both in television and radio, one of the observations that emerged was the degree of parental involvement in children’s high school athletics, or the lack thereof. Some parents would berate coaches because they didn’t like the way a particular game was being handled by the coach, or because their son or daughter didn’t play. There were also parents who would scream and yell at game officials to the point of being ejected from the event and parents who were derogatory toward their own child or another member of the team.

On the other hand, there were parents who wouldn’t even attend practices or games, for whatever the reason. They would drop their son or daughter off for practice, but that would be the extent of their involvement. This research paper will examine the positives and negatives of “helicopter” parents and “absentee” parents. Is one way of parenting an athlete better than the other? How is the student-athlete affected? Wisconsin athletic directors and coaches were surveyed to see what they thought about parental involvement in children’s high school athletics and whether or not over-involvement is on the rise.

Literature Review: Definition of the Term “Helicopter” Parent

Some parents tend to be very involved in monitoring all of their children’s educational experiences, including their involvement in athletics. These parents are often referred to as “helicopter” parents. Helicopter parents, a phrase coined by adult and child psychiatrist Foster W. Cline and educator Jim Fay in the 1990 book “Parenting With Love and Logic,” are always hovering over their children, never allowing them to succeed or fail on their own. Helicopter parents oversee their child’s every move in an effort to protect
them from pain, disappointment, and failure in the process of achieving success. This can manifest itself at the park, in the school, in social circumstances, or when maneuvering important decisions of any kind. (Cline and Fay 339)

A parent’s job, according Dr. Peter Love, director of the Learning Resource Center at Mitchell College in New London, Connecticut, is to give their child roots and wings. The roots come from a solid sense of security and protection, a clear sense of being unconditionally loved and a strong sense of self-worth but not overinflated self-esteem. Love says, “The wings and the ability to fly both come from developing the right muscles, testing out the air currents through repeated trials and errors, and having the courage to leave the nest.” But he says balancing these two jobs has become increasingly complicated in the modern world and is one reason why we have “helicopter” parents. Furthermore, Love believes parents are receiving increasingly inconsistent messages about their role as protectors of their children. They are constantly being reminded of how important it is to nurture and protect their children. In addition, the popular media continually perpetuates parents’ fears of the multiple dangers facing their kids, reinforcing the helicoptering instinct. (Love)

Scott Kugi, district activities coordinator at Muskego High School in Wisconsin, wrote an article for Coach and Athletic Director magazine entitled “Culture and System: The Anatomy of Dysfunction in Youth Sports,” published in August 2012. In the article, Kugi states that parental involvement problems start at the youth level. “Parents are socialized early in the youth sport culture to vocalize their opinions of coaches, officials, players and league directors. Winning and playing time are often the determinants in parents’ perception of individual and program success.” Kugi says although parents are vocal
about what they want in their children’s sports programs, they are generally neither informed nor realistic about athletics. “Athletic illiteracy is a common theme for most parents, yet some feel compelled to pass judgment in spite of that fact. What professional experiences do parents have that validate their opinion on athletic matters? Ignorance, arrogance, and loss of perspective, combined with the culture and system, creates the combustible powder keg we call youth sports.” (Kugi)

**Definition of the Term “Absentee” Parent**

The opposite of excitable, fanatical and over-involved parents are the under-involved, disinterested, misinformed, or absentee parents. Disinterested parents may spend more time arranging a car pool to take their children to the game than they do at the actual game, if they attend at all. Although they appear as though they care about their children’s sport choices, these parents often feel their appearance at a game or practice will be stressful for the youth or not important to them. (education.com)

Parenting expert and author Scott Luper, defines “absentee parent” this way: “When I use the term ‘absentee parent’ I mean a parent who doesn’t make a positive, meaningful, constant impact on their child’s life.” (Luper 101)

The origins of “absentee” parents range from the natural separation of adolescents and parents as they transition from childhood dependence toward adolescence to social impacts of job and families in the 21st century. General social pressure and developmental patterns during adolescence force a movement away from parents and toward peer groups. (Muuss 308-309)

The Horace Mann Educator Advisory Panel has been in place since 2004 and consists
of educators from across the country. Educators that sign up for the advisory panel are asked to complete 4 to 5 online surveys each year. Survey topics include a mix of educational-related topics. Currently, around 1,700 educators belong to the panel and are mostly Public K-12 teachers. The advisory panel conducted a “parental involvement” survey in October 2007. The survey asked questions related to the level of parental involvement at schools, the importance of that involvement, and the most common reasons for the lack of parental involvement. Teachers of all grade levels cited too little time and different priorities as the most common reasons why “absentee” parents don’t get involved in their child’s education and/or extracurricular activities.

There are some student-athletes who come from split families where one parent may have moved away or the mother, father, or both have to work during sporting events and cannot attend because they have to provide for their family. It should be pointed out that there are some “absentee” parents who are absent out of necessity. (“Parental Involvement Survey”)

**Definition of Parental Involvement**

Cross-cultural comparisons of children’s time use indicate that children in the U.S. spend an unusually large amount of time being active. It is not unusual for middle-class parents to encourage their children to carry out intensive sport schedules. In addition, the structural support of children’s athletics is evident in the ready availability of extracurricular activities, after-school programs, sports leagues, and recreational facilities. (Kremer-Sadlik and Jeemin 35-52)

Parental involvement can be defined as activities that entail the “time, energy, and
money parents invest in their child’s sport participation, including things such as providing transportation, attending practices and games, providing instructional assistance, and purchasing sport equipment.” Parental involvement ranges from minimally to highly involved. (Stein, Raedeke, and Glenn 591) Through their involvement, parents can create a sense of enjoyment of the sports activity, or they can be a source of stress and anxiety.

**What the Scholarly Research Says**

The role of the coach intrinsically implies the ability to observe and assess the impact of parenting on the student athlete. Through athletics the student athlete will ultimately transfer the power of judgment from parents and peers to other adults, e.g. coaches, who can make a determination of the child as an athlete and person. Unlike parents, coaches tend to have a more emotional distance from the student athletes. (Ogilvie 50) For this thesis a survey was conducted where coaches and athletic directors, as ultimate judges of the student athletes as people, were asked their perceptions on parental involvement in children’s high school athletics.

Highly involved parents can play a strong, positive role in a child’s socialization into sports. This indoctrination translates into qualities that are recommended as adult members of society. In general, parents serve as: (1) role models, (2) providers of experience and (3) interpreters of experience. Role modeling works by establishing the normalcy of athletic participation and establishes the viability of engagement in sports. In addition to role modeling, athletes also list other ways in which parents provide sport-participation experiences for them: game attendance, coaching/managing, and transportation/logistical. Parents also communicate the value, appropriateness, and
importance of sport. Parents whose children take part in formal sports activities regularly comment on their children’s and the team’s performance during and after the sporting event. These comments often evaluate the performance not only from an athletic perspective, but also from a moralistic standpoint. By doing this, parents are displaying to their children their own attitude toward the unfolding events and socializing this form of moral evaluation as they see fit. (Dixon, Warner, and Bruening 538-559)

Not only is it the parents’ goal to cultivate children’s moral values for application to the realm of sports activities, values such as leadership, teamwork, loyalty, competitiveness, confidence, and ingenuity also apply to life. They are likewise seen as prerequisites for raising children into successful, healthy adults. (Kremer Sadlik and Jeemin 35-52)

Parents’ influence over their children originates with the transfer of their genetic dispositions, but often times their actions have a greater impact (Avolio, Rotundo, & Walumbwa, 2009). Parents’ actions and behaviors have a substantial influence on the personal characteristics, behaviors, and motivational orientation of their children (Partridge, Brustad, & Babkes Stellino, 2008; Avolio, et al., 2009). Bass (2008) concludes that parents who are “warm, supportive, nurturing, conscientious parents that set rational expectations, raise children who are mature for their age, socially responsive, friendly, purposeful and achievement oriented” (p. 1055). He adds that parents who are cold or unsupportive have children who are socially deviant, irresponsible, careless, withdrawn and can also display other negative social behaviors.

Similarly, Comeaux and Harrison (2011) find that family background is the most important factor in predicting the success or failure of a student-athlete. While the
interactions children have with their parents considerably affect their motivational orientations for different activities, the environment in which they are raised has been shown to predict their success. The authors note that the family’s socioeconomic status, which is defined not only as the parents’ perceived income level, but also the parents’ level of education, is a major predictor of a child’s motivational orientation toward academics. They add that the higher the perceived income and level of education of the parents, the more likely a student is to achieve academic success. Also, the parents’ level of education is an indicator of student-athlete success in itself, as is the level of parent or guardian support. Comeaux and Harrison find that all three, parents’ income, level of education, and level of support-predict the academic success of the student but are not alone in developing the situational background.

In addition to a study that examined the association of parental involvement in youth sport participation and performance it was found that parental involvement in kids’ sport endeavors was significantly associated with enjoyment of the sport and the importance players ascribed to it (in this case, tennis). Players who claimed to have a high level of parental involvement reported to have greater enjoyment of their sport and viewed it as a significant part of their lives. (Hoyle, Rick H. and Leff, Stephen S.) Athletes also claim to have developed close relations to one or both parents because of sports. (Coakley 271-285)

As one can imagine, there are also negative effects of overly involved parents, particularly when support turns to pressure. Parental pressure is defined as behavior indicating expectations of unlikely, even unattainable levels of accomplishment. (Hoyle, Rick H. and Leff, Stephen S.)
In the above study by Hoyle and Leff, those tennis players who claimed a high level of parental support fell lower in state tennis rankings than their counterparts with less parental support. As support turns to pressure, the desire to succeed wanes. Bill Gosse, president of Team Score, Inc. — a local sports ministry-and columnist for Gannett papers, describes the pressure parents are putting on their kids and coaches to win.

“It’s ok to lose. We have to let our kids be kids. Recently I saw a video on the Oprah Winfrey show of a father who was training his 10-year-old son to be a quarterback. He trained the kid 6-8 hours a day and if he started to cry, the father had a ten-second rule. After ten seconds the kid had to stop crying and go back to training. I wonder where that boy is today. That is alarming footage in my opinion. Consequently we have a ‘look at me’ society. When you watch kids who play basketball, and they pull out their jerseys during the game they’re saying, ‘Look at me, look at me.’ When I speak to kids, I ask them which name is more important, the one on the front of your jersey or the one on the back?” (Gosse)

Gosse continues: “We have a ‘win now’ mentality with a considerable amount of that attitude is coming from parents, the effects of which are felt by high school coaches. We have a turnover rate of 20 percent for boys’ high school basketball coaches in the state of Wisconsin on a yearly basis. In 2009 there were 90 new jobs; that’s a significant amount of turnover. To be sure, some of it is from retirement and some is moving on to new opportunities, natural progression, but “I can tell you there is more and more happening because of the force and pressure from parents.”(Gosse) In 2013-14 there were roughly about the same number of coaching changes (90) in boy’s high school basketball in Wisconsin. (Miller)
Legendary St Mary’s (Menasha, Wis.) basketball coach Ralph “Cyclone” McClone saw parents begin to change in the 1970’s. McClone started his coaching career in 1950. He retired in 1963 only to return to St. Mary’s in 1972 after the Zephyrs went through three coaching changes in eight years. In the book “Cyclone’ McClone: The Story of the Zephyr Whirlwind who Took the Sports Scene and the Business World by Storm,” McClone claims it wasn’t the same experience when he returned to coach in the ’70’s. “The biggest difference was that the parents were different. I thought the kids were still great. The parents weren’t happy just to have their son as a member of the team. They had to be a starter or had to play enough. The team was forgotten in sports and the concept of the individual became important. The kids hadn’t changed a lot while I was away. The parents did.” (Martin 92)

Brian Noble, who started at middle linebacker for the Green Bay Packers from 1985 to 1993, is linebacker coach for Coronado High School in Henderson, Nev. near Las Vegas. He said coaching at the high school level was a real eye-opener for him, but it wasn’t all bad. Noble believes every program has what he calls “Dream Parents.” “There are parents who are always there when you need them, whether it be to work in the concession stand or help out with the music, whatever you need,” Noble added. “We had one dad, a well-known attorney in town who had two sons on the team. They were decent players, not great. But their dad believed that football built character and he wanted his kids to stick with it even when times got tough. And they did get tough for them. But the dad supported us. He didn’t like the music system we had at the stadium so he went out and bought a new one, no questions asked. Now I realize not all parents are in a financial position to be able to do this, but the point is, it had nothing to do with his sons’ playing
time. There were not strings attached. Other parents will tell you flat-out that they will not support the program financially if their son is not playing.” (Noble)

Noble said that parents can provide great support or can divide a team very easily. During a meeting with parents before the start of a recent season, Noble shared the following story: “Parents would have their own idea where their son was going to play. Some parents would come up to me and say, ‘My son is going to play linebacker.’ I’d look at the kid and he’s barely five-foot-six. I would just chuckle. You don’t have to be a coach to know that a pudgy kid who’s five-foot-six is not going to be a linebacker. But because he played the position in Pop Warner, some parents think their kid is going to play the position at Notre Dame or the University of Southern California and I dealt with those parents. Perception is far from reality in some cases. A kid with that size may go to one of those schools, but I can guarantee you, he is not going to be playing linebacker. But some parents trust the coaches and others don’t. They feel that if their son is going to college, football is the way to get it paid for. It puts a great deal of stress on coaches, let me tell you.” (Noble)

**Media Examples**

There are several media examples of coaches resigning across the country because of over-the-top parental involvement. A big part of that can be attributed to advances in technology. It’s much easier today for parents to make contact with a coach whether it be via email, texting, or by using social media tools like Facebook or Twitter.

wasn’t the only reason he stepped down, but it was a contributing factor. “A coach is such a target now,” he said. “With computers, cell phones and texting, a coach is under the gun all the time. “I’m not used to that. I’m used to running my program without anyone interfering.” (Remsburg)

Patrick Hite, a columnist for The News Leader in Staunton, Va., suggests that outspoken parents are chasing away the best coaches from youth sports. He tells the story of Rob Bennett, a Covington High School (Va.) science teacher with a master’s degree who was also the town’s mayor. But the job of boys’ basketball coach proved too much for Bennett, and he resigned. Bennett and his coaching staff were questioned by parents after every game. “It was either over playing time, what I said to their child on the bench, why they didn’t start, why they didn’t play in this quarter, why did you play this player because he missed practice or missed 30 minutes of practice because he went to get tutored in English, why did you keep a freshman on the varsity,” Bennett said. “It was unbelievable …” Bennett questioned, “Why am I going to be miserable doing something I love to do and, for the most part, was pretty good at?” (Hite)

Other sources also point to technology as a negative factor in high school sports. According to Virginia High School Athletic Director Greg Troxell, overall media exposure is part of the problem today. “It’s what I call the ESPN factor,” Troxell said. “Everyone watches ESPN and hears how it should be done and now everyone is an expert. Is it parents trying to live their youth again through their kids? Is it economic pressure and the hope that their kid is going to get a full ride to college and save them money? I don’t know, but it is getting worse, and the lack of respect for officials and coaches is alarming.” (Hite)
Violence in Sports

There may be a correlation between parents’ over-aggressiveness toward coaches and game officials and sports that are physical and violent, like football and basketball. Parents’ behavior may be linked to what they see their children experience on or off the playing field. Willie Jolley, a Washington, D.C.-based youth counselor, claims “violence has been desensitized [in our society].” Penn State University professor and Little League baseball consultant David Dimmick concurs. Dimmick says, “Since the 1970’s, movies, television and video games have become much more violent.” He claims the result is that our society is more violent, and that is reflected in the culture of youth sports. Jolley, however, believes that increased exposure to violence is only part of the problem; he also feels that too much attention is focused on winning rather than the values that a sport can teach. Dimmick agrees, stating: “America has turned sport into a cult, where winners are exalted and their defeated opponents are degraded. We have blurred the distinction between sport, which is intended to provide enjoyment and escape from the rigors of everyday life, and athleticism, which is all about competing for a prize.” (Prettyman)

It was also in the 1970’s when parents began to “gang up” on coaches, officials and student athletes. Case in point – one of the first documented incidents of “sports rage” occurred nearly 39 years ago in Kissimmee, Fla. According to the article, “Taking the Fun Out of the Game,” which first appeared in Sports Illustrated, “a mob of adults attacked four coaches of a winning team of 12-year-olds with clubs and pipes, sending one coach to the hospital. A cry from the crowd, “He’s dead!” apparently satisfied the mob and it withdrew just before the police arrived. (Underwood).
Is Parental Involvement a Subculture?

In Dick Hebdige’s book, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, he explores the quest to understand a growing number of visible youth subcultures in Britain during the 1970’s. Subcultures poke holes in what is normal. They usually form in response to some sort of perceived cultural conformity or hegemony, which Hebdige defines as… “A provisional alliance of certain social groups who can exert ‘total social authority’ over other subordinate groups, not simply by coercion or by direct imposition of ruling ideas, but by ‘winning and shaping consent so that power of the dominant classes appears both legitimate and natural.’” (Hebdige) You could make a strong argument based on Hebdige’s findings that there are parents of athletes who comprise their own subculture and that the attitudes and behaviors they exhibit can be attributed to a group mentality.

Individuals tend to lose their inhibitions and sense of “right” versus “wrong” when they become part of a crowd. As Gustave Le Bon (1952) explained in his “contagion theory,” a ‘collective mind” forms within a large group and individuals abandon rational reasoning and become submerged into the group’s acts and mood. Individuals experience a heightened sense of suggestibility when they are part of a “mob.” At many sporting events, alcohol fuels a mob mentality. (Delaney and Madigan 170)

**Burnout**

Parents can have a huge impact on whether their child may begin to view sports negatively and lose interest in competing altogether. Research has shown that parental pressure can backfire, hurting an athlete’s development. Some “burn out” and leave the sport altogether.
Jay Coakley (1992) addresses the issue of burnout, focusing on adolescent athletes involved in high-performance athletics. He defines burnout as a psychological, emotional, or physical withdrawal from an activity in response to stress. In turn, when burnout occurs, a previously enjoyable activity becomes a source of stress. He contends that chronic, excessive stress is the main cause of athletic burnout in teens. He had conversations with fifteen young athletes identified as burnout cases. He was interested in learning how sport participation was tied to other dimensions of their lives, including their sense of who they were and how they were connected to the social worlds in which they lived. He observed that these athletes had little to talk about except sport experiences when they talked about their past. Even when they were in non-sport activities, the involvement was frequently tied to the sport endeavors of the athletes who spoke of those activities. They mentioned pressures and stress in their sport participation. Many referred to the sacrifices they had to make to stay involved in their high level of sport achievement and to achieve the goals that had been set for them, some when they were only ten or eleven years old. (Coakley 271-285)

In addition, these athletes also were ambivalent when they talked about how sport was tied to the rest of their lives. On one hand they were thankful to have had the opportunity to develop physical skills and have the sporting experiences they had. On the other hand, they regretted being denied some of the other experiences that peers their age had, as sports had consumed the bulk of their free time. All fifteen athletes interviewed in Coakley’s study described emotional high points in their athletic careers, but also devastating low points. (Coakley 271-285)

Coakley believes that athletes leave competitive sports for one of two reasons: a)
constraints of life experiences leading to a one-dimensional view of self, and b) power relations in sports that limit the athletes’ control over their own lives. These athletes found themselves in situations where it was impossible to make commitments to other activities and roles because of the pressure of commitment to their sport. Coakley compared the athletes’ sport involvement to being on a tightrope. It is exciting being talented and being the center of attention, but they know they can’t shift their focus to anything else without losing their balance. If they would lose their balance, there would be no net to catch them. That situation creates a feeling of insecurity, which, in turn, affects their abilities to achieve their performance standards. Unfortunately, because their exclusive commitment to sports began at such an early age, they have little to fall back on. Their identities are so closely associated with the sports they are participating in, they have no alternative identities. (Coakley, 271-185)

Coakley goes on to say that despite good intentions of parents to encourage their children to maintain their commitment to sport as they work toward achieving those performance goals, they unwittingly participate in creating and perpetuating social isolation and dependency in those young athletes. After sport goals were set, parents created environments in which those goals could be met. These environments limited the range of experiences available to their children and guided them in patterns of sport involvement that allowed for little or no autonomy. And although the athletes in Coakley’s study were aware of their parents’ support (time, resources, money, and effort), many also made the connection between parental support and the need to express gratitude through personal achievement. When this happened, the athletes appeared to feel more stifled and isolated. (Coakley, 271-285)
Communication

Communication appears to be a key to quality parental involvement. Bill Gosse states, “You have to talk to your kids as a family and tell them, ‘If you go out for this sport and you don’t play, you’re going to be OK.’” (Gosse)

As a coach, working with parents comes with the territory and some coaches do a better job of communicating their goals and expectations with parents than others.

Robert Biebel, current president of Lourdes Academy in Oshkosh, Wis., spent time at Saint Mary’s University in Minnesota as director of the Cardinal “M” Club and the associate director of the Hendrickson Institute for Ethical Leadership. Biebel, a former high school coach at Xavier in Appleton, Wis., where he won a state championship in 1995, blames the coaches for “bad parents.” He believes that some coaches have forgotten how to communicate and are even, in some cases, afraid of the parents of their athletes. He states: “Some coaches create environments that set-up ‘helicopter’ parents and until we change the actual structure and the design of our environment and give people other choices, we’re going to continue this problem. We (coaches) set up systems where everything is based on game play. Coaches have to do a better job of communicating to the parents their goals and expectations. Coaches don’t have strategies for how to deal with parents. They haven’t set up contact with ‘this is what we’ll talk about.’ Obviously there is always going to be one or two parents who cause problems but the reality is, parents will start policing themselves once you’ve set up these parameters for them that say ‘this is what we expect, this is what we abide by.’ The other thing is, people are basically good, I believe that. If parents know you have the best interest of their child in mind, if you love their kid, they’re going to accept what you do. It’s when
they see you not doing what you should really be doing, not treating their child properly or not being organized, then parents are going to fight you. It’s easy for us as coaches to say parents are bad, so what are we doing about it?” (Biebel)

Bill Collar was a social studies teacher and football coach at Seymour High School in Wisconsin for 29 years. During his career, Collar was recognized as Wisconsin Teacher of the Year and Wisconsin Coach of the Year, having coached state champions in football and track. Collar, now a motivational speaker, feels that communication is the key to preventing over- or under-involvement of parents in their children’s sports. He echoes Robert Biebel’s concern about lack of communication when he states, “We got to the point after a few years of coaching at Seymour that we had a required parent-and-athlete meeting where at least one of the parents had to be there. We would meet in the auditorium and we (the coaching staff) would explain the goals and objectives of our program and emphasize to the parents that the number-one job as the coach is to make this experience a positive one for your son, and the coaches have to be able to do the coaching. We told the parents we appreciated their support and expected them to cheer for the team, but to please allow the coaching to be left up to the coaches.” As far as absentee parents go, Collar claims: “I made many trips in the country to talk with a few parents. I can think of some farms I went to where I pulled my car up, the big dog would come barking and you’re kind of afraid to get out of the car. Just wind down the window and yell, ‘Is it ok?’ ‘Oh ya, he won’t hurt ya.’ But then sit down and try and convince the parents of the benefit of sport and what football can do for them and the values associated with teamwork, those kinds of things. Sometimes when you get those parents involved they can sometimes just turn around. But once again you have to go to them; you can’t
wait for them to come to you. I can think of a few who just didn’t realize the value of being there at the game and supporting their son and that’s a difficult situation. There were times when I was coaching where my wife had to walk on the field with a player during parents’ night because the athlete’s parents didn’t show up.” (Collar) If given the choice between helicopter parents and absentee parents, Collar would choose the helicopter parents. He feels that it is easier to work with parents who are interested and concerned about their children.

After explaining this research paper to retired Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel Packers beat writer and Packers historian Cliff Christl, he told me of a long-time Wisconsin coach who once told him that the best athletes he’s ever worked with came from an orphanage.

**Helicopter vs. Absentee**

A common view is that involvement lies on a continuum with high involvement (helicopter) on one end and low involvement (absentee) on the other – the implication being that high involvement shows over-involvement and low involvement denotes lack of support. In the academic arena, it is suggested that a U-shaped relationship exists between parent involvement and the child’s stress levels. This means that parents who are moderately involved in their child’s schooling create less stress for their children than those who are highly or minimally involved. Likewise, in the sport domain, Hellstedt (1987) finds that moderate parental involvement allows parents to provide support for their child’s participation in sports. However, both low and high parental involvement generally create a less optimal environment, which is likely to increase stress and reduce enjoyment of playing that sport. It can be hypothesized that the degree of parent
involvement will predict the level of stress felt when children participate in sports. (Stein, Raedeke, and Glenn)

It is, moreover, possible to have highly involved parents who are not overly involved. It is the quality of that involvement that needs to be examined and adjusted. Dixon, Bruening, and Warner found that athletes work best with parental support consisting of encouragement without pressure. Some athletes in their study explicitly stated that this led to their continuation in sport. (Dixon, Warner, and Bruening 538-559)

**Parental Red Flags**

Bruce Brown, a highly respected teacher and soccer coach (both in high school and college athletics) for 35 years in the state of Washington and former special presenter for the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA), speaks around the country on the role of athletics with players, coaches, parents, and school districts. Brown is the author of six books on sport, character, and coaching and has been featured on seven coaching videos. Brown believes that athletics are one of the few opportunities for some children to succeed or fail in a safe environment. He lists a few red flags that parents may be too involved in their child’s athletics:

1. You share in the credit after a game when things go well.
2. You attempt to resolve your child’s problem with the coaches.
3. You continue to coach them when it is obvious that they know more about the sport than you do…usually around age 13.
4. You talk or yell at a referee.
5. You make excuses for failures on the field.
6. Your kids avoid you after the game – physically or conversationally.

7. You are more nervous about a game than your child.

8. The outcome of the game good/bad lasts longer on you than it does on your child.

Here’s what Brown believes a parent’s role should be during the game and one coaches will support:

1. Practice objectivity: Soccer is a fast contact sport in a confined space that makes it very subjective. The game is perceived by what color jersey your child is wearing. Go to a game where you don’t know anyone, and you’ll be amazed at what good coaching and refereeing there is.

2. Model Appropriate Behavior: We have all seen screaming parents. Remember that you are a role model for your child and that your actions may negatively impact their experience.

3. Focus on the Team: Try to avoid having a spotlight on your child throughout the whole game. Soccer is a team sport. It can place additional pressure on your child.

4. One Instructional Voice: Release your child to take instruction from his coach. Support, encourage, and yell positives all night, but leave the instruction to the coach.

5. Four Roles: You can be a player, coach, referee, or a fan. We all must pick one role …we can’t be two! (Brown)

**Survey Methodology**

To examine parental involvement in children’s high school athletics, a survey was conducted with help of the Strategic Research Institute at St. Norbert College in De Pere, Wis., led by Dr. David Wegge. The object of the survey was to see how coaches and
athletic directors in the state of Wisconsin viewed the topic of “Parental Involvement in Children’s Athletics.” David Anderson, the executive director of the Wisconsin Intercollegiate Athletic Association (WIAA), was asked to issue a survey to his member coaches and athletic directors. In return, Anderson and the WIAA received the survey results and this thesis to review and share with member coaches and athletic directors/coordinators.

During the first week of November 2013, Anderson sent an email to athletic directors/coordinators at both public and non-public high schools across the state, asking them to complete the survey. There are 424 public school districts in the state of Wisconsin and 527 high schools. In addition, there are 850 private schools in Wisconsin, of which 53 are high schools identified grades 9-12. The number grows to 66 when you include high schools with added or fewer grades. (Ryberg)

The athletic directors were asked by Anderson to share the survey (embedded in email sent) with their respective coaches in every sport. To help increase the odds of a higher survey sample size, an announcement was made in front of roughly 250 men’s and women’s high school basketball coaches from Wisconsin at a coaching clinic at Appleton East High School in Appleton, Wis., in October 2013 when coaches were invited to complete the survey.

A list of questions was established for the survey with the focus being on “helicopter” versus “absentee” parents. We tried to keep the coaches, athletic directors and David Anderson from the WIAA in mind while formulating the questions. What would they want to know and what would be interesting to them? They were the audience, per se, for framing the questions. From there, with the help of Dr. Wegge, the list of questions was
narrowed down and included in the survey. The complete questionnaire is included in the appendix.

The first five questions dealt with school and coach/athletic director demographics. For example, how large was the school district, how long had they been with the district, were they a coach or athletic director, and if a coach, what sport(s) were they responsible for. These questions were asked to determine whether factors such as size of the school district, years of experience, and type of sport played a role in the perception of parental involvement at the high school level.

The next section of questions in the survey (6-11) focused on communications. Coaches and athletic directors were asked how they communicate to their student athletes and parents. These questions were asked to determine how important communication is in establishing goals and expectations and eliminating potential problems for student athletes and parents.

Questions 12-20 in the survey focused on whether coaches and athletic directors view “helicopter” parents as a positive or negative force for both the student-athlete and the athletic program, whether athletes of “helicopter” parents have more or less success, if the number of helicopter parents has increased, decreased or stayed the same, and how coaches and athletic directors handle “helicopter” parents. These questions were asked to determine whether coaches and athletic directors see “helicopter” parents as a positive or a negative for their program(s).

Questions 21-29 in the survey focused on how coaches and athletic directors view “absentee” parents. Do they see “absentee” parents as a positive or negative force for the student-athlete and the athletic program, do athletes of “absentee” parents have more or
less success, has the number of “absentee” parents has increased, decreased or stayed the same, and how do coaches and athletic directors handle “absentee” parents. These questions were asked to determine whether coaches and athletic directors see “absentee” parents as a positive or a negative for their program(s).

Finally, questions 30 and 31 directly posed the question of whether coaches and athletic directors would prefer working with “helicopter” or “absentee” parents, and questions 32 and 33 dealt with why student-athletes leave competitive sports and whether there was anything else coaches and athletic directors wanted to add about parental involvement in children’s athletics.

**Intercoder Reliability**

In addition to the 33 questions, there were also ten open-ended questions in the survey, producing nearly 15,000 written responses from coaches and athletic directors. Sarah VandenHeuvel, a research assistant from St. Norbert College’s Strategic Research Institute and myself, coded all 15,000 comments. A coding rubric was created for each open-ended question and intercoder reliability statistics were calculated for each open-ended question. Intercoder reliability for all statements was .80. Once the variability was calculated, we met a second time to reach a consensus on where the differences existed in the coding efforts. Thesis advisor Dr. Kevin Quinn, provided the statistical package EViews 8 that produced the final statistical data for the open-ended questions.

Intercoder reliability refers to the extent to which two or more independent coders agree on the coding of the content of interest with an application of the same coding scheme. In surveys, such coding is most often applied to respondents’ answers to open-
ended questions. (Lavrakas)

Results

St. Norbert College’s Strategic Research Institute received 1,468 completed surveys: 1,196 of those were from coaches (approximately 19% of all Wisconsin high school head coaches), 238 from athletic directors (approximately 47% of all Wisconsin athletic directors), and 34 were from others who received the survey and completed it. (Table 1)

Table 1: Demographic make-up of the survey sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Sample n</th>
<th>Valid Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Coach</td>
<td>1,196</td>
<td>81%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athletic Director</td>
<td>238</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>1,468</td>
<td>99%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Columns may not equal 100% due to rounding

In the state of Wisconsin there are approximately 506 athletic directors/coordinators and approximately 6,311 head coaches of both men’s and women’s sports. It is not known whether assistant coaches were forwarded the survey. (Anderson)

Of those coaches who responded to the survey, forty-three percent have been coaching for more than fifteen years while nineteen percent of athletic directors have been in their position for more than fifteen years. (Table 2)
Table 2: **How many years have you been athletic director/coach?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years</th>
<th>Athletic Director</th>
<th>Coach</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Two Years or Less</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-6 Years</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-10 Years</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11-15 Years</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More Than 15 Years</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These individuals have had a great deal of experience dealing with parents. It is clear from the survey results that both coaches and athletic directors see “helicopter” parents as a problem or a negative force. Interestingly, athletic directors see “helicopter” parents as more of a problem for the student athlete than do coaches. The hypothesis is that athletic directors have to deal with more “helicopter” parents than coaches.

Table 3: **Are “helicopter” parents a positive or negative force for the student athlete?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Force</th>
<th>Athletic Director</th>
<th>Coach</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Negative Force</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive Force</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Sure</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Columns may not equal 100% due to rounding
P < .05

Seventy-one percent of athletic directors surveyed indicated that “helicopter” parents are a negative force compared to sixty-three percent of the coaches. The difference between athletic directors and coaches is statistically significant. (Table 3)

Both coaches and athletic directors see “helicopter” parents as a negative force for their respective schools’ athletic programs as well, but again, athletic directors view it as more of a problem. (Table 4)
Fifty-seven percent of athletic directors said “helicopter” parents are a negative force in their school’s athletic programs compared to forty-eight percent of coaches. The difference between athletic directors and coaches is statistically significant. (Table 4)

The reasons for this may have to do with athletic directors dealing with the entire athletic program (several sports) and coaches just focusing on one sport and a limited number of athletes. Also, many coaches mentioned the fact that parents don’t understand or appreciate the chain of command and will go around coaches directly to the athletic director with their complaints or problems. This may be another reason why athletic directors see “helicopter” parents as more of a negative force. Simply put, they’re communicating and dealing with a higher number of parents than coaches are.

The issue of “helicopter” parents does not just reside in larger school districts; it shows up across the board in the survey.
Table 5: Are “helicopter” parents a positive or negative force for the student-athlete by enrollment of school district?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Fewer than 2,000 students</th>
<th>2,000 to 4,999 students</th>
<th>5,000 to 9,999 students</th>
<th>10,000 or more students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Negative Force</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive Force</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Sure</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Columns may not equal 100% due to rounding

When asked if “helicopter” parents are a positive or negative force for the student-athlete in their school districts, 63 percent of coaches and athletic directors who work at school districts with 10,000 or more students said it’s a negative force, while 64 percent of coaches and athletic directors at schools with fewer than 2,000 students voiced the same complaint. “Helicopter” parents reside in big cities and rural areas. No school district is immune. (Table 5)

Parental involvement in children’s high school athletics has changed in recent years.

Table 6: Over the past five years do you think the number of “helicopter” parents has increased, decreased, or stayed about the same by position?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Athletic Director</th>
<th>Coach</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Increased</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stayed About the Same</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decreased</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Sure</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Columns may not equal 100% due to rounding

P < .05

Athletic directors (at 63 percent) and coaches (at 46 percent) say the number of “helicopter” parents has increased over the past five years. Again, athletic directors come in at a higher number and the assumption is that they’re dealing with more parents
overall. Both coaches and athletic directors certainly don’t think the number of “helicopter” parents has decreased. The difference between athletic directors and coaches is statistically significant. (Table 6)

So why do parents get overly involved in their children’s athletics? Forty-five percent of coaches and athletic directors said the main reason is because parents live vicariously through their child. (Graph 1)

**Graph 1: Reasons for parents being overly involved in child’s athletics?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reasons for Overly Involved Parents</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Living vicariously</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protective Parents</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time/Money Invested</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Controlling Parents</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Want Success for Child</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scholarship Dollars</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unrealistic Expectations</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Frank Smoll, a sport psychologist at the University of Washington, refers to this phenomenon as a reverse-dependency trap. Parents who over-identify with their children start to see their children as an extension of their own egos. “In this situation the parents become dependent upon the children for feelings of self-worth,” said Smoll. “If the
children are successful, the parents feel good about themselves. If the children fail, however, the parents feel bad about themselves.” (Berry) Not surprisingly this situation places children under a high degree of pressure. As one coach put it, “Parents have invested a great deal of time and money in their child’s success and they want a return on their investment.”

One coach provided the following anecdote on the survey: “I had a dad tell me he spent $18,000 on tennis lessons and he expects/demands his daughter make varsity. I told him, that’s great, all I care is that they’re competitive and a good person and they give 100 percent. She did not make varsity.”

In reality, most student-athletes have a better chance of getting an academic scholarship than they do an athletic scholarship. For example, in Washington State in 1994 there were 9,776 senior boys who played high school sports. Of those, 117 of them got a college scholarship, which is only 1.2 percent. According to the NCAA website, about two percent of high school seniors get an athletic scholarship at an NCAA institution. (Berry)

Instead, teenagers might better focus on being the best students they can be. It will increase their chances of earning academic merit awards which are much more plentiful than athletic scholarships. For example, at private colleges and universities, 85 percent of students receive an academic scholarship or grant. (O'Shaughnessy)

When asked what specific challenges “helicopter” parents pose for coaches and athletic directors, twenty percent said they question coaches’ decisions and strategies, including playing time. (Graph 2)
Graph 2: What challenges do “helicopter” parents pose to you?

One coach claimed some parents try to “bud into coach’s meetings where we discuss playing time for players and strategy. It’s difficult to ask them to leave. They constantly call to discuss things and they stay in their student-athlete’s head about certain coaching techniques and philosophies, often undermining coaching efforts.” Coaches also indicated that “helicopter” parents take up a great deal of time with phone calls, emails, Facebook or texts. One coach said “One hundred emails a day and meetings with the administration that are not needed.” Many coaches claimed parents will try to communicate with them before or after practice, all of which takes time. As one former coach and athletic director put it, “Parents take ownership away from the student-athlete.” In addition, there are also those parents who feel they have the knowledge and know-how to be a coach. These parents were labeled as sideline coaches.

On a positive note, thirteen percent of the coaches and athletic directors surveyed claim
that “helicopter” parents pose no problem. There are many parents who are involved in booster club and fundraising, and are willing to help with open gyms. They just want to assist any way they can and leave the coaching to the coach. It should be noted that many who coach individual sports like golf, track, or cross country said they have very few problems with “helicopter” parents because, as one girls’ track coach put it, “The athlete can either jump 5’4” or not.”

Coaches and athletic directors alike agree that, although “helicopter’ parents are a problem in today’s high school athletics, they’re not an extremely serious problem. The difference between athletic directors and coaches is statistically significant. (Table 7)

Table 7: **How serious of a problem do you think “helicopter” parents are in athletics today?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Athletic Director</th>
<th>Coach</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Very Serious</strong></td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Moderately Serious</strong></td>
<td>37</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Somewhat Serious</strong></td>
<td>40</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Not Serious</strong></td>
<td>7</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Not Sure</strong></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Columns may not equal 100% due to rounding

P < .05

Only thirteen percent of athletic directors and twelve percent of coaches surveyed said “helicopter” parents are a very serious problem. Most believe that it’s a somewhat serious to a moderately serious problem. Only seven percent of athletic directors said “helicopter” parents are not a serious problem, compared to fourteen percent of coaches. This goes back to the notion that athletic directors have more problems with “helicopter” parents than coaches.

When asked what advantages “helicopter” parents provide their student-athlete, thirty-
five percent of coaches and athletic directors believe that parents positively support their child at practices, games and by sending them to summer camps to improve on their sport(s). (Graph 3)

Graph 3: **What advantages do you see “helicopter” parents providing their student-athletes?**

They also can count on these parents for “food, feedback and rides,” as one coach put it. Seventeen percent said children of “helicopter” parents are accountable and prepared. Another 17 percent said there is no advantage to “helicopter” parents. As one coach stated, “Helicopter parents put too much stress on the player and the coach. It makes it hard for the coaches and players to enjoy the game.”

It’s clear, the longer coaches have been in their position(s), the more they see “helicopter” parents as a negative force in their athletic program(s). (Table 8)
Table 8: Are “helicopter” parents a positive or a negative force in your school’s athletic program by years of coaching experience.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Two Years or less</th>
<th>3-5 Years</th>
<th>6-10 Years</th>
<th>11-15 Years</th>
<th>More than 15 Years</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Sure</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
<td><strong>101</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Columns may not equal 100% due to rounding

52 percent of coaches with more than 15 years of experience see “helicopter” parents as a negative force in their program(s). (Table 8) Of those who have coached 11-15 years or 6-10 years, 50 percent say “helicopter” parents are a negative force. The interpretation here is because coaches have been in their positions for a great deal of time, they have had more experiences in dealing with “helicopter” parents and thus have a more negative outlook on them.

The coaches also believe the number of helicopter parents has increased over the past five years. Forty-nine percent of coaches with 15 or more years say it has increased while 53 percent with 11-15 years of coaching experience have seen an increase. (Table 9)
Table 9: Has the number of “helicopter” parents increased, decreased, or stayed the same by experience level of coaches.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Two Years or Less</th>
<th>3-5 Years</th>
<th>6-10 Years</th>
<th>11-15 Years</th>
<th>More than 15 Years</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Increased</strong></td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Stayed The Same</strong></td>
<td>26</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Decreased</strong></td>
<td>13</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Not Sure</strong></td>
<td>33</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Columns may not equal 100% due to rounding

P < .05

One factor could be that the experienced coaches and athletic directors have had to deal with more “helicopter” parents over the years than an athletic director or coach who has only been at his or her job a few years. Another hypothesis would be young coaches and athletic directors are much more social-media savvy; they might have fewer problems with “helicopter” parents because they do a better job of communicating their goals and expectations to parents through social media.

Social media is defined as any type of shared social interaction between individuals, groups, and companies via the Internet. It includes blogging and podcasting, using social networks such as Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter, sharing videos on YouTube and photos on Flickr, and using email to send and receive messages. Coaches and athletes might also use instant messaging, online chatting, or texting on cell phones to communicate as well. (Martens)

There are some coaches and athletic directors who are “old school” and choose to ignore social media, dismissing it as simply an electronic version of neighborhood gossiping, but that may be mistake. Social media can be a great way to communicate.
important information to the parents of student-athletes, such as letting them know what
time they need to pick their student-athlete up after practice or asking for their help with open gym.

When asked whether coaches surveyed maintained a website or a Facebook page to keep players and parents updated on their sport season, 55 percent of the coaches said “yes” and 45 percent said “no.” According to Rainer Martens, author of “Successful Coaching,” one has to be careful when using social media. “Some people avoid speaking directly with individuals by using email or instant messaging when they anticipate a difficult conversation, such as a confrontation or conflict. That’s almost always a mistake. Face-to-face conversations allow you to see facial expressions and hear tone of voice, important aspects of working through conflict.” (Martens) There were coaches who said they only meet face-to-face with parents and will not communicate through social media because, as one coach put it, “Once you let parents hide behind email or Facebook, they never leave you alone.”

So not only do coaches need to be skillful in what they communicate with athletes and their parents, they need to be wise in what medium is used to communicate messages. This may be an area where young coaches who have grown up with social media have an advantage over older coaches who would prefer not to deal with social media at all.

When asked what coaches and athletic directors found to be the best strategy for handling “helicopter” parents, thirty-nine percent said you have to actively communicate with them and be honest and respectful. (Graph 4) “Nine times out of ten the parents only want to be heard,” said one coach. “I find that if I just listen and assure them that their child will be treated fairly, then they (parents) are happy.” Twenty percent said
expectations must be set, so parents know where they stand.

Graph 4: What have you found to be the best strategy in handling “helicopter” parents?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Best Strategy for Handling &quot;Helicopter&quot; Parents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communicate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Set Expectations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Redirect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ignore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As one coach who responded to the survey question put it, “I have found it best to clearly lay out our team’s ‘operational procedures’ (how things are done, in what manner and timelines of how to address coaching concerns) at the beginning of the season.”

Some coaches and athletic directors indicated that redirecting parents by giving them a job to do such as helping with team meals or fundraisers can be beneficial. (Graph 4) As one coach stated, “It gives them (parent) a purpose and makes them feel important.” This much is clear; communication is critical in keeping harmony between parents, coaches and athletic directors.

“Helicopter” parents pose one set of problems and “absentee” parents another. When it comes to “absentee” parents, Wisconsin coaches and athletic directors see them as a negative force for their student-athletes and their athletic programs. The difference
between athletic directors and coaches is statistically significant. (Table 10)

Table 10: Are “absentee” parents a positive or negative force for the student-athlete?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Athletic Director</th>
<th>Coach</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Negative Force</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive Force</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Sure</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Columns may not equal 100% due to rounding
P < .05

Fully, 73 percent of athletic directors and 69 percent of coaches said “absentee” parents are a negative force for the student-athlete. The difference between athletic directors and coaches is statistically significant. (Table 10)

Fifty-five percent of athletic directors and 51 percent of coaches believe “absentee” parents are a negative force in their athletic programs. The difference between athletic directors and coaches is statistically significant. (Table 11)

Table 11: Are “absentee” parents a positive or negative force for the athletic program?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Athletic Director</th>
<th>Coach</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Negative Force</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive Force</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Sure</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Columns may not equal 100% due to rounding
P < .05

Thirty-eight percent of the coaches and athletic directors surveyed said “absentee” parents provide NO advantage to the student-athlete. (Graph 5) As one coach put it, “absentee parents make it very hard on the athlete affecting their self-value.”
Graph 5: What advantages do you see “absentee” parents providing to their student athletes?

Twenty-one percent surveyed said because “absentee” parents are not around and involved, their son or daughter is more independent and self-reliant. Twenty percent said athletes of “absentee” parents feel less pressure, have more freedom, and in some cases, they enjoy participating in the sport more. (Graph 5) According to one coach, “If the parent is absent for the right reason(s), like working to make ends meet, then that can have a positive effect on the student athlete. It’s showing them the importance of choosing what is best for the family even though it may be difficult to miss their child’s sporting event(s).”

When asked what specific challenges “absentee” parents pose for coaches and athletic directors, seventeen percent said they see how the student-athlete lacks support from “absentee” parents. This includes emotional development and family support. (Graph 6)
Sixteen percent of coaches and athletic directors indicated they pose NO problems because they’re never around. Fifteen percent claimed that it’s hard to communicate when they never see an “absentee” parent at games or practice. (Graph 6) Accountability of the athlete, or lack thereof, can be a problem as well. As some coaches put it, “If ‘absentee’ parents don’t seem to care, why should the student-athlete?” It sets the wrong example. Some coaches indicated they will step up when necessary to make sure the student-athlete of an “absentee” parent has what he or she needs, like transportation. They also try to be there for emotional support and take on a parental role if need be, but the coaches admitted that can be touchy and a balancing act.
Thirty-six percent of coaches and athletic directors said the best strategy in handling “absentee” parents is to try and maintain communication, whether by email, phone, sending notes home with the student athlete, or Facebook. (Graph 7)

Graph 7: *What have you found to be the best strategy in handling “absentee” parents?*

![Bar chart showing the best strategies in handling absentee parents](chart.png)

When the coach or athletic director does make contact with the “absentee” parent, they must encourage them to get involved in the program. One coach said “You have to be relentless in contacting and encouraging ‘absentee’ parents to get involved and make certain activities mandatory for parents.” Fifty-six percent of the athletic directors surveyed said they require their coaches to hold a meeting with parents of their team members to discuss their goals and expectations.

Both “helicopter” and “absentee” parents pose unique and challenging problems for
coaches and athletic directors alike. But in the end, coaches and athletic directors agreed that student-athletes are better supported by “helicopter” parents than “absentee” parents.

(Chart 1)

**Chart 1: Would you prefer to have “helicopter” parents or “absentee” parents for your student-athletes?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Helicopter Parents</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Absentee Parents</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Sure</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Numbers may not equal 100% due to rounding

Forty-one percent of the coaches and athletic directors said they would prefer to have “helicopter” parents; it’s much easier to communicate and set expectations, as they know the student-athlete is supported at home by “helicopter” parents. (Chart 1)

Thirty-five percent of coaches and athletic directors said they would prefer to have “helicopter” parents as opposed to 31 percent who favored “absentee” parents for their athletic program. (Chart 2)
Chart 2: Would you prefer to have “helicopter” parents or “absentee” parents for your athletic program?

Frank Smoll, co-author or editor of 13 books and manuals on athletics for youth, who has done extensive work on helping parents and coaches understand one another, says “The number one problem parent is the one that you never see — the athlete looks up into the stands at practice or at a game and Mom or Dad are never there. That’s a real problem parent.” (Berry)

Forcing a student-athlete to work on their sport of choice at an early age does not always add up to success at the high school level. Twenty-one percent of the coaches and athletic directors surveyed said the primary reason student-athletes leave competitive sports is due to burnout. (Graph 8) Many parents start their child in youth camps at an early age and send them to year-round practice, so by the time they reach the high school level they’ve had their fill of playing the sport(s). Nineteen percent said many student-
athletes today lack commitment and are not willing to work hard or put the time in to be successful.

Graph 8: What do you think are some of the primary reasons that student-athletes leave competitive sports?

As one coach stated, “parents are advocating for their kids more, but it is getting over-the-top and it’s hurting the coaching profession as more coaches are stepping aside.”

Another coach wrote, “We cannot train athletes to be responsible adults if the parent is always there fighting for their cause. They (student-athletes) have to learn to deal and accept things for themselves and on their own terms.” Lastly, another coach claimed, “Take away the parents and coaching would be fun.”
**Conclusion**

Based on the research, people interviewed, and the survey data from Wisconsin coaches and athletic directors, it’s clear that “helicopter” parenting is on the rise and “absentee” parenting is a negative force in children’s high school athletics. Although there may be a general increase in the number of instances of “helicopter” parents at youth sporting events, it is important to recognize that the majority of parents behave in a manner that is fitting for the youth sports environment. Most young athletes believe that their parents provide them with a supportive, stable, secure, and encouraging environment. (Hellstedt, 1995) On the other hand, under-involved (absentee) parents may deny their children the rich opportunities for personal growth and socialization that sports provide. Children can’t and often don’t want to succeed without parental support. (Dixon)

It is also clear that some coaches need to do a better job of communicating their goals and expectations with parents. If parents understand their role from the beginning, it may eliminate some of the problems that arise. Smoll said coaches should invite input from parents, but in any interaction the coach is in charge. Smoll claimed, “Coaches have to present a picture of a capable leader. But they also need to convey the message that they are open to input. The interaction between a coach and a parent has to be at an adult, mature level.” Smoll added, “The coach’s invitation to talk is not an open invitation to take abuse, and parents should treat coaches with dignity and respect at all times. They should recognize that the bottom line for both the coach and the parent is the welfare of the young athlete.” (Berry)

Moderation and common sense must be the rule of thumb for parents in dealing with
their child’s athletic endeavors. When parents tend to live vicariously through their children, support turns to pressure. If the child has any degree of success in athletics, parents may see potential dollar signs, not realizing how hard it is for their child to participate in their sport of choice at ANY level in college. There are more than seven million high school athletes, but there are college roster spots for just two percent of them. Getting to the NCAA Division I level is even tougher. Just one percent of those seven million student-athletes get a “full ride” to a Division I program. (“Athletic Scholarship Statistics”)

Take basketball, for example. The National Collegiate Athletic Association website (NCAA) shares the following information:

- Less than one in 35, approximately 3.1 percent, of high school senior boys playing interscholastic basketball will go on to play men’s basketball at any NCAA member institution.
- About one in 75, or approximately 1.2 percent of NCAA male senior basketball players, will get drafted by a National Basketball Association (NBA) team.
- Three in 10,000, or approximately 0.03 percent of high school senior boys playing Interscholastic basketball will eventually be drafted by an NBA team.

Coakley recommends that preventive strategies be put into place aimed at changing the structure and organization of sport programs, the social relations associated with the training and competition in high-performance sport, and the range of life experiences available to young athletes. He suggests that parents help their athletes develop a self-complexity, or multiple identities, that would provide a cushion for the stress inherent in their sport lives. Parents should allow their children to find social relationships in other
activities and roles, and to construct their own identities unrelated to sports.

In the end, parents should do everything in their power to make their child’s sporting experience positive and memorable, because in most cases, the memories will be all they have. The main focus should be on fostering qualities children need in order to be successful, well-adjusted people, and respectable members of society. (Dixon, Warner, and Bruening 538-559)

It’s been said that there are six words parents of athletes should remember “I love to watch you play.” That’s it. No pressure. No correction. No judgment. (That’s the coach’s job). Just pure love of their child using their gift in competition. (Elmore)
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Appendix A

As part of my master’s program, I took a course on sports ethics in which we were asked to write a code of ethics manual. This code of ethics manual, drawn from other sources, applies to parents and is designed to be a useful guide as they carry out their ethical responsibilities.

Table of Contents for: Parental Involvement in Children’s High School Athletics Code of Ethics

I. Parents Code of Ethics: Preamble……………………………..49
II. Professional Ethical Conduct for Parents……………………………..50
III. Professional Practices and Performances……………………………..51
IV. Ethical Conduct Toward Athletes, Coaches, Administrators, Other Parents or Community Members……………52
V. Conclusion…………………………………………………………53

Parents Code of Ethics: Preamble

Youth sports programs play an important role in promoting the physical, social and emotional development of children. It is important for parents to encourage high school athletes and to embrace the values of good sportsmanship. Sportsmanship rules are “where one is honor-bound to follow the spirit and letter of the rules and are designed to prevent ethically questionable and sometimes violent behavior.” (Lumpkin, Stoll, Beller-
Parents involved in high school sporting events should be models of good sportsmanship and should lead by example by demonstrating fairness, respect, and self-control.

Unfortunately, parents’ role in high school sports tends to manifest itself in the form of external intimidation. Parents believe they often do have the ability to influence the outcome of the game through initiating or encouraging negative behavior and by pressuring the coach to make decisions favoring their own children. Although the intention may initially be to cheer and support their children, actions parents take may progress to unethical behavior such as attacking others, which reduces the overall quality of competition. (Lumpkin, Stoll and Beller-page 63)

The controlling forces of this code of ethics are the four moral/ethical values stated in Lumpkin, Stoll, and Beller’s work, Sport Ethics: Applications for Fair Play — justice, honesty, beneficence and responsibility. Responsibility, doing what is expected and being accountable for one’s actions, will be a primary focus of this code. Likewise, beneficence, the practice of doing no harm, is also a driving force in the following honor code. Justice includes fair play and fair treatment of players, coaches, referees and parents. Finally, honesty, the capacity of being truthful or trustworthy, translates into accepting the code of ethics for parents and following it. (Page 27)

A) Ethical Conduct for Parents

- Conduct yourselves in a respectful, just and responsible manner toward players, officials, coaches and other parents. (Lumpkin, Stoll, Beller-page 246)

1.) Parents will show respect for the opposing players, coaches, spectators, support groups and facilities.
Examples include the following:

(a) Booster clubs may provide welcome posters for opposing team members.

(b) Booster clubs may provide water for visiting team.

(c) Parents encourage players to shake hands after a game no matter what the outcome is.

(d) Parents encourage other teams and coaches.

(e) Parents exhibit positive attitudes and friendliness toward opposing teams and family members.

(f) Parents keep host team’s facilities orderly.

(g) Parents will be cognizant of the fact that the game is for the players and not for the parents. (“WAC Student Leadership Conference”)

2.) Parents will be respectful of all officials’ decisions.

Examples include the following:

(a) Parents will refrain from being “sideline referees.”

(b) Parents will refrain from arguing with or complaining about a referee’s call or decision.

(c) Parents will treat all referees with respect regardless of race, gender, creed or ability. (“Parents Code of Conduct”)

3.) Parents who have a concern should take time to talk with coaches in an appropriate manner, including selecting the proper time and place for this discussion. Be sure to follow the designated chain of command.

Examples include the following:

(a) If you have a question(s) about your child’s playing time, set up a meeting with the head coach to discuss the matter in private. Do not try to meet with the coach before or after a game or at practice.
(b) As a parent, if you have a specific problem or disagreement with a head coach, don’t go over his head and file a complaint with the athletic director or another administrator. Make an appointment to meet the coach at an agreed time and location. (“Arrowhead High School Parent/Athlete Code of Conduct”)

**B) Practices and Performances**

- Parents should comply with rules and regulations of their Interscholastic Athletic Association and the National High School Coaches Association (NHSCA).

  1.) Parents should gain an understanding and appreciation for the rules of the contest their son or daughter is taking part in. Parents shall not seek an advantage by circumvention of the spirit or letter of the rules. “Parents and fans should be held to a code of conduct that requires them to either behave responsibly or forfeit their right to spectate.” (Lumpkin, Stoll, Beller-page 77)

  2.) Parents should reinforce drug- and alcohol-free policies by themselves refraining from the use of any controlled substances before and during athletic contests. (“Sports Parents Code of Ethics”)

  3.) Parents should understand that this is not an adult sports program, but rather a youth sports program organized by the high school for children in the community and for their enjoyment. (“National Youth Sports Code of Conduct”) “Some parents burden their children by living vicariously through their offspring.” (Lumpkin, Stoll and Beller-page 118)

  4.) Parents should understand that a ticket to their child’s athletic event is a privilege, not a right.

**C) Ethical Conduct Toward Athletes, Coaches, Administrators, Other Parents or Community Members**

- Avoid making false statements.

- Avoid coercing, harassing or discriminating against another based on race, color, religion, national origin, age, sex or disability.

- Avoid revealing confidential information concerning children or players on team unless disclosure serves lawful professional purposes or is required by law. (Lumpkin, Stoll, Beller-page 246)

  1.) Parents will be positive role models through their actions and words to ensure
their child has the best athletic experience possible.

2.) Parents will encourage their child/athlete to treat any coach, parent, player, official or any other attendee with respect regardless of race, creed, color, national origin, sex, sexual orientation or ability. (“U.S. Squash”)

3.) Parents will not engage or encourage their child/athlete to engage in any verbal or physical threats, fight or argue with any coach, parent, player, participant, official or any other attendee.

4.) Parents will refrain from creating disturbances that would be detrimental to the flow of the game and/or the safety of the participants involved.

5.) The parent of a current player shall play no active part in the evaluation of coaches. The parent shall support the decisions of the coaches, athletic director, principal, superintendent and school board.

6.) A parent shall not exert pressure on coaches or teachers to give their student-athletes special consideration.

7.) Parents should not put undue pressure on their child to succeed. (“Code of Ethics for Parents & Other Spectators”) “Parents who reward and praise winning while berating or ignoring losing, send clear messages that they value only one outcome.” (Lumpkin, Stoll, Beller-page 118)

**Conclusion**

It is the responsibility of the parent(s) to police themselves. Every parent is issued this Code of Ethics manual. If a parent witnesses a discrepancy in the behavior of a fellow parent, they should report the potential violation to the head coach or athletic director/administrator at the high school as soon as possible.

**Agreement**

As a parent of a high school athlete, I understand that if I fail to abide by the rules and guidelines listed above, I will be subject to disciplinary action that could include, but is not limited to, the following:

- Verbal warning by school official(s), head coach and/or head of league organization.

- Written warning: Parent(s) will be issued a strict warning for their behavior.

- Parental game suspension with written documentation of the incident kept on file by the school or organization.
• Parental season suspension.

--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Child’s Name (Please print)          Date

--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Parent’s Printed Name and Signature          Date

This form must be signed and returned to the coach by the first official practice or the athlete will not be able to participate in sports including practices, games, and road trips to athletic events.
Appendix B
Parental Involvement in Children's High School Athletics
Survey

WIAA PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN STUDENT ATHLETICS

Parents play a critical role in the development of our athletic programs at the WIAA. This survey is designed to learn more about parental involvement in the athletic program at your school. Please take a few minutes to complete the survey below. Your responses are completely confidential and your responses will never be associated with you personally. All results will be aggregated and presented in aggregate form only. A final report of the results will be available to you upon completion of the study. Thank you so much for taking time out of your busy day to complete this survey.

Q1 What is the approximate total enrollment of your school district?
   10,000 or more students
   5,000 to 9,999 students
   2,000 to 4,999 students
   Fewer than 2,000 students

Q2 What level within the school district are you primarily working in?
   High School
   Middle School
   Grade School

Q3 What is your position in the athletics program at your school?
   Athletic Director
   Coach
   Other: Specify _______________________

Q4 How many years have you been coaching?
   Two years or less
   3-5 years
   6-10 years
   11-15 years
   More than 15 years
Q5 Which of the following sports is your PRIMARY coaching responsibility?
Baseball
Men’s Basketball
Women’s Basketball
Softball
Football
Men’s Soccer
Women’s Soccer
Men’s Track
Women’s Track
Men’s Golf
Women’s Golf
Men’s Tennis
Women’s Tennis
Men’s Hockey
Women’s Hockey
Men’s LaCrosse
Women’s LaCrosse
Men’s Other: Specify
Women’s Other: Specify
Currently Not Coaching

Q6 As a coach, which of the following ways do you use to communicate your goals and expectations to student athletes? (Please Check All That Apply)
I meet individually with each team member to share my goals and expectations.
I meet with my team members as a group to share my goals and expectations.
I prepare a written handout that presents my goals and expectations and give that to my team members.
My team members know what my goals and expectations are without me having to directly communicate them to the team.
Other: Specify

Q7 As a coach, which of the following ways do you use to communicate your goals and expectations to the parents of your student athletes? (Please Check All That Apply)
I meet with the parents of my team members as a group to share my goals and expectation.
I prepare a written handout that presents my goals and expectations and give that to the parents of my team members.
I rely on the team members to communicate my goals and expectations to their parents.
Other: Specify
Q8 Do you have a website or Facebook page dedicated to the sport you are coaching to keep players and parents updated on their sport season?  
Yes
No

Q9 How many years have you been an Athletic Director?  
Two years or less
3-5 years
6-10 years
11-15 years
More than 15 years

Q10 How do you as an Athletic Director, handle the issue of coaches communicating their goals and expectations to their team members?  
I REQUIRE coaches to discuss their goals and expectations to their team members
I RECOMMEND that my coaches communicate their goals and expectations to their team
I leave this totally up to the coach’s discretion

Q11 How do you as an Athletic Director, handle the issue of coaches communicating their goals and expectations to the parents of their team members?  
I REQUIRE coaches to hold a meeting with parents of their team members to discuss their goals and expectations
I RECOMMEND that my coaches hold a meeting with parents of their team members to discuss their goals and expectations
I leave this totally up the coach’s discretion
INSTRUCTIONS: In the next series of questions we will be asking about your experiences with both “helicopter” parents and “absentee” parents. Some parents tend to be very involved in monitoring all of their children’s educational experiences including their involvement in athletics. These parents are often referred to as “helicopter” parents. Other parents tend to be not involved at all in their children’s educational experiences including athletics. These parents are often referred to as “absentee” parents.

HELICOPTER PARENTS

Q12 Overall, do you think that “helicopter” parents are a positive or a negative force in your school’s ATHLETIC PROGRAM?
   - Positive Force
   - Neither
   - Negative Force
   - Not Sure

Q13 Overall, do you think that “helicopter” parents are a positive or a negative force for the STUDENT ATHLETE?
   - Positive Force
   - Neither
   - Negative Force
   - Not Sure

Q14 Do student athletes with “helicopter” parents tend to have more or less success in athletics than other student athletes?
   - More Success
   - Same Level of Success
   - Less Success
   - Not Sure

Q15 Over the past five years do you think the number of “helicopter” parents has increased, decreased or stayed about the same?
   - Increased
   - Stayed About the Same
   - Decreased
   - Not Sure
Q16 How serious of a problem do you think “helicopter” parents are in athletics today?
   Very Serious
   Moderately Serious
   Somewhat Serious
   Not Serious
   Not Sure

Q17 Why do you think that some parents get overly involved in their children’s athletics?
   
   
   

Q18 What specific challenges do “helicopter” parents pose for you?
   
   
   

Q19 What advantages do you see “helicopter” parents providing to their student athletes?
   
   
   

Q20 What have you found to be the best strategy in handling “helicopter” parents?
   
   
   


ABSENTEE PARENTS

Q21 Overall, do you think that “absente” parents are a positive or a negative force in your school’s ATHLETIC PROGRAM?
   Positive Force
   Neither
   Negative Force
   Not Sure

Q22 Overall, do you think that “absentee” parents are a positive or a negative force for your STUDENT ATHLETES?
   Positive Force
   Neither
   Negative Force
   Not Sure

Q23 Do student athletes with “absentee” parents tend to have more or less success in athletics than other student athletes?
   More Success
   Same Level of Success
   Less Success
   Not Sure

Q24 Over the past five years do you think the number of “absentee” parents has increased, decreased or stayed about the same?
   Increased
   Stayed About the Same
   Decreased
   Not Sure

Q25 How serious of a problem do you think “absentee” parents are in athletics today?
   Very Serious
   Moderately Serious
   Somewhat Serious
   Not Serious
   Not Sure

Q26 Why do you think some parents are not actively involved in their children’s athletics?
Q27 What specific challenges do “absentee” parents pose for you?

---

Q28 What advantages do you see “absentee” parents providing to their student athletes?

---

Q29 What have you found to be the best strategy in handling “absentee” parents?

---

Q30 Would you prefer to have “helicopter” parents or “absentee” parents for your ATHLETIC PROGRAM?
   - Helicopter Parents
   - Absentee Parents
   - Not Sure

Q31 Would you prefer to have “helicopter” parents or “absentee” parents for your STUDENT ATHLETES?
   - Helicopter Parents
   - Absentee Parents
   - Not Sure

Q32 What do you think are some of the primary reasons that student athletes leave competitive sports today?

---

Q46 Is there anything else you would like to tell us about parental involvement in student athletics?

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Thank you so much for taking the time to participate in this study!