

Kids call timeout on poor sideline behaviour

Parents all want their children to shine on the sports field. Yet there's nothing that will dull a child's sparkle more than having parents and spectators pressure them from the sidelines.

It can be an easy trap to fall into as an adult. We go to adult sports events where the noise of the crowd masks all but the voices of those nearest us. We comment out loud at players' performances, roar at mistakes, and vocally urge our favourites to do better and go harder.

We call it atmosphere.

But at a child's sports event, we are likely to be one of only a few dozen spectators. When we scream instructions or yell in disgust, our child and other children on the field **can** hear every comment, and they know where it comes from.

What they hear can have a marked impact on them for the rest of their sporting lives. Some may rise above it. Many can't.

Now in his fifties and one of Australia's most successful football leaders, Socceroos coach Ange Postecoglou is at the top of his game, revered for his energy and confidence, and with a reputation for not suffering fools gladly.

It may come as a surprise to learn then, that Postecoglou harbours a discomfiting memory from his childhood of huddling, frightened with his team mates and opposition players as parents argued on the sideline.

Throwing his support behind the Play by the Rules 'Let Kids Be Kids' campaign to raise awareness of the impact of poor sideline behaviour, Postecoglou recounts the story of how an enjoyable weekend sports match suddenly turned ugly.

"I must have been 10 or 11 and the parents started arguing and fighting amongst each other," he says in a video message for ['Let Kids Be Kids'](#). "And the thing that struck is that the kids—us—both teams, just huddled together in the centre circle, each of us frightened for ourselves and I guess for our parents.

"And even at such a young age it made such an impression on me that the people arguing and fighting outside the field forgot why they were there ... because why they were there were the kids, and their kids were scared, huddled together, opposition and team alike, trying to protect one another."

Postecoglou is one of a number of high profile sports people endorsing the 'Let Kids be Kids' campaign. Netball and volleyball player Caitlin Thwaites says children find shrugging off sideline comments very difficult. Australian cricketer Usman Khawaja says sideline abuse often robbed him of his childhood fun both on and off the sports field.

Former Australian Rules footballer Nick Dal Santo observes that even parents who are trying to encourage their children, frequently do it in a 'bit of a degrading way'. "And if just keeps

chipping away at them, eventually they'll either one, drop out of the sport, or two, just purely not enjoy it for what it's meant to be."

By far some of the most moving stories recorded as part of the '[Let Kids be Kids](#)' campaign come from children themselves. Children's comments about sideline abuse range from: "it makes me feel like I'm useless and can't do anything", to "sometimes it makes me sad, but sometimes it makes me feel angry at the same time". One child pleads: "Would you please like stop yelling at me on the court because it's making me feel like I can't do it anymore".

[Play by the Rules](#) has released a toolkit with practical advice and steps to help sports groups stamp out poor sideline behaviour and power junior sport with positive support.

The message being sent is clear: let kids have fun and do what they love. On the sports field, let kids be kids.