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Timothy Gower:

Sporting behavior

Parents who obsess about children's athletics are a growing -- and potentially troublesome -- phenomenon. One therapist's advice: Get a life.

A few years ago, a man showed up in San Francisco psychologist Jim Taylor's office with his daughter, a competitive figure skater. "You need to fix her jump," he told Taylor, explaining that his daughter had been struggling to execute a new move on the ice.

After meeting with the 15-year-old girl a few times, Taylor says it became clear that it was her father who was the problem. Her dad was on hand every time she practiced or competed, the skater explained, and if she performed well, he lavished her with gifts. When she faltered, he became angry. On a few occasions, her father had barged onto the ice to challenge her coach's advice. Father and daughter fought constantly.

Taylor spent time with the father and learned that he was unhappy with his marriage and bored with his job. Under the guise of helping the daughter's skating, he was masking his own inner pain. "All parents love their kids," says Taylor, "but some are misguided."

Not long ago, this kind of behavior was practically unheard of among parents of kids who play youth sports. Today, psychologists and coaches agree that many parents have become more passionate — obsessed, in some cases — about their children's athletic pursuits than mothers and fathers of the past. Micromanaging a child's sports career and agonizing over his or her success on the playing field may be the most public expression of the so-called "helicopter parent" phenomenon; that is, the tendency of today's moms and dads to "hover" over their children.

Parents who belong to this new breed are easy to spot. They shout more on the sidelines, barking directions at their children, and often struggling to control their emotions. They pester coaches about their kids' playing time. They complain more loudly if a child isn't chosen for an all-star team. Thanks to the rising popularity of travel teams — which compete against teams from other communities, often very far away — some parents find themselves devoting entire weekends, and even vacations, to shuttling their sons and daughters to tournaments.

This new ultra-devout sports parent has become a cultural icon of sorts, lampooned in a new movie, "Kicking & Screaming," in which actor Will Ferrell plays a mild-mannered dad who turns into a ranting, obnoxious buffoon on the sidelines of his son's soccer games. What's more, a television series scheduled to begin airing on Bravo in June, "Sports Kids Moms & Dads," will follow the travails of several parents of aspiring young athletes.

For some, the rabid commitment simply interferes with other family priorities, occasionally frustrating less obsessed spouses. For others, it becomes an unhealthy fixation. Why do youth sports matter so much to parents today? And how does this new, deeper emotional investment affect relationships between parents and children? While it's the rare violent episodes that tend to grab the headlines, such as the Texas man who shot his son's football coach in April, most coaches can tell stories about parents who crossed the line of acceptable behavior while

stopping short of actual violence. More frequently, this behavior is marked by fits of anger or menacing words from an out-of-control parent.

Sean Heyman, 42, of Westchester, who coaches a girls' softball team, says one father angrily confronted him after a game. "He completely lost it. He was frustrated," says Heyman. "He was loud, aggressive and ready to fight." Heyman was baffled by the man's ire, because the young girl had played the entire game. His complaint? The man wanted his daughter to play shortstop, but Heyman had assigned her to the outfield.

While today's sports parents come in all stripes, most are content to leave the coaches alone, instead directing their emotional energy to their children.

It's natural to feel pride when your child hits a home run or scores a goal, or sadness when his or her team loses, says Dr. Ian Tofler, a Los Angeles psychiatrist. Tofler, coauthor (with Theresa Foy DiGeronimo) of "Keeping Your Kids Out Front Without Kicking Them From Behind," says it's healthy for parents to identify and empathize with sons or daughters, even to live vicariously through their exploits.

However, explains Tofler, trouble starts when parents rely on their child's athletic success to boost their own self-esteem or fulfill other personal needs and aspirations.

"When your own identity becomes caught up in the child's performance, that's a clear red flag," says Tofler. "The child becomes more a means to the parent's end than a separate individual with his or her own needs and goals."

Parents who struggle to maintain a healthy perspective are often aging ex-jocks who push their children too hard because they are reliving past athletic accomplishments, or perhaps chasing glory that eluded them in their own youth. These mothers and fathers often believe that their budding star can be the next Michael Jordan or Annika Sorenstam, despite the astronomical odds. (Estimates vary, but most sources say that less than 5% of high school varsity athletes end up playing on college teams. Among college athletes, about 2% make it to the professional ranks, though the average pro career lasts only a few years.)

For such parents, the money and the fame are the allure. Parents are seduced," says psychologist Taylor, author of "Your Children Are Under Attack." A generation ago, few parents saw sports as a path to wealth and celebrity for their children, says Taylor, because few professional athletes earned big salaries and sporting events only received modest coverage in the media. Parents of a talented youth athlete may come to regard him or her as little more than a status symbol. "My house is bigger than yours. My kid is going to excel in sports, and yours is not," says Dr. Dilip Patel, a professor of pediatrics and human development at Michigan State University in Kalamazoo. Still other parents push their kids too hard to succeed in sports to fill an emotional void, says Taylor. "They're people who have very little meaning and satisfaction in their own lives. They are often very unhappy." In his practice, he often finds that parents who are obsessed with their children's sports achievements are stuck in failing marriages or hate their jobs.

Even parents who say they don't push their kids to play sports can go a little overboard. A generation ago, few parents attended every one of their child's youth-sports games, says psychologist Rick Wolff, chairman of the Center for Sports Parenting, a website affiliated with

the Institute for International Sport at the University of Rhode Island. Today many parents attend all their children's games — and practices. "We're the first generation of parents who are so hyperactive," says Wolff.

But hyperactivity isn't necessarily always a bad thing. Scott Forbes says his heavy involvement stems from having three kids who all love playing sports — a desire he wants to support. "If they want to do it, I'm all for it," says Forbes, 44, of Westchester. But with three children playing at least two sports each this spring, he spends about three hours a day shuttling the kids around town and attending every practice and game he can. "It's like a part-time job," says Forbes, who keeps his children's schedules on a Palm Pilot.

Forbes' wife, Ana, also 44, attends her kids' games and does plenty of chauffeuring too. But while she and Scott made a New Year's resolution to go out to dinner or see a movie without the kids at least once a month, there's little room in their schedules for such outings these days. "We need more time for ourselves as a couple," says Ana.

Darrell Burnett, a Laguna Niguel sports psychologist, says highly involved parents need to check themselves and ask whether they are beginning to see a son or daughter not as a person but as a first baseman or halfback. Burnett worked with one high school football player who injured his knee, dashing hopes for a college scholarship. In a session with Burnett, the burly youth burst into tears and said he had considered suicide, partly because he felt rejected by his parents. "The only way they related to me was as a jock," Burnett recalled the youth telling him.

Parents who are too emotionally invested in their children's athletic careers may also need to examine whether their obsession is replacing an inner void. "The No. 1 piece of advice I give to parents is 'Get a life,' " says Taylor. "Parents need to have something in their life other than their kid that gives them meaning, satisfaction and happiness."

Rules for the sidelines: How to be a better fan and parent:

Stop hollering: That's the coach's job, and you'll only confuse the players. Besides, with younger children, you're wasting your breath. Few 5- or 6-year-olds understand the concept of a team, much less admonishments such as "Stay in position!" or "Take the low post!" Says Dr. Dilip Patel of Michigan State University, "No matter of yelling or instructing is going to change them."

Avoid the negative: Try not to make negative comments, and keep cheering whether your child is playing well or poorly.

(Try to) look relaxed: Psychologist Jim Taylor advises parents on the sidelines to sit and try to seem relaxed; appearing tense will distract your child. Also, wear a hat and sunglasses, says Taylor, "so they can't see your gnarled expression."

Skip the postgame analysis: After the final out or whistle, give your child a hug and praise his or her performance, says psychologist Rick Wolff. Remark on a specific play he or she made to show that you were paying close attention. But resist the temptation to critique a child's performance in detail. "Let the kid relax and enjoy the moment," says Wolff.