

SURVIVING MINOR HOCKEY



**Big Picture Thinking
for Hockey Parents**

Is minor hockey causing stress in your household? Trouble parents, politics, questionable coaching, bad officiating, problems scoring, losing team, ice time concerns? If your answer is yes, you are probably in the majority. Good news, it can be fixed or avoided all together, but it takes some internal reflection and lots of self reinforcement. Hockey Canada and its regional bodies have made great strides in educating parents and volunteers about appropriate behaviour in the rink. I am sure the statistics show some improvement in reducing violence toward officials, coaches and other parents. But from my experiences we still have a long way to go to make the rink a stress free environment.

Although I now consider myself a reformed hockey parent, it has taken twelve years to finally put most everything into perspective. In that time I have managed to break almost every clause of the Code of Conduct as well as few that aren't even written. Sure, I watched the parent videos and read the codes, but I was convinced they weren't directed at me. That was for those other bad parents, the ones that were really out of control. So I have decided that I couldn't let this hard earned enlightenment be wasted without trying to pass it on to others that may be able to avoid these mistakes of minor hockey parenting. This is my penance and my attempt at leaving the game a little better than how I found it.

The Problem

The reason that some of the minor hockey parental conduct programs have not been a huge success is that although they preach good common sense and fair play, they don't change our concept of what is truly the goal of participation in the sport. Many parents still think deep down that their child could be the next 'one', or at least one that will make a seven figure income or get the college scholarship. For many others who are more realistic about the hockey future, they somehow think that their child needs to make the big team and win the championship to feel good about themselves, or they may suffer some kind of psychological trauma, like being left behind in school. Then there is the group of parents that live through their child and need the team and their child to be successful for them to feel good about themselves. Though these three cases are quite different, all result in the same types of behaviours. If the latest mistake is not corrected right away, or if the latest injustice is not dealt with, whether it be an unfair tryout, a bad call by the referee, or a bad coaching decision, the future well being of their child (or themselves) could be compromised. When confronted, most are quick to justify their actions since all they are trying to do is help their child succeed, demand fairness and to look out for their best interest, right?



When I look back at my past digressions, most all have been related to this ingrained concept that our sons should always be treated fairly, success was important, and that if bad habits were not promptly corrected they would undermine their ultimate success and enjoyment of the game. Sounds very noble and just, but as I have come to realize, it is wrong and a recipe for disaster in any hockey kitchen.

Seeing the Light

My epiphany began a few years ago when our oldest joined a Vancouver based spring hockey program. The local minor hockey experience was not going well. Opposing teams and parents doing whatever they could to bring down the big city star, parents battling with coaches, penalties, suspensions and injuries. So, with some urging from another more experienced hockey dad, we took our turn driving four hours back and forth every other weekend for months on end, but as it turned out, it was all worth it, not just for our son who learned to love the game again but for myself who started to figure out where I had gone wrong. It was the first big game of a tournament and our team was on the receiving side of some very poor officiating. There were at least eight minor penalties in a row called on our team, in a game that our team had the puck for the majority of the time. I couldn't believe what I was seeing and even more shocked that none of the parents seemed to share the same frustration. I finally had to say something to the ref and then to the parent next to me. I will never forget his response, "well, it's a great chance to work on our penalty kill". After that game and every other, win or lose, the parents walked out of the rink with the same demeanour, talked a bit about how the boys played and gave them a pat on the back as they came out of the building.



This core group of parents had already learned the secret to being a successful sport parent, what I now refer to as "the big picture". Every game, every practice and every experience is a small step to reaching their ultimate potential. As with all aspects of life and learning, most steps will be forward, some sideways and a few backward. If we want to help in the process, we can support and encourage but there is very little else we can truly do to improve the final outcome. However, there are countless ways that we can we get in the way and negatively affect the progress and success of our children.

Most players would much rather play and have fun on an average team than be miserable on a winning team. In the early years of Novice and Atom they rarely even remember the results of last

week's game, never mind the last few seasons. The only lasting memories are the fun times in the dressing room, on trips, or conversely the miserable ones that make them want to quit and take up skateboarding.

True Potential

The first step to understanding "the big picture", especially for rep parents, is to come to grips with what true potential really means. I firmly believe that everyone has the inner potential to be good or great at one or more things. To be successful in life we need to discover what those things are and pursue them with the passion that they create and deserve. As an example, let's look at all the ingredients required for someone to reach the pinnacle of achievement in hockey:

- ☑ The body: composition, size, strength, coordination, endurance, speed, durability
- ☑ The mind: personality, inner drive, aptitude, attitude, creativity
- ☑ The environment: opportunity, encouragement, coaching, guidance, love of the game
- ☑ The skills: developed over time, given the presence and amount of the above ingredients

The only thing that we as parents have any real control over is the environment! We introduce the sport, pay the bills, drive the car, provide encouragement, share our love of the game and then all we can really do is sit back and see what happens. On the other hand, we can criticize, complain, scream, manipulate, spend more money and steal not only a love for the game but hinder the discovery of whatever potential is left to be realized.

For a select few, the inner gift is sport and for a fraction of those it is hockey. That is not to say that only the gifted few should pursue the game, as there are many life long benefits that participation can bring – fitness, teamwork, perseverance to name a few. The point is to realize and accept that true potential is determined almost entirely at birth, not created by playing on a winning team or going to the right hockey school. For some players that potential is obvious, for others it takes more time to develop and mature. The hockey school or the top coach or the best trainer can help a player approach their potential sooner or fuel their desire to achieve, but will not expand their ultimate capabilities. If a player has the potential and burning desire to succeed, and they are given the opportunity and encouragement to do so, they will find a way to reach their goals. You can't change genetics once the deed is done. Accept it and move forward.



The Big Picture



Before we even start our children in any sport or activity (or right now if they have already started), we need to have a long term objective or outcome in mind. A wise old coach of mine called it EPV "end point visualization". If you don't have a vision for how something might turn out, then it will be very difficult to reach that outcome. In this context it is not the same as players setting performance goals for each season or the next. In this case it is more of a philosophy for justifying why we are making the investment in time and money for this particular activity. I suggest that for hockey, and for most other pursuits, it should be something like this:

"This is something that our child might enjoy and continue to participate in as a lifetime activity or interest, for its physical, mental and social benefits. If they continue to love the activity and participate as an adult, it will have been well worth the investment. If by slim chance this is their gift then this will be their opportunity to see it realized. If they do not enjoy it, they will move on to other things and be richer for the overall experience."

With this type of outcome in mind, one can start to see how the small bumps in the road and the day to day stresses at the rink become more and more trivial. A bad call is opportunity to work on the penalty kill, an inexperienced coach is a chance to work on patience and self determination, the loss of a game is incentive to keep working hard at practice, a setback in tryouts is a challenge to prove someone wrong or a message to try something else. I am not saying that you must sit back and never say a word, but before you do, ask yourself if it will truly affect the big picture or the long term outcome. Chances are it won't. The world is full of injustice and unfairness, whether it is perceived or reality. Why should hockey be any different? That is why the game is such a good learning experience for all of life's lessons.

The time we have with our children in sport is such a short span of time, 10-12 years maybe. Once we accept the big picture, we can relax and start enjoying the journey. Because, when this journey is over and you end up at the wrong spot, you don't get to go back and try again. We spend so much time with minor sports that it becomes our social network. The children will make some life long friends, but so do the parents. Our approach should be no different than going to the Christmas concert at elementary school. Acknowledge their efforts, show them we care, visit with friends and all go home happy. That same idea should be our focus at the rink, not how well the drill is going, who is getting the most ice time or how many goals have been missed.

The Action Plan

1. See the Big Picture

- Adopt the above plan or write your own, rid yourself of expectations and performance goals (those are for the players), focus on fun and fulfillment for all.
- As they get older, it helps to have a realistic picture of your child's hockey potential, considering all the ingredients listed above. If you can't form a realistic opinion of your child's potential, get help from a respected friend or coach, someone that has been around the game longer than yourself.

2. Spread the Good Word

- It is no good if you are the only one seeing the big picture and everyone else around you is stressed out. Share the message, challenge their attitudes.
- Be a spectator, not a fan! 'Fan' is short for fanatic. You can be a fan of pro hockey or junior hockey but you should not be a fan of your child's minor hockey team. The parents should not be competing to see who can make the most noise at games. Applaud good plays by both teams, praise effort, don't coach or critique from the stands. At the end of each game, act the same way win or lose. Ask your child, 'Did you have fun?' If anything, talk about their successes no matter how trivial and dismiss mistakes as learning experiences.
- Get to know the opposing parents as well as the ones on your team, talk with them, sit with them, avoid the "us versus them" mentality.
- Respect the referees' calls, don't expect perfection, realize that it doesn't affect the big picture, trust the coaches to deal with any safety issues.

3. Have a Plan for Problems

- Don't allow others to ruin things for you. If they just don't get it, sit in a different place, wear ear plugs or sit inside behind the window if there is such a quiet place. When people ask you why you sit there, don't make excuses, tell them the truth.
- When others engage in any negative talk, be ready with big picture responses:
 - They all make mistakes, that's how they learn.
 - The coach probably has a good reason for doing that.
 - That is something they can work on at practice.
 - It's a good chance to work on the penalty kill.....



4. Don't Always be in Charge

- Always being the coach or the manager may not be good for you or your child. They need to experience different situations and leadership. Watching can also provide additional insight and energy for you. Consider alternating between children or let someone else have a turn.
- There are still ways to help them along even without coaching. The biggest impact I believe I made after many years of coaching (and criticizing) was playing road hockey. Sharing a love of the game, emphasizing fair play over results, sometimes competing, but more often creating highlight reel passing plays, 'picture' goals, trying moves we have seen on TV, passively teaching vision and creativity without even knowing it.

5. Put Things into Perspective

- Once we see the big picture, some other questions come to mind. By focusing so much time on this one activity, am I robbing my child of exploring other important activities for their well being or even robbing them of their true gift? It is sad to see some midget aged players focus solely on hockey and miss out on all the fun of high school sports and activities while they (or their parents) cling to an unrealistic hockey dream.
- I would strongly urge parents to forego most of the expensive summer camps and extra training sessions, especially at the early ages. They are only business ventures preying on your ego for advancing your child's 'best interest'. Buying or borrowing a stick handling video instead for example and practicing for a while each day in the garage or basement can help just as much at a fraction of the price.
- Spring hockey can be rewarding for some but should be kept to the spring at most (not summer) and not be at the expense of other activities.
- These extra hockey commitments will not make much of an impact in the long run and worst case may result in chronic injury, burn out, or added pressure to perform. Even if they love every minute and beg to get back to the rink, doing other things will only enhance other attributes and create even more passion for the return of the next season. The best hockey players are always good at other complimentary sports.



Summary

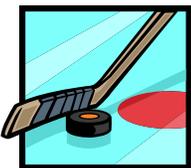
Before you start on the road to minor hockey bliss you must understand and accept this underlying rule of the universe: **“You cannot increase your child’s true potential to be great at hockey or anything else, you can only nurture it or ruin it.”** This is the secret to being a successful sport parent, understanding “the big picture”.



This big picture theory applies to much more than minor sports of course. It is no different for academics, hobbies, clubs and even jobs. A big picture attitude seems to come more naturally in many of these other pursuits, but we seem to have much higher expectations in sports. No one seems to mind if their child can’t sing or doesn’t have the grades to get to medical school but heaven forbid getting cut from the hockey team. Success in sport is seen to hold a higher degree of respect than other pursuits, but that is a discussion for another day. I hope this big picture concept will help increase your enjoyment at the rink and throughout your life.

One final thought: Some players (or parents) will inevitably ask, if we can’t win or if I can’t be one of the best, then is it worth all this effort or is it better to quit and look for something else? I would like to leave you with my favourite motivational poem, one that I found back in University, pinned on the wall and would read whenever things weren’t going as well as planned.

*The contest lasts for moments, though the training’s taken years,
It wasn’t the winning alone that was worth the work and the tears,
The applause will be forgotten, the prize will be misplaced,
But the long hard hours of practice will never be a waste.*



*For in trying to win you build a skill,
You learn that winning depends on will,
You never grow by how much you win,
You only grow by how much you put in,
So any new challenge you’ve just begun,
Put forth your best and you’ve already won.*



W.J. Clennan