

The Four Detours

The Parent Patterns Coaches Face, and Why One Preseason Meeting Isn't Enough

Episode 2 | Season 4 | *Coaching Research To Results Podcast*

EPISODE AT A GLANCE

Paper	'Just be the parent': Problematic parent behavior from the perspective of fee-based youth sport coaches
Author	McGlynn, J., Bell, T. R., & Milford, M. (2026). 'Just be the parent': Problematic parent behavior from the perspective of fee-based youth sport coaches. <i>Sport in Society</i> , 29(4), 868–885. https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2025.2537646
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THE THREE STICKY IDEAS

These are the labels to remember from this episode. They are designed to stick with you long after the research fades.

The Four Detours

Coaches across nine sports described the same four patterns of problematic parent behaviour: results-obsessed parents, uncommitted parents, communication-excessive parents, and parents with mismatched expectations. These are behaviours, not types of people, and any one parent may show some, all, or none of them.

The One-Meeting Myth

Fourteen of twenty coaches relied on a single preseason parent meeting to set expectations and boundaries, but one meeting cannot close the knowledge gaps that surface later in the season. The authors recommend more frequent, more personal in-season communication so the relationship is regularly recalibrated.

Just Be the Parent

Coaches repeatedly said parents should "just be the parent" and act as a safe place for the athlete rather than a second coach. Role theory suggests conflict grows when roles are ambiguous, and coaches rarely spell out what a great sport parent actually does.

TWO ACTIONS FOR TOMORROW

Take one or more of these actions into your next coaching session.

Quietly sort your parent group by type

Quietly sort a few families by recurring parent type (such as performance-focused, clock watcher, emotionally driven, or seasoned veteran) and match your approach to each, without labelling anyone. The types work as prompts for your next conversation, not names for families.

Book a midseason recalibration

Book one midseason check-in now, whether a parent meeting, short conversation, or personal message that shares something the athlete is doing well and asks what would help parents support them. Closing the loop with a visible change shows parents their input matters and keeps the relationship calibrated.

RESEARCH REFERENCE

Primary Source: McGlynn, J., Bell, T. R., & Milford, M. (2026). 'Just be the parent': Problematic parent behavior from the perspective of fee-based youth sport coaches. *Sport in Society*, 29(4), 868–885. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2025.2537646>

Counterpoint Sources: Santos, F., Knight, C. J., Dias, L., Elliott, S. K., Milan, F. J., Ferreira, M., & Milistetd, M. (2026). "It felt like a cold war and no one said anything": Understanding coach–parent relationships in youth sport. *International Sport Coaching Journal*, 13(3), 703–712. <https://doi.org/10.1123/iscj.2025-0045>

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Share this episode with one coach this week, since that's how research actually travels.

SHOW NOTES



FULL EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

The following is the complete script for this episode of *Coaching Research To Results*.

Cold Open

Every coach knows the speech. Preseason parent meeting, folding chairs in a darkened room with a PowerPoint, someone always late, someone else asking about the schedule that is already on the team chat. You cover your philosophy, playing time, the twenty-four hour rule, and maybe a slide about team travel. And you leave thinking: that should cover it.

Should it?

This week's research asked twenty coaches what parent behaviour drives them up the wall, and fourteen of them said, more or less, that the preseason meeting is their plan to deal with it. The authors of the study have some thoughts about whether that plan is enough. Spoiler: it's a great start, and a terrible finish.

Intro and Show ID

Welcome to Coaching Research To Results. I'm Beth Barz, the Coach Developer. This is 1 paper, 3 ideas, and 2 actions for tomorrow in under 15 minutes. This is the podcast where coaching research gets off the shelf, out of your notes, and into your practice. Let's go.

The Paper

The paper is called, "Just be the parent': Problematic parent behavior from the perspective of fee-based youth sport coaches," published in *Sport in Society* in 2026. The lead author is Joseph McGlynn of the University of North Texas, working with Travis Bell of the University of South Florida and Mike Milford of Auburn University. What prompted it? Fee-based travel and club sport has exploded, families are paying a lot and driving a lot, and yet very little research had looked at how parents and coaches deal with each other in that pressure cooker caused by time and money. So, the team interviewed twenty coaches across nine sports about what parent behaviour they find hardest. Here's what they found.

Big Idea #1

The first big idea is called The Four Detours. Coaches across nine sports, from wrestling to swimming to softball, described the same four obstacles. The four behaviours showed up like potholes, derailing the coaches and athletes unexpectedly as they were already buzzing along the road. One detour: success-obsessed parents fixated on winning and results. One wrestling coach said, "These parents, they want their kids to win so bad that they will scream. I had a parent scream at me and said, you know, you're a [bleep] coach and just walked out.... He had like a nine-year-old son on the mat." The second detour: uncommitted parents who pay the fees but don't show up for practice on time, or at all. Third detour: communication excessive parents who text the athlete mid-game, or criticize the coach and the referee during and post-competition. The fourth detour: expectation disharmony, where parents do not understand the sport or athlete development enough to hold realistic expectations about ability or playing time.

These are four patterns of behaviour, not four kinds of people.

The authors are clear: one parent may show some, all, or none of these behaviours. Think back over your last season or two. Which detour did your team hit most often, and did you see it coming or did it catch you off guard?

Ideas #2 and #3

Idea two builds on that, and it's where the paper gets uncomfortable. It's called The One-Meeting Myth. Fourteen of the twenty coaches pointed to the preseason parent meeting as their solution, and every one of them trusted it to set expectations and boundaries. The authors are not so sure. A single meeting has a hard time closing the knowledge gaps coaches described, and the early season meeting can't answer the questions that pop up later on in week six. The authors say relationships need regular calibration, and recommend more frequent and more personal, in-season communication. Think of it this way: the meeting is the map, and the season is the road trip. Nobody finishes a road trip on the map alone with all the trials that travel presents. It's tempting to say the communication has been taken care of as the meeting is the one moment when you control the room. But, the season is everything after and in the absence of continued communication, humans make up information to fill the gap. Parents are no different when communication only happens once.

Idea three is called Just Be the Parent, and it is the phrase coaches used again and again in this study. Let's look at what they meant. A gymnastics coach, said, "Be the mom. Let us do the hard work and let them have that home space." Another coach described parents in the car saying, "You should have started today." Coaches wanted the parent to be the safe place, not taking on the role of another coach. We know from role theory that conflict grows when roles are ambiguous.

Coaches ask parents to be the great sports parent, but there is no job description on how to be that "great sport parent."

The Counterpoint

Now, here's the thing: not everyone agrees that the parent is the problem to be managed. Santos and colleagues (2026), who studied coaches, parents, and athletes together in Portugal, argued that the view that parents should keep a minimal role may rest on socially constructed, largely unchallenged assumptions that parents are inherently a negative influence. They say restricting parents to small roles can reduce what parents contribute and keep the mismatch alive. McGlynn and colleagues themselves add a caution: coaches share responsibility, so hesitate before blaming parents. Remember, too, that this study heard only from twenty coaches, mostly men. We dig into Santos's paper in Season 4, Episode 4.

The Anecdote

I recently worked with a coach who did an excellent job with the preseason meeting, laying out expectations and chatting with parents about how they can support their athletes. The parents even thought the meeting was a great start to the season. But, by six months in, parents were grumbling and that discontent was getting back to the coaches. Interestingly enough, that team had far exceeded expectations of performance and the coach took time to remind the parents just that AND that their athletes were developing well as individuals and as a team.

Conflict grows when parents aren't clear about who is supposed to do what, even when expectations have been shared at the beginning of the season...so another reminder was necessary, and, looking back, setting another parent meeting or check in along the way could have avoided the grumbling that eventually set in. A bit of extra communication meant that coaches and parents got back onto the same page and were able to finish the season well together.

Two Actions

Over the first few weeks, your first action is to quietly sort your parent group by type. Van Mullem and Cole (2015) describe several recurring types, and the four detours overlap with several: the performance-focused parent, the clock watcher, the emotionally driven parent, and the seasoned veteran. Then match your strategy to the type. For a clock watcher parent, set expectations early that playing time is earned through subjective and objective factors; it's not owed. For a performance-focused parent, invite them to support the development of the whole team. For a seasoned veteran, listen without getting defensive. One caution from McGlynn and colleagues (2026): avoid labelling parents negatively. Keep these types in your own head as prompts for what to say next, not names for families. Do this for two or three families, not the whole roster, and see what changes in how you open the next conversation.

Action two is to book a midseason recalibration now. McGlynn and colleagues (2026) argue that coach-parent relationships need to be calibrated regularly. Put one date in your calendar around the middle of the season, and link it to a helpful idea like a check-in parent meeting, a ten-minute conversation or a short personal message to each family. Include one specific thing their athlete is doing well, and ask one question: "What would help you support your athlete better right now?" Then adjust something visible in response. On a pool deck, at a rink, or in a gym, the setting changes but the action is the same. Then write down what you hear and share one change with the group so parents see the loop close. What do you think your parents might say if you asked them today?

Close and Invite

Let's pull it all together here. The big idea: four detours keep showing up, and they are patterns, not people. Idea two: the one-meeting myth, because a meeting sets expectations but doesn't maintain them. Idea three: "just be the parent" only works if the role has been clearly described and understood. Here's the nugget to keep. A meeting sets expectations; a curated relationship keeps them. The authors' answer is not a better initial speech; it is a steadier rhythm of communication. Next time, we zoom out from one athlete to the whole team, and ask what happens when a single parent's behaviour ripples through everyone. Until then, book that midseason check-in.