

# Why Car Coaching Drives Kids Crazy

Every year the coach says some variation of “You be the parent, let me be the coach,” at the first team meeting. And you get it, right? In most cases, the coach knows more about hockey than you do, and he or she has taken on the coaching responsibility. But Monday-morning quarterbacking, not to mention backseat driving, are almost American traditions. We just can’t help ourselves from talking to our kids about their performance at practice much less during a game. Is this helpful? Are kids just rolling their eyes at us, taking it all in—or both?

## The Right Time and Place for Everything

The last turn to our neighborhood rink involves the longest red turn arrow in the history of traffic lights. A figure skater we know once confessed that her mother made her cry every morning before practice while waiting at this light. Hockey players dread this light, which always seems to be red, offering parents the opportune time to get in some last-minute car coaching.

But is driving in the car really the best time and place to offer your two cents? Consider this, you are engaged in driving, the most dangerous activity in the United States (statistically speaking). Additionally, ask yourself this question—would you like it if your boss gave you feedback through sidelong glances or comments tossed to the backseat? Learn to quiet the car coach, and you can simultaneously improve your driving and refrain from alienating your kids.

## What the Kids Think

During a tournament/jamboree weekend, we conducted an informal and highly unscientific poll of players ages four through 18 from Colorado, Texas and Wyoming. In response to the question of “How do you feel about car coaching?” We got everything from blank stares to confessions of vague tolerance. What we didn’t get was any level of excitement or enjoyment regarding a parent’s last-minute advice or post-game analysis. No matter how irresistible you find car coaching, consider these trends:

- **U8/Mites:** This group was most likely to not understand the question. With the USA Hockey ADM emphasis on skill building rather than scoring, parents rarely have a reason to engage in car coaching beyond “have fun” and “play hard.” Kids in this group who are car coached let the conversation go in one ear and out the other.
- **Squirts:** New to competitive hockey and score keeping, this is the group that absolutely haaaaates car coaching. What makes it worse: when mom or dad is a coach on the bench *and* in the car. Sorry dads, but Squirts’ universal survival strategy is to ride with moms whenever possible. (A strategy that clearly only works for sports in which dad is more likely to know more than mom. See baby-sitter anecdote above.)
- **PeeWees:** Pre-teens start to lose patience with car coaching, especially when what you’re saying doesn’t jive with what the coach is saying. If your player has a phone or iPod, don’t be surprised if the earbuds go in.
- **Bantams:** This group is experiencing checking for the first time, so their most common reaction to your advice is “easy for you to say.” When a parent says “be more aggressive” and “use your body,” many players in this age group are thinking, “I’m just trying not to get killed.”
- **Midgets:** A Midget with a driver’s permit has larger coaching concerns—and so should you. (See driving statistic above.) A Midget with a driver’s license is free at least.

So, is our advice not to talk on the way to and from games? Absolutely not say longtime coaches. Provided you’ve mastered the art of driving while making supportive noises, as opposed to a big confrontation—you can have a productive conversation.

- **Don't criticize:** Most kids know better than anybody when they do something wrong, mess up or have a bad game. Listening is much more important than speaking. Additionally, active and empathetic listening will strengthen the bond with your child.
- **Ask questions on the way to the rink:** Ask what they are going to work on during the game. Don't tell them what they need to work on—that is the coach's job.
- **Be quiet on the way home:** Often players need to talk, vent, or sit quietly and think. Their cup is full. You really aren't going to teach any lessons on the way home from the rink.
- **Listen:** Ask non-leading questions and let your player lead the conversation to and from the rink.
- **Answer honestly:** If your player asks questions, be honest and focus the probable consequences of each approach, but leave the decision to them. If you aren't qualified to answer, suggest someone who they can ask or get the answer yourself and show them the source.
- **Consider the teacher:** Honestly, most parents know little about the game of hockey. Would you take a college class in debating from a person who has only watched debates? There is no doubt that parents pick up the game, but this is only the tip of the iceberg.
- **Don't blame a bad game on anything:** Hockey is a complex and fast game; blaming the refs or coaches or another kid reinforces the view that others control their destiny. This is the number 1 bad lesson in life and in hockey. The kids do control themselves and this lesson will help them deal with self-imposed stress.

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