

Is arguing with officials OK at any age?

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All four of my children have either umpired baseball or refereed soccer, or both. They, for the most part, find it to be a great way to earn money working flexible hours on weekends. However after watching the games my 14 year-old daughter reffed recently, I began to wonder if some parents and coaches only see the official's uniform, and not the age of the person wearing it.

Watch any sporting event on television and you'll be treated to coaches and fans berating referees and umpires. It's just part of the game. It's no wonder average moms, dads and coaches feel the compulsion to do the same thing at kids' games. Yet in most televised sports, the officials are very highly-paid and therefore, it is understood that some abuse comes with the territory. Most sport fans would probably agree that they'd be willing to booed by 80,000 fans or screamed at by a rabid coach in exchange for tens of thousands of dollars. This doesn't make the behavior acceptable or civil. But when you combine the huge amounts of money at stake for players and coaches, fast-paced games and close calls that could easily be ruled both ways, tempers are bound to flare. And everyone involved knows this going in. They're all adults.

And that's the point: When big money is not involved and it's just kids playing the game, is it still OK to castigate game officials? And is it open season on everyone, or is there an age level where we should back off and keep quiet? If the officials are kids themselves, doesn't that make a difference?

My daughter was the side ref for three competitive games this weekend and I came by at halftime of the first one to bring her a sandwich. She said one of the coaches had really been "on" the center ref who appeared to be younger even than my daughter. She told me the coach had said, "This is a nightmare! We've got a ref who is twelve." Oh and by the way, this wasn't a game being played by high school athletes vying for college scholarships: These were seven year-old boys. And judging by the level of play, I'd say the coach might do better yelling at himself for poorly training his players, rather than a ref who didn't call fouls when he "should" have.

The following day I arrived to pick up my daughter from her final reffing assignment with a few minutes to go in the game. Ironically, (or maybe not) one of the teams was from the same club as the previous day's rude coach, this time with boys maybe a year or two older. Today, it was my daughter who got yelled at. The coach couldn't believe she hadn't called a foul on what appeared to me to be a clean tackle, and then when the center ref, (who looked to be in his fifties), did whistle a foul that resulted in a free kick and subsequent goal for the other team, the coach gestured angrily at my daughter and complained about both calls. I'm sure she wasn't happy with being yelled at, but she didn't let it show. I walked over to that side of the field wanting to see if the coach kept it

up. The game ended and, while he didn't say anything else critical to the refs, I listened in as he huddled his players. My suspicions were confirmed. He essentially told them it was the refs' faults that they lost.

I don't want to preach, because I'll admit I've done my share of arguing with baseball umpires, especially in my early days of coaching – albeit only with grown men. As I drove home with my daughter I began thinking, is there a minimum age where complaining to officials should not be tolerated? Or, as I witnessed this weekend, if you put yourself out there as an official must you be prepared to take criticism, regardless of how old you are? And I'm sure many people would say that arguing with officials is more acceptable in competitive sports where "elite" teams are squaring off than when it's simply recreational. But, especially if the players haven't even hit puberty yet, should it matter if the teams are travel or rec?

My opinion is that child or adult, competitive or recreational, there should be far less complaining about calls than there is. And yes, if the officials are kids, leave them alone. I have coached games when a teenager umpired and I wouldn't have dreamed of making him uncomfortable or nervous about the way he called the game. There are certain behaviors that are acceptable among adults, which are not acceptable between adults and children. And this is one of them. Yes, we all get caught up in the moment but what I wanted to ask the coaches I saw over the weekend was, is this game, which you probably won't remember two months from now, so important that you'll sacrifice your dignity and yell at a little kid? Arguing with an adult who is officiating a game is lacking in class – I'll admit, I've done it. But taking out your frustration on a young boy or girl doing their best and simply trying to earn some money goes beyond classless – it's just downright mean.