
THE HOCKEY PARENT GUIDEBOOK

HOCKEY
- THINK TANK -

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WELCOME & WHAT'S INSIDE

Welcome to the Hockey Think Tank Parent Guidebook! We hope to provide you with a knowledgeable perspective and best practices as you help your child navigate their youth hockey journey. The content is based not only from our experience and point of view, but through input from parents all over North America at all age and playing levels. This guidebook is not meant to be gospel, but rather guidelines to help your family enjoy the youth hockey experience. Here are the 12 topics we'll cover to help guide your family's youth hockey journey:

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5 GOLDEN RULES

While navigating the youth hockey experience can seem daunting, we want to help you keep it simple. By prioritizing the 5 Golden Rules, we believe it will help you gain some perspective in the often complex world of youth hockey.

THE 5 GOLDEN RULES

- 1 Hockey is a game that is meant to be fun and teach your kids life lessons like teamwork, effort, resiliency, and passion.
- 2 Communication is key. Healthy communication between parents, kids, and coaches are all important for a player's development.
- 3 Control the things that you can control and teach your kid to do the same.
- 4 Hockey development is a marathon, not a sprint.
- 5 Make sure you take a step back and enjoy it. Youth hockey is a lifestyle. If you embrace the positives your kids and your family will make friends for life.

WHAT IS YOUR WHY?

Being a hockey parent can be stressful. We get so invested in our kids and our kids' dreams that it can be tough to sit on the sidelines and watch the process unfold. Undoubtedly, things outside of our control will happen that don't fit with our kids' plans...and that can be difficult as a parent.

The hockey lifestyle is a pretty crazy one. Between the early morning practices in the winter, the constant travel, the competitiveness at such a young age, and much more...sometimes we can barely find the time to breathe. But finding some time to breathe and reflect upon being a hockey parent is really important if you want to enjoy the experience.

Take some time throughout the season to re-center yourself on why you chose to put your kid in the sport of hockey. Most parents place their kids in sports like hockey so they can...

- ...be physically active and healthy.
- ...learn discipline and accountability.
- ...learn how to be a part of a team.
- ...have fun and make friends.

While these reasons above are why most of us put our kids in sports...it often gets forgotten in the craziness of the culture. We get caught up in line combinations, ice time, the coach, the politics...and we lose sight on why the game is so good for our kids' maturation and development.

There will certainly be rough times. Throughout the journey there will be coaches and administrators that you disagree with. There will be stress-filled situations. There will be injuries. There will be cuts.

But these are necessary parts of the process for our kids to grow and mature into well-rounded individuals. Positive communication and action will help them find a way through the struggles, valuable lessons learned while being part of a team.

Now...as we stated earlier, hockey is meant to be fun for the kids. But hockey is also meant to be fun for you too. The bonds and friendships built within parent groups can be special and last a lifetime. Hockey is unique in that it really connects families with similar interests and hobbies. Forming these friendships with other parents that are in the same crazy foxhole as you can be a very positive part of your experience.

At the end of the day, hockey is a GAME that is meant to be fun and teach our kids life lessons. If a by-product of that is having success at the higher levels, then what an incredible bonus for your kid and your family. Sometimes we attach our why to the success aspect of the journey. But if we instead attach it to the development of our kids, they will take away amazing gifts and lessons that will help them for the rest of their lives.

PARENT-COACH COMMUNICATION

Being on the same page as their coach is essential for the overall development and well-being of our kids. It allows for an understanding between coach and player that synergizes what they both want...and how to execute getting it. Coaches at the highest levels will tell you that being on the same page as their players is one of their most important jobs. But they'll also tell you that it's a two way street and that part of that responsibility is on the player to approach them when there's an issue. Having the confidence to walk in and speak to the coach can absolutely further your kids' development.

And it's an attribute that can and should be cultivated in youth hockey.

Teaching your kid to go in and talk to the coach, rather than you going in and talking to the coach on their behalf, is so important to your kid's development.

If your son or daughter has an issue or disagreement with the coach, it should be **THEM** that approaches the coach first. That may be a tough thing to do, especially for a younger kid, but the player communicating directly with the coach should be the first proposed solution when they come to you with an issue.

If your son or daughter isn't quite comfortable with that yet, it can be appropriate as a parent to be in the room while that conversation is going on. However, the conversation should still be between the player and the coach, with you in the room for support.

Now, if the issue is a hockey issue then the above standards should apply. But if there is an issue with your kid's mental health or well-being then as a parent I think it's completely reasonable to approach the coach.

For example, if your kid just doesn't enjoy coming to the rink. If they are having a serious issue with a teammate or with bullying. Or if their overall mood and energy are much lower than normal. In circumstances like those, it's important to approach the coach and try to work together to help your kid with their troubles.

If it ends up being the case where you do feel it's appropriate to talk to the coach then it is important to do it in the right way.

Next we'll look at how best to approach these situations.

PARENT-COACH COMMUNICATION

4 TIPS FOR PARENT-COACH CONVERSATIONS

- 1 Ask questions first, don't accuse.**
Accusations will put the coach on the defensive right away and the meeting probably won't have a happy ending. "Hey, my kid is struggling, **what can my kid be doing better...**" is a GREAT first question.
- 2 Go in with a mindset of finding solutions, not venting problems.**
With asking questions, your goal should be to find a way to get on the same page so you can better help your kid in their experience.
- 3 Listen.**
I guarantee you there is another side to the story that you will learn after speaking to the coach. Having their perspective, and not just your kid's, is extremely valuable. Many times what your kid hears will not be what the coach was trying to say. Listen to what the coach says, politely tell them what your kid took out of how they coached them, and you'll be able to find common ground much easier.
- 4 Take emotion out of it.**
When something is happening with your child, it's emotional. That's undeniable. But if you go in with an even-keel approach looking to exchange valuable information and find a common ground, your kid will benefit from it in the long run. Big Time. The "24 hour rule" is a great rule.

A new saying is going around...the "Snow Plow" parent. A snow plow parent clears all the snow ahead so their kid doesn't have to hit any rough patches.

That is not how life works. If your kid can figure out how to communicate to solve their problems they will be much better for it. And if you don't let them hit any adversity or get uncomfortable, you won't be doing them any favors in their development as both a hockey player or a person.

You may have to step in at times, but working through conflict is a necessary skill in the real world. Allowing your kid to work through their conflicts with their coach is beneficial for their overall development.

PARENT-KID COMMUNICATION

One of your most important jobs as a parent is the **CAR RIDE HOME**. Your words and demeanor have a HUGE effect on your kid's development. What you say, and how you say it, can determine much of your kid's passion and enjoyment of the game. For the good and the bad.

6 TIPS FOR PARENT-KID CONVERSATIONS

- 1 Let them talk about hockey first.**
You'll know if they want to talk about hockey or not. If they want to talk hockey, GREAT! If not, you are sucking the energy out of them.
- 2 Focus on effort, enjoyment, and passion...not execution.**
Your coach is the coach for a reason. Let them handle the execution. Emphasize the things your kid controls like their work ethic and attitude. If it looks like they are having fun, make sure you positively reinforce that. If they have bad body language ask them what's up. Controllables are the key to the conversation.
- 3 Highlight their positive plays that helped the TEAM.**
If your kid has a good game on the scoresheet they'll be able to recount every one of those plays. But if you could recount certain plays like a hustle on the back-check, a great effort on a line change, a blocked shot...that will give them another great lesson on teamwork and how the little things in hockey matter.
- 4 If you play the blame game...so will they.**
Blaming other players, the coaches, or the refs will give your kid the perfect environment to focus on the negatives outside their control. It's toxic for your kid and the team.
- 5 Help them to SLOW DOWN and look at the big picture.**
A bad game or a bad shift isn't the end of your kid's hockey career. Every NHL player has bad shifts and bad games. Many kids today are hard on themselves when they are not playing well due to early professionalization of youth sports. Helping them to understand the big picture and that a single bad game is not that big of a deal can be of huge help.
- 6 ASK QUESTIONS.**
If your son or daughter opens the door to talk about a game, ask them about what *THEY* saw. It's easy to nitpick from the stands where the game is slow. It's much harder to think and execute in the heat of the moment on the ice. By asking questions about why they made certain decisions...it will lead to much more discussion and a better understanding of what they see on the ice. That's great hockey talk!

At the end of the day, the best thing you can tell your kid as a parent is this:

"I love watching you play." It will do wonders for their enjoyment of the game and their relationship with you as a parent. Keeping it positive and fun will not only allow their passion to grow for the game, but your relationship with them moving forward as well.

PARENT-PARENT COMMUNICATION

The way that parents treat each other and form their own unique bond has so much effect on a positive (or negative) experience for the kids. A parent group that is united vs. a parent group that is divided can lead to two totally different outcomes. A united group provides value and camaraderie...a divided group adds uncertainty and chaos.

We've all probably been a part of both. And what a difference it makes.

There are a few things that you can do to help with the parent experience, the first one being providing roles where each parent can positively contribute to the team.

ROLES FOR PARENTS TO POSITIVELY CONTRIBUTE

Team manager

Scorebox organizer

Team meal organizer (order by number!)

Bleacher etiquette watchdog (to police parents acting inappropriately during games)

Locker room key attendant (their kid is usually the last one out)

Penalty box organizer

Stats organizer (multiple parents mark stats during the game! Faceoffs, +/-, shots etc.)

Team party organizer

Road trip carpool organizer

Holiday gift exchange organizer

You can get creative and give responsibilities to pretty much everyone. If parents feel engaged and believe they have an impact in helping the team succeed, it's great for building a positive parent culture.

Many parents will tell you that their greatest memories are during road trips hanging out with their parent group. The times where late night drinks were poured after the players-only curfew. Times where stories were shared in freezing cold rinks while waiting for games to begin. Times bonding over a shared love (for the most part) of the craziness that is youth hockey. Friends are made for life.

It's a really awesome part of the culture that is not shared by any other sport.

But that culture can be decimated by parents that don't care to get along or buy in. By the parents that yell constantly in the bleachers (**TIP: your kid can't hear you, the coach doesn't care, and the ref is an amateur just like your son or daughter**). By the parents that constantly gossip about what the coaches and players are doing wrong and how their own kid is getting undervalued. By the parents that try to use money as an influence to get their kid special privilege.

PARENT-PARENT COMMUNICATION

All it takes is one bad apple to really spoil the camaraderie of a team.

It's important as a parent group to address these issues. The easy thing to do when there is a problem parent is to either ignore it or gossip behind closed doors. Neither is healthy for you, the kids, or the team. So if you find that there is a parent that isn't buying in, approach them about your concerns. Just like you would if you were a player on the team or an employee in your business. You may find that the person doesn't even realize they are being an issue.

Building a parent culture takes effort, but it is a major factor in your team's experience. Put in the time to get to know one another and help each other out...because there are times when every family needs some extra support during the hockey season. Work to promote a healthy culture through positive relationships and you will contribute to a positive experience for you and your kids as well.

CHOOSING A TEAM

There are a lot of questions regarding the choice of your kid should play. Which coach? Which organization? Which league? Which level? It's the question we get asked the most...by far. We'll uncover a lot of layers to what we believe, but to start...

It's all about the coach. The coach will be your kid's biggest influence throughout the season...teaching them, motivating them, inspiring them, holding them accountable, and much more. Here are some pointers in doing your homework for finding the right coach for your kid:

5 TIPS FOR CHOOSING A TEAM

- 1 **Go watch them run a practice.** If a coach can run a good practice, your kid is going to get better. Practices are where players develop!
- 2 **Ask people who have played for that coach before about their experience.** And make sure to get more than one opinion, because each family will have a different one.
- 3 **Ask the coach for their development plan.** What skills do they work on? Concepts? Are they about systems or skills and concepts? *Do they even have a plan?*
- 4 **Ask the coach how they approach playing time.** If your kid is going to play on the 4th line...and that coach doesn't play their 4th line...might want to find another place to play.
- 5 **For the older kids, has that coach moved players on to the next level?** If they are placing kids into prep schools, juniors, and higher levels...there's a good chance they are developing players.

A coach that can develop a player's physical and mental skills and foster a good team culture is a coach that is going to benefit kids of all ages and abilities. The coach should be the main deciding factor in where your kid plays.

Determining which level to play is another question many parents have as they navigate choosing a team. The advice of many high level coaches is to dominate the level you are at before moving up. Whether it's moving up an age group or moving up a level...it's better to be the top player on a team and build confidence with reps and ice time than it is to be a bottom player on a team and sit on the bench.

The counter-argument to this way of thinking is that kids get better when they play against better competition. And this is absolutely true.

But if it's at the expense of playing time, confidence, or if your kid isn't quite good enough to move up a level yet...taking your time is never a bad decision. Remember...youth sports is a marathon, not a sprint.

Finally, **STAY LOCAL** for as long as you can. The culture of youth hockey today has allowed for kids to move away from home what seems like younger and younger every year. But having the chance to live at home with family and being looked after and disciplined by parents are just as important for development than anything a coach can do on the ice. To get to the top, your kid needs to develop the necessary skills on and off the ice. And who better to develop your kid off the ice than you!

MULTIPLE SPORTS vs. SPECIALIZATION

All of the research is out there...DO NOT specialize your kid in one sport too early. The culture of all youth sports has unfortunately started to stray from this mentality...but having your kid play multiple sports and giving them time away from the rink in the summer is crucial to their development.

The research shows that specialization at too young of an age has shown to increase injuries and burnout. It also shows that playing multiple sports has shown to increase overall athleticism and problem solving capabilities on the ice, field, or court.

So you may ask...if my kid has dreams of playing hockey at the highest levels, when should they specialize?

The answer is that it really depends on the kid and the situation. Physical and emotional maturation are huge determining factors. If your kid is not physically mature, it's a terrible idea to specialize. If your kid is not mentally ready to focus on that *one thing*, then they are not ready to specialize.

Research tends to say that there's a range and it's typically mid to late teenage years. Within this range, kids are more physically, mentally, and emotionally ready to handle the rigors of specialization.

No sport, and especially hockey, was meant to be a 12 month long sport. So another question that is prevalent is...

What do we do in the summer?

For younger kids playing multiple sports, continue to play multiple sports! Playing soccer or lacrosse can help with pattern recognition and footwork. Playing baseball or tennis can help with hand-eye coordination. Other sports can help give kids a general learning pallet with relatable skills that they'll be able to use at the rink. It will also decrease the risk of injury and burnout.

Is it ok to still skate? Absolutely! If there's a skills clinic, a tournament with friends over a weekend, or low-key spring league that will be fun...there's no problem with that at all! But it should be all about enjoyment of the game.

For older kids that have chosen to focus solely on hockey and dedicated themselves to their goals on the ice...it's still important to take a breather during the summer. Focus on off-ice workouts, which some would even argue are more important than what is done on the ice. By focusing more on off-ice training in the summer it allows players to build speed and strength, decreasing their risk of injury, and allow their mind to be away from the pressures of the sport.

MULTIPLE SPORTS vs. SPECIALIZATION

This will help to put them in optimal physical and mental condition for their hockey season. On ice development should gradually increase as the summer progresses...starting at the beginning with skating 1-2 times per week and finishing with skating 3-4 times per week. And make sure that the off-ice strength coach is in communication with the on-ice coach so they are not overloading the kids on specific days which can cause injury from fatigue.

As a parent of older players if you are going to spend money on your kid during the summer, spend it on things that will make your kid better. A million showcases and exposure camps won't do your kid any good. But a strength or skills coach, nutritionist, or a mental skills coach may help your kid on his or her development path.

For kids that want to play junior/college/pro hockey, the summer is about DEVELOPMENT, not exposure. It's about using that time to get their body and mind physically, mentally, and emotionally ready for the grueling hockey season. The more they focus on exposure and the multitude of showcases and tournaments offered in the summer, the more the risk of burning out. There's nothing wrong with going to a few experiences that interest them, but the main focus should be on development.

As it always should be.

HANDLING FOMO (FEAR OF MISSING OUT)

One of the biggest fears that parents have is not doing something for their kids...while other parents are doing it...and feeling like they're leaving their kids behind.

Whether it's going to certain tournaments or clinics, exposure camps in the summer, hiring the right skills or strength coach...I can tell you that if everyone else is doing it, it doesn't mean that you have to as well.

A lot of times in hockey development,
more doesn't necessarily mean better.
Especially in the summer.

While there is a certain "Keeping up with the Joneses" culture that has permeated youth hockey today, it's important to take a step back and make sure the focus remains on your kid's development as a player and a person.

Overwhelming them with hockey isn't great for their development. Paying a gazillion dollars for irrelevant experiences isn't great for your wallet. And just because people may pressure you into thinking that if you don't do "X" then your kid won't achieve "Y," 99% of the time that is not the case.

If your kid works hard, has the right influences on and off the ice, and loves the game, their experience will be positive. And if they want to reach the higher levels...that is what is important.

Trust yourself and your intuition when it comes to the silliness of the youth sports business model. Your ear and your email inbox may get overwhelmed with "opportunities" for your son or daughter. But just remember that you know your kid best and that focusing on the controllables of development is what will drive their experience and climb to the next level.

PRIORITIES

1. Family
2. Academics
3. Hockey

In that order. No need to even elaborate.

COSTS

Hockey has become an expensive sport. Understanding the costs and how your money is being spent can benefit families trying to figure it all out. Here is a breakdown of your 5 most typical costs to play hockey both in the check you write to the organization and other costs as well:

5 COMMON COSTS PLAYING HOCKEY

- 1 Equipment**

Just remember that equipment is made to keep your kids safe. The latest and greatest models aren't always necessary. Choose equipment based on functionality and safety. And try as best you can to buy as a group which can lower the price based on bulk.
- 2 Ice Time Fees**

Ice time per hour is radically different depending on where you live. And with more rinks being privately owned and ran for profit today, the rates are getting higher every year. Ice time fees are typically where the biggest chunk of your organizational costs go to.
- 3 Coach/Administrator Fees**

Many organizations pay their coaches and directors a stipend, some even a salary. The levels of these fees vary based upon where you live, what organization you are involved with, and the level in which your kid plays. It can vary from volunteer at one end of the spectrum to full time job on the other.
- 4 Tournament/League Fees**

Each tournament attended and league joined typically comes with an entrance fee. This fee can range from a couple hundred dollars to a couple thousand dollars based on the event.
- 5 Travel**

Depending on level and location, travel can be the biggest out-of-pocket cost for any family. Between flights, gas mileage, food, hotels, etc...it costs a lot to travel for games. The best way to keep these costs down is...to not play so many away games! Make sure in your scheduling that each away weekend HAS A PURPOSE so as to not drive the costs way up.

OFF-ICE TRAINING

“When should my kid start training?”

Kids can start off-ice training at the youngest of ages with balance, coordination, and movement type drills. The focus should be on fun and creating competition through games. Making it fun through games, races, and competition will engage younger players off the ice and create a passion for training. Increasing their athleticism, mobility, and overall physical literacy are the keys. Keep it fun and keep it safe.

Off-ice training must be age appropriate. It is not healthy to start lifting heavy before puberty... and even after puberty trainers are moving away from using heavy weights and are leaning more towards body-weight and resistance training exercises.

Off-ice training has two main components:

Building a better athlete and injury prevention.

It's important to focus on both while performing exercises in the gym. You can't play hockey when you are hurt, and the amount of over-use injuries is at an all-time high.

While strength, speed, and agility are natural areas of focus for athlete development and injury prevention...other important areas of practice include recovery, breathing techniques, nutrition, and hydration. These exercises create a mentally and physically healthy body and should be focused on in any training regimen.

We certainly are not experts in off-ice training and there are a lot of great resources and people that can put programs together for your kids and your teams. But we wanted to give a brief overview of what we have learned is important from respected trainers in the industry.

PERSPECTIVE

Let's all take a step back now and think about what we're talking about right now:

Youth Sports.

Let's put that into perspective and treat it for what it is...a way for your kids to be healthy, make friends, and learn life lessons that will benefit them throughout their lives. Competition can bring out the best in us, or the worst of us, depending on the way we choose to look at it.

Enjoy the process.

Enjoy the time you get with your kids, their friends, and your friends that you'll make along the way. Enjoy the family "vacations" to tournaments near and far. Enjoy the camaraderie of being a part of something bigger than you. And most importantly...

Enjoy the moments watching your kids having fun and doing what they love to do.

That's what being a hockey parent is all about.

WANT MORE?

We have more resources and services available!!

You can find a wealth of FREE knowledge and resources:

Website & Blog: thehockeythinktank.com

Twitter: [@TopherScott_](https://twitter.com/TopherScott_)

Instagram: [@TopherScott_](https://www.instagram.com/TopherScott_)

Facebook: [The Hockey Think Tank](https://www.facebook.com/TheHockeyThinkTank)

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Let's keep the conversation going! Need more personalized guidance for your team or organization? Reach out!

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