Giving children a sporting chance

Claire Hoare

A camera pans slowly across the crowd of spectators early one winter's morning. As parents smile, indulgently cheering every passage of play, very young footballers of no more than six years of age strive their hardest. The children fumble, they trip, stumble and often miss the ball completely. An avuncular voice-over extols these halcyon days of blossoming friendships and burgeoning attitudes, asserting that such experiences will forge lifelong memories for those most actively involved ... and for the children too.

In this McDonald's advertisement the message is well concealed and most adults probably smile in recognition upon its revelation. In some form or other we identify with its premise – as a parent, or perhaps as the member of an extended family, as a coach or a teacher. In any or all of these capacities, we want the best for children, hoping that their participation in sport will foster the positive and healthy attitudes that will be of benefit to them for life. Frequent media attention attests to the necessity of physical activity in an increasingly sedentary lifestyle, with VicHealth CEO Dr Rob Moodie alluding to labour saving devices such as remote controls, for example, which obviate the need for even incidental exercise. Dr Moodie laments this 'conspiracy of sedentariness' (Ferguson 2004, p.24) which sees society as increasingly inactive.

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Unfortunately though, and somewhat ironically, substantial evidence exists to suggest that while children benefit from physical activity, this does not mean that they will necessarily benefit from participation in organised sport.

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Eitzen (1999) expands upon such ironies and in fact has based an entire book on the paradoxes that exist in sport and the negative influence that these can have upon children's attitude to fair play; an opinion with which writers such as Lumpkin and Cuneen (2001) and Rowland (2000) agree. Others contend that prolonged involvement from an early age can lead to children coming to regard as part of the game such euphemisms for poor sportsmanship as a 'fair foul' (Pilz 1995, p.3) and 'game reasoning' (Hodge & Tod 1993, p.3) or viewing the opposition as 'the enemy' (Hager 1995, p.3).

Such an attitude in children is reinforced by the misconduct, both on and off the field, of some members of the sporting elite; undoubted role models themselves who are given frequent media coverage. Murphy (1999) refers to the acceptance of questionable behaviour as 'positive deviance' and laments its emulation by young and impressionable children who have been frequently exposed to the details of this because of the media interest it generates.

It may be argued in light of the above that children could simply choose to opt out of competitive sport. But this is far easier expressed than accomplished as peer social status is often determined by degree of involvement and sporting proficiency (or lack thereof). And if such a choice was an informed and enlightened decision, based on moral education as discussed by Arnold (1988; 1986), this may be a positive, edifying and character building experience. However, there is much to indicate that in opting out of sport, many children do so because of fear of failure. According to Hager (1995, p.4), when children in sport 'fail and fail often', their decision to no longer participate is not made from a positive and considered perspective. Instead, it is frequently a reaction to experiences that have already eroded confidence, motivation and self respect; the effects of which can subsequently impact upon learning, achievement and personal development in the long term.

While sport holds a number of pitfalls for children, what helps them to best achieve what we hope for them in participating is the *principled* example set by role models. The word 'principled' is emphasised because undoubtedly both the highest honour and the greatest responsibility of being a role model is that one's values are perpetuated. Rowley agrees with this point, proclaiming that such modelling can be so strong as to be a 'mirror image' (1993, p.140). And while not unproblematic, among the most significant role models of all are a child's parents. Murphy (1999) well encapsulates the sentiment by asserting that as children's attitudes are shaped more by what they see than by what they hear, so the significant adults in their lives must be prepared to practise what they preach. And when our actions do not reflect our words, so occur the paradoxes to which Eitzen (1999) frequently alludes.

Parental consistency in this regard though can be subjugated by the 'day-to-dayness' of fulfilling the plethora of both familial obligations and those of being a member of the workforce, as well as providing transport and financial support to sporting interests and social activities; all with the constraints that time imposes, as addressed by Singleton (2003). But as Walker (1993) suggests, it behoves parents in more ways than one to make the time to adopt a healthy lifestyle and to involve themselves in their children's activities – not just sport – from an early age. He acknowledges, however, that this can be a very delicate balance to achieve. He makes the point that parents should be wary of engaging their children in competitive sport at too young an age as not only can this be to the detriment of a child's concept of fair play, the element of competition can also jeopardise long term involvement in sport. As is demonstrated to teachers every day, children are often just happy to play, and adults do well to remember this. Again, it may be the demands and accountability of adult life that cause some to perhaps be dismissive of play as 'frivolous' (Walker 1993, p.107). However, as asserted by Thorpe (1993, p.284), children aren't 'mini adults' (although they themselves might sometimes like to think otherwise) and should be allowed to have their skills and attitudes begin to evolve through developmental play without this being made to seem more like work.

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In keeping with allowing children to play, so parents should endeavour to emphasise the *process* of physical activity rather than its product or outcome. Murphy (1999) expands upon this in describing the concept of mastery orientation, which when developed in children equips them to gain satisfaction from their performance rather than the result. But what is apparent is that this will only prevail if practised from an early age, and can only be developed with positive and consistent display from supportive and principled adults who do not focus unduly on winning as being the primary objective of sport. This is particularly so in the case of girls (see Singleton 2003) who, in general, have a very different and less competitive orientation towards sport than boys and are more inclined to opt out in adolescence without the appropriate guidance.

In all of the above, it must be remembered that it is not only adults who are adept at recognising those who only make 'the right noises'. Children readily identify this trait in adults, as has been discovered to the consternation of many a parent or teacher.

In promoting mastery orientation, which has applications in moral education, Murphy (1999) declares that goal setting is crucial, as is the role of the parent in helping their child to determine these according to skill development. However, Ryan (2000) believes that such practices are only possible in 'a perfect world' (p.152) – one far removed from our own.

For in encouraging and supporting their children in their sporting pursuits and having them compete at too young an age, many adults fall into the 'parent trap' as described by both Ryan (2002, p.14) and Murphy (1999, p.11). Perhaps the aforementioned 'day-to-dayness' contributes to this as busy parents are keen to see their sacrifices, efforts and expense rewarded by their child's victory and are frequently unaware of the effects that an overbearing and domineering attitude can have. According to Ryan, most parents 'wade into the waters of obsession incrementally' (2000, p.160), and do not realise that their natural enthusiasm has both escalated and degenerated into something inappropriate, perhaps even to the point where some parents achieve victory vicariously through their children. Eitzen (1999, p.69) and Rowland (2000, p.2) both refer to this as 'achievement by proxy' and its practice by adults, who often take their children's 'failures' as a personal slight, can have far reaching effects on such children's attitudes to sport and, even more significantly, to them as parents. Rowland (2000) elaborates upon this to refer to the demands of some parents as bordering on child abuse. Eitzen deems them to be a 'distortion of love' (1999, p.20) and Ryan (2000) declares that not only are these practices legal, in some sports they are a celebrated form of child abuse, as such parents are considered to be dedicated. She sees legislation as necessary to modify the conduct and temper the attitude of such people. Undoubtedly, it appears that the 'ugly parent' syndrome is escalating and seems to be more prominent at junior sporting venues, according to the media coverage that it has generated in recent times (Smith

2003; Eastman 2003; Phillips 2003a; 2003b), to the extent that such conduct has been dubbed as 'sideline rage' in the USA (Moor 2003, p.13).

The above leads me to an observation made by Murphy (1999) that parents are a child's greatest strength, but that they can, in the sporting arena, also be their greatest weakness.

It may be argued that 'over-involved' parents are at least showing an interest in their child's pursuits. I know that as a teacher I am less concerned by an 'over the top' parent than by one who merely deposits a child at a venue and then flees with often indecent haste. But my opinion may well be different if I were a coach who would be more likely to be embarrassed by having incurred the immediate and often very public wrath of an irate parent during match play.

Baker (1997) acknowledges the coach as one of the most influential role models for children in sport. In fact, he bestows equal credit and responsibility on both coach and parent, and offers substantial advice on how they can best work together and complement one another's role. The role of the coach is also acknowledged by Rowland (2000) and Vamplew (1992) who make the observation that coaches have greater accountability than parents because often they are not interacting with their own children in this capacity; and as previously acknowledged by Ryan (2000), parents in many respects do not have to answer to anyone for their parenting. Coaches, at least, now have to undertake accreditation programs, for example. However, it may be argued that such accreditation can be attained through simply making the 'right noises' with no subsequent change in either attitude or practice. But whatever their philosophy, Vamplew (1992) feels that coaches are not judged by what they know, but by what they should have known in retrospect. In short, they are in the invidious position of having to 'get it right' for so many people so much of the time in so many different ways. And if a disenchanted parent so decides, then 'getting it right' may not only be an exercise in futility for a coach, it could put them at risk physically or even render them vulnerable to legal action (see Bantick 2003).

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The importance of positive 'triangular interaction' between coach, parent and child is addressed by Baker (1997) who contends that although sport needs a 'paradigm shift', a strong relationship between the child, the parent and the coach can facilitate this (p.135). Therefore, the onus is upon coach and parent to find ways to cooperate in the child's best interests and to remember, particularly with regard to contentious issues, the clichéd but nevertheless pertinent question –'Who are the adults here?'

There are two anecdotes of which I have recently been made aware regarding such triangular interaction. The first involves the father of a boy I taught several years ago. The father had taken over as football coach of his son's team part way through the season and was unaware that, in his efforts not to appear to favour his son, he was actually harder on him than on any other child, especially when the team was 'performing poorly'. Eventually this was pointed out to him by his wife after his son had uncharacteristically burst into tears at a post-match address. The father was taken aback by this disclosure and, while he felt duty bound to continue in his capacity, he tempered his attitude and then retired as that team's coach at the end of the season. Both he and his son feel that their relationship improved as a result. The boy's mother goes so far as to say that she believes that the relationship would have been permanently damaged otherwise. And in an irony worthy of the recognition of Eitzen (1999), the father now calls upon his son for coaching advice.

The second anecdote involves the husband of a former colleague. All three of their children were proficient in sport. The oldest has played cricket for Victoria. The youngest, their only daughter, won a tennis scholarship to the USA in her teens. As a very young child, she was involved in Little Athletics, as her much older brothers had been. Her father had become accustomed to victory and, according to his wife, was a self-styled expert in matters strategic. On the first Saturday that the 400 metres event was introduced for her particular age group, he sat his daughter at the breakfast table and talked her through how best she could win the race. He was well rewarded. Although his daughter and her fellow competitors had run less than the proverbial mile, she seemed to win by more than one. However, his paternal elation was as short lived as his credibility as a tactician when she was disqualified upon crossing the finish line. And while his daughter had heeded her soon to be disregarded instructions well, the lessons for her father were of greater consequence. Firstly, he learnt that in a 400 metre race, competitors actually stay in their designated lanes, contrary to his advice to move to an inside lane as quickly as possible. The second, and even more profound lesson that he learnt, was that coaching is best left to those who know how to coach, as all three of his children and his wife have unceremoniously reminded him when he has ventured to 'talk tactics' since then.

Connecting these two anecdotes is the necessity for communication and feedback among the links of the triangle

– well exemplified by a significant moment in the movie *Bowling for Columbine* (2002) in which Michael Moore asks a number of experts what they would have said had they had the opportunity to counsel the young gunmen. Numerous considered opinions are offered as to what would have been the best advice for them. But the most illuminating comment is made by Marilyn Manson, a much maligned and reviled musician who, in full Goth regalia, says simply that he wouldn't have said anything at all to them – '(he) would have listened'. Accordingly, if talking could have been of some consequence for such troubled youth, its benefits would be many for those less so. Clearly, interaction and communication are in the best interests of all three sides of the triangular relationship.

Yet another figure who looms large as a role model for children in sport is the school teacher – perhaps indicative of 'quadrangular interaction' – with no pun intended. What has been gained from my teaching experience is the desire to educate children to feel positive about their own participation, to gain intrinsic reward from involvement and to celebrate their victories in skill building, which is not necessarily hallmarked by winning, and I would venture to suggest that many other teachers feel the same. For this reason I was more than a little taken aback to hear a colleague from a neighbouring school announce to my school's Newcombe team that *he* had been waiting to 'knock them off' for two years.

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However, my indignation was tempered by the memory of my own principles being tested many years ago when, as the coach of my then school's softball team, our unexpected victory as district premiers was imminent. It came to the last match in the deciding round robin competition and, unbeknown to us, the team that usually won had been eliminated in earlier rounds. The only other team eligible to win was to play us in the final round. I became aware of this possibility upon recording the results for the previous match and was amazed to find that the scent of victory had rapidly wrought havoc on what I thought was my unassailable attitude. With the wise counsel of a parent whose own extensive involvement in sport may have prompted her advice, I didn't mention the possibility of our winning the trophy when I spoke to the team before the match. While I like to think that I was trying to motivate them to play to their capacity and so enjoy what would be the last interschool softball match of their primary school lives, I have a secret doubt. This is that I was hoping to incite rather than inspire, particularly as it was late in the day and the now-tired children were of the opinion that the team which usually won, with whom we had tied earlier, would again be the trophy's recipients. It is certainly no exaggeration to say that what I believed to be ethical did battle with what I hoped would happen. We won – not through any great feat and certainly not because of my dubious ministrations. It was more likely because, as had become immediately apparent upon commencing the match, our opposition's coach had informed his students of what was at stake and they had fallen victim to the pressure of their own expectations. From this experience I learnt a great deal – about team performance, student anxiety, my own philosophies and importantly, practising what I preached.

For all of us who are role models on a daily basis for the children in our charge, our aim should be to set them a sufficiently principled example to foster their own moral education. Moreover, we can hope that our example will one day be perpetuated by their actions as parents, coaches and teachers – role models of the future.

The camera is still filming the smiling crowd at the conclusion of the junior football match. Clearly, today the game's process rather than its product is being celebrated or there would only be half as many happy faces. In the final frames we are convinced that such early childhood sporting experiences will undoubtedly remain memorable for everyone involved ... with an unspoken addendum being the hope that these experiences will remain memorable for all the right reasons. ❖

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