



Encouraging Positive Parental Involvement toward Athletes in Sport: A Coaches' Practical Guide

This guide aims to:

- 1) Defining the role of parents in sport,
- 2) Understanding supportive, controlling, and violent parental behaviours,
- 3) Debunking common myths on parents involvement in sport,
- 4) Sharing guidelines to foster positive parental involvement in sport.

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The role of parents in sport

Parents play an integral role in shaping their child's involvement and overall experience in sport. Parental involvement is important to : 1) enhance their child's sports experience, and 2) ensure their child's safety. They often influence which sports their child chooses to pursue, how many they participate in, and the overall place sport will play in a child's life.



We recognize the diversity of caregivers in children's lives. Throughout this document, the terms "*parent*" and "*parental*" are used solely for clarity and ease of reading and are intended to include all primary caregivers.

Parents as providers:

- Parents play a vital role in facilitating their child's sport participation by offering financial, practical and emotional support (e.g., listening, welcoming, encouraging),
- Parents often reorganize their personal (e.g., social life, work, hobbies) and family time (vacations, family dinner) to enable their child to participate in sport,
- Parents take various actions, such as providing transportation, purchasing equipment, covering registration costs, managing injuries which enable and promote their child's participation in sport.

Parents as interpreters:

- Parents help children to interpret various experiences throughout their development,
- Parents help shape their child's understanding of sport through feedback and conversations that occur before, during, and after practices or competitions,
- Parents' actions and reactions around competition serve as a lens through which children understand what is expected of them in performance and achievement,
- Parents shape their child's view of sport and its culture. Children absorb their parents' values, whether they prioritize winning, skill development, or friendships, which influences the pressure they feel to perform and the behaviours they accept or normalize from coaches and peers,
- Parents' response to their child's effort, performance, and achievements, whether through praise, criticism, or encouragement, greatly influences the child's expectations, confidence, personal values, and emotional connection to sport.

Parents as role models:

- Parents' own involvement in physical activity can inspire children to value and enjoy sports,
- Children learn by observing their parents' behaviour, especially in how they manage stress, communicate with others, and uphold sportsmanship,
- Due to the complex and close parent child relationship, it is important to note that even positive behaviours modeled may not always have the intended impact on the child,
- Parents' controlling or violent behaviours, such as aggressive outbursts or disrespectful conduct, can discourage a child's continued participation in sport and contribute to the development of harmful behaviours, such as aggressive play, bullying or hazing teammates.

Supportive, controlling, and violent parental behaviours in youth sports

Supportive parental behaviours

- **Most parents display supportive and positive behaviours in sport** (e.g., offering praise, feedback and reinforcement for mastery attempts, unconditional love).
- Supportive parenting in sport has many **benefits for athletes**, such as increased self-esteem, reduced anxiety, enhanced motivation, greater enjoyment, and consistent participation.
- It also helps foster a strong work ethic, supports the transfer of **skills learned in sport** to everyday life, strengthens the parent-athlete **relationship**, reinforces the coach-athlete relationship, protects athletes, and enables them to reach their full potential.



Parents may use supportive, controlling, or violent behaviours at different times. These behaviours can fluctuate day to day, influenced by factors such as stress, external pressures from coaches, or organizational expectations.

However, while variability in behaviour is understandable, **controlling or violent behaviours are never acceptable** and should not be tolerated under any circumstances.

Controlling and violent parental behaviours

Parents can demonstrate **controlling and violent behaviours towards athletes, officials, coaches, and other support staff**. These behaviours may occur during training sessions, competitions, on the way home in the car or once home.

Controlling behaviours

- High and unrealistic athletic expectations for their child,
- Overemphasizing performance,
- Unsolicited parental interference (e.g., putting pressure on the child during training by sitting nearby and commenting on their performance or by "coaching" them),
- Excessively controlling athletes' habits (e.g., sleep, diet, training schedule),
- Excessive sport investment (e.g., child going to gym at young age or practicing for hours by parent demands).

Psychological violence behaviours

- Negative or disrespectful verbal comments, yelling, excessive criticism, and swearing,
- Negative or angry body language or facial expressions,
- A lack of emotional support for their child (during or after a poor performance),
- Negative comparisons (of their child to other athletes),
- Punitive behaviour toward children (e.g., exercise as punishment after a poor performance).

Physical violence behaviours

- Throwing an object or hitting someone,
- Grabbing a jersey, restricting movement or space to prevent someone from moving, pushing, hitting, etc.



Controlling and violent behaviours **do not always come from a bad place** rather, often are **attempts to ensure a child's success** in sport.

While appropriate expectations can positively support a child's sporting experience, they should be **communicated in a way that is encouraging and respectful of the child's needs, desires, autonomy, and well-being.**

Controlling and violent parental behaviours' potential outcomes

On athletes:

- Decreased motivation, enjoyment, sport dropout, overtraining, distraction and poor performance,
- Diminished well-being (anxiety, low self-esteem) and fear of failure,
- Strain on the parent-child relationship,
- Increased aggressive, poor sportsmanship and antisocial behaviours from athletes (e.g., hazing, bullying),
- Lower satisfaction of basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness.



To learn more about meeting **athletes' basic needs**, [view this guide](#).

On officials and coaches:

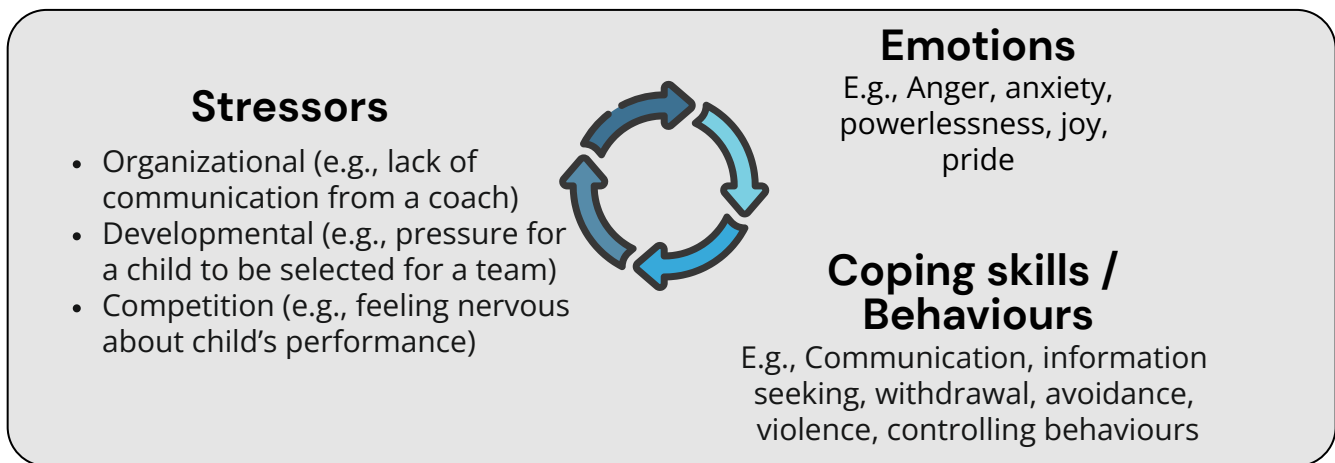
- Anxiety, sadness, frustration
- Greater consideration given to leaving their roles.

Factors that influence parents' behaviour in sport

Individual factors

Parental stressors, emotions and coping skills

Parents may encounter various stressors throughout their child's sport participation which lead them to experience a range of **emotions and subsequently respond with varying behaviours based on their coping skills.**



Parents' beliefs and aspirations for their child

- Worries about child's well-being and performance,
- Expectations shaped by parents' own sport experiences and knowledge,
- Aspirations for scholarships or professional success (status and return on investment).

Parenting styles

Parenting styles represent the general way parents interact with their child, expectations and values parents have towards their relationship with their child. The four styles include:

- **Authoritative:** Parents set clear rules and expectations but are also responsive, supportive, and encourage autonomy. This type of parenting style is associated with the most positive child outcomes.
- **Authoritarian:** Parents enforce strict rules with little room for negotiation and often rely on punishment. The child rarely has room for input.
- **Permissive:** Parents are nurturing and indulgent but set few rules or expectations. The levels of freedom provided may not be developmentally appropriate.
- **Neglectful/Uninvolved:** Parents are emotionally uninvolved and provide little guidance or attention. This style is linked to the poorest outcomes in children.



It is important to note that these categories are not rigid; parents may adapt or shift their parenting style depending on the situation.

Relational factors

Interactions with other Practitioners

- Interactions and relationships with coaches, officials, athletes, and other parents need to occur to foster positive sporting experiences for athletes.
- Respectful, periodic, and open communication are crucial to create a partnership where everyone involved in the interactions feel heard.

Family Interactions

- The family dynamic (e.g., other siblings, extended family) can range from supportive to hostile, influencing parental responses.

Environmental and cultural factors

Sport Culture

Sports culture encompasses ways of thinking and acting in sport. It consists of values, beliefs, and attitudes, and determines what is acceptable, important, explicit, etc. Sports culture influences behaviours and interactions between individuals, whether within a local team, a sports organization, a federation, or even the organizations that oversee sports. It can vary depending on the sport practiced, or even from one team to another within the same sport. Sport culture may reflect:

- An excessive emphasis on performance and results instead of enjoyment, learning and development,
- Selection policies within sport organizations,
- Financial costs involved in sport participation.

Such factors may shapes parental beliefs, expectations, and identity over time.

Social Hierarchies in Sport

They represent the relationships of power, status, and influence that can be formal (people in positions of authority such as coaches or parents toward athletes) or informal (based on sports performance) within sports environments (teams, associations, federations, etc.). They can be illustrated as follows:

- High-performance athletes, those with college/pro prospects elevate family status, or athletes who are perceived as the most talented on their recreational/hometown teams.
- Comparison and competition among parents for resources and recognition may reflect this hierarchy.
- Parents who also act as coaches of their child's team can lead to perceptions of unfairness by athletes and other parents. On the other hand, parents may penalize their own child to buffer against the fear of being perceived to favor their own child.

Debunking myths on parental involvement in sport

Myth: Parents are problematic and must be silenced or excluded. A good parent stays quiet, doesn't question, and follows orders.



While occasional parental behaviours may be controlling or violent, **most parents act with good intentions and genuinely want the best for their child.**

Silencing or excluding parents can lead to feelings of marginalization and increased frustration, which may worsen the very behaviours coaches seek to avoid. Silencing parents may also diminish positive parental engagement (e.g., cheering in the stands).

Parents may also stay silent as they do not want their child to be negatively impacted by their behaviour. Although parents are not coaches, they are ultimately **responsible for their child's well-being and overall development.** For example, if they observe controlling or violent behaviours, such as overtraining or emotional misconduct, they have both the right and the responsibility to speak up.

Healthy parental involvement includes respectful communication, emotional self-regulation, and constructive support that aligns with the shared goals of athlete development. **Respectfully answering parents' questions and having open communication can lead to a relationship of trust and respect** which ultimately benefits the athlete and lead to parents becoming valuable allies in supporting an athlete's development.

Myth: Successful athletes are a reflection of successful parenting.



If an athlete performs well in sports, that doesn't make their parent a better parent. **A parent's worth is not measured by their child's athletic performance or success.** Performance is influenced by many factors: personal drive, coaching, environment, and opportunity. Parenting is only one piece of the puzzle.

A child might perform well despite poor parenting (e.g., excessive pressure or unrealistic expectations), or might struggle even with supportive, healthy parenting.

Myth: Coaching styles have no impact on parental behaviours



Coaches and organizations play a central role in shaping the culture and dynamics of a team. When coaches emphasize a highly competitive, performance-first approach focused on winning at all costs, **parents often mirror these values.** This can unintentionally reinforce pressure, increase stress, and contribute to controlling or violent parental behaviours.

It is therefore **essential that coaches** recognize how their own attitudes and practices can shape the broader environment around athletes, **and influence parental behaviours.**

Myth: Parents who demonstrate controlling or violent behaviours won't change, so there's no point trying.



- While some parents may initially appear resistant, it is important to approach all parents with **calmness and respect** to foster constructive dialogue. It can be helpful during these situations to recognize that all the **parents' emotions (e.g., anger) may be a function of many other factors** other than your coaching (see section above).

It is also important to recognize that many **parents may simply not know any better**, often believing that harsh, "tough love" approaches are in their child's best interest or are the only ways to get their point across to coaches. These beliefs are frequently shaped by their past experiences.

Varied **cultural backgrounds can also contribute to parenting behaviours** and what is considered appropriate and best practices. In such cases, support, not judgment, is key. Providing parents with **guidance, support, and evidence-based information** is essential to aligning efforts toward the common goal of athletes' well-being, enjoyment, and long-term development.

Dismissing or avoiding challenging parents can result in missed opportunities for mutual growth and understanding. Instead of confrontation, coaches should aim to **build collaborative relationships by integrating parents into appropriate aspects** of the decision-making process (e.g., discussing athlete goals) so they feel heard, respected, and valued as partners in their child's development.

Strong coach-parent relationships are often built on commitment where both members feel secure in challenging one another in a respectful way to foster learning and growth. Including parents should be based on a shared understanding of the importance of mutual respect for each other's roles in the athlete's sport journey.

Myth: We need to 'fix' parents.

Rather than taking a negative or fixed attitude towards parents as problematic, coaches could take a more **malleable approach in which coaches and parents are allies** contributing to the child's holistic development and experience in sport.



This involves adopting a **collaborative, strengths-based approach that is grounded in their context**, and guided by the following principles:

- Recognize parents as full members of the team, whose unique backgrounds and experiences enrich the group dynamic,
- Establish regular opportunities for social interaction and communication based on openness and honesty,
- Create a healthy and safe sports environment that promotes constructive and respectful interactions between parents and coaches.

Through coach communication, empathy and collaboration, parents can grow and learn to act in a more supportive way that best meets their child's needs.

Myth: Parental involvement doesn't have any positive impact.

Many believe that involving parents will only lead to problems and no benefits. However, parental involvement in sport may have **many positive impacts for their child, the team, and parents themselves.**



Shared experiences, such as attending practices, traveling to competitions, and post-game conversations, can strengthen the parent-child bond and create lasting memories. These **quality moments spent with their child can lead to the transmission of pro-social values and positive child-parent interactions.**

Even if parents may not be an expert in sports, they are inevitably **an expert and know their child best.** Their opinion and input can have a tremendous impact on their child's sports development, safety, involvement, and enjoyment.

In rare but serious cases, parents may display **violent or abusive** behaviour (e.g., **sexual, physical, psychological, and neglect**) toward their child which can have detrimental impacts on their development and well-being.



If you witness any signs of child abuse by a parent toward an athlete, you **should report it to your local child protective services.** If you are unsure whether it warrants a report, you can call and receive advice and guidance on the situation. **Child safety should always be a priority.**

Sports can provide social opportunities for parents to foster community and the development of relationships with other parents on the team. This can increase their well-being, enjoyment, and decrease stress.

Myth: It's not coaches' role to manage parents' reactions towards officials.

As a coach, it's important to recognize your role not only in modeling respectful behaviour toward officials, but also in **addressing situations when parents react aggressively or violently** toward them.



In the sport environment, everyone, especially those who witness such behaviour, has a **responsibility to act and address violent conduct from parents toward officials.** When a coach fails to intervene, it can send a message to other parents and athletes that such behaviour is acceptable. The well-being of everyone involved in sport, including officials, is essential.

Guidelines to fostering positive parental involvement in sport

The coach-parent relationship plays a critical role in athletes' overall experience in sport. However, this relationship can often become strained due to common sources of conflict, such as differing perspectives on the child's goals, inconsistent expectations around communication, and a lack of mutual trust. When these issues go unaddressed, they can lead to tension, misalignment, and a competitive rather than collaborative dynamic between coaches and parents.

Rather than limiting parental involvement it is important to take on a **collaborative strengths-based approach** encouraging parental engagement. Here are several recommendations to foster positive parental involvement in sport:

Raising awareness and improving parents' understanding

- **Rules of the game** (especially as they differ by age group): Parents may rely on coaches to provide them with technical knowledge on the sport,
- **Challenges and demands of sport**, along with the natural emotions they evoke, and effective strategies for coping with them,
- **Roles of sport practitioners** (e.g., officials),
- Primary **roles of coaches** (e.g., technical, physical, and psychological skills) versus **parents** (e.g., providers, interpreters, role models).



For more information on **coach-athlete relationship boundaries**, [view this guide](#).

- **Benefits of sport for children** (e.g., physical and mental health, academic success),
- Knowledge and comprehension of the **different types of violence** and their manifestations,
- **Impact of controlling and violent behaviours** on their child's well-being and performance (see section above),
- Resources and procedures available for **addressing dissatisfaction or filing complaints**,
- **Developmental expectations of their child in sport** to help parents align their aspirations with their child's goals.



It is important to encourage collaboration and open communication between coaches and parents and not to fall into lecturing parents on how to parent their child.



Clearly promoting expected behaviours towards athletes, regardless of their performance or achievements

Expectations can be shared in pre-season meetings, pre-competition briefings, or via email:

- Establish and share a **zero-tolerance policy for violence** by players, officials' parents, or coaches. The section above on inappropriate behaviours can be used as a guideline or refer to your organization's code of conduct,
- Discuss **expected parental behaviour** (e.g., type of encouraging gestures, at which moments during competitions, etc.). Focus on what parents should do instead of what they shouldn't,
- Explain that parents should **emphasize athletes' effort, progress, and enjoyment** instead of sport performance or results before, during and following a practice or competition,



For more information on the **sandwich method for feedback**, [view this guide](#).

- Place an emphasis on the importance of providing **emotional support, listening and warmth** to their child, especially in times of defeat to prevent low self-esteem, motivation, and the development of fear of failure,
- Encourage parents to **stay calm and manage their emotions** to support not only their own athletes but also a positive environment for all. This helps build a healthy team dynamic and promotes sportsmanship,
- Encourage parents to **debrief with their child after competitions by asking open-ended questions that promote reflection**, without focusing on performance outcomes or offering criticism. It's important for parents to be attuned to their child's emotional state, respond supportively, and foster a two-way conversation.

For younger children, parents may need to take the lead in starting the conversation. **Guiding questions** can help children reflect on their experiences, understand their emotions, and begin to develop their own insights. For example:



- *"What did you think of your practice/competition/game?"*
- *"Can you tell me how you felt out there today?"*
- *"What's something you think you learned from this experience?"*
- *"Is there anything you might want to try differently next time?"*

These conversations should remain positive and supportive, helping young athletes build self-awareness, resilience, and a growth mindset.



For more information on **resilience**, [view this guide](#).



As a coach, it is crucial to **model these positive practices** to convey to parents that consistent standards apply to all individuals involved.

3 Open, honest, and recurrent communication with parents

At the beginning of the season

- **Introduce yourself, your coaching philosophy, with your background** as having an authentic, open, and approachable coach is important to parents. Show **gratitude towards the parents** and acknowledge the stress that can be felt at the beginning of the season,
- Clearly **communicate roles and ways of functioning** at the beginning of the season (e.g., articulating parents' roles at games and events, expected arrival time, dress codes, season schedule),
- Involve parents and athletes in the **definition of values, goals, and a vision** at the beginning of the season. Keep parents informed if these evolve or change. Help parents determine how they can help their child attain their goals,
- Provide parents with guidance on **how and to whom they can voice concerns:**
 - **Coach communication:** Encourage parents to speak with you and establish how to best contact you (e.g., by making an appointment). Explain that more serious conversations should occur face-to-face,
 - **Complaints:** Share the organization's official mechanism for handling complaints, including contact information, steps to file a concern, and expected response timelines.
- Establish and maintain certain **expectations as a coach** (e.g., schedule changes will be communicated at least 24 hours prior),
- Discuss the **importance of parent-child communication** and provide opportunities for exchange to enable the athlete to express their desires and goals,
- Establish a **clear and appropriate communication channel** (e.g., intermediary that transmits information from parents to the coach) that reflects the realities of the sports team or club.

Throughout the season

- Maintain **open, honest and continued communication** with parents (e.g., meetings, emails) to keep them in the loop and provide them with an opportunity to give their input,
- Ensure **transparent and clear communication and feedback to parents** (e.g., funding, team selection decisions, and requirements for talent development programs).

4 Promoting parents' involvement and creating social connections

Parents should feel welcome, that they can be present, and interact with coaches' and other parents in a fun environment:

- Make parents **feel valued** by expressing that they are important, thank them for their implication, and explain that their input is important,
- Encourage parents' engagement by **giving them roles that can help the team** (e.g., social committee, first aid, tournament coordinator, social coordinator) and help them to **feel involved**,
- **Promote flexible and inclusive rules** that strengthen parents' sense of trust and autonomy,
- **Encourage social events and development of relationships** between parents and coaching staff (e.g., dinner or end of the year game including parents).



Planning mid-season and end-of-season activities with parents can be a great opportunity to **gather feedback and keep parents informed**. Events like a parent-child game or a team dinner at a restaurant help **strengthen relationships, celebrate progress, and promote open communication** in a relaxed setting.

5 Model positive sports culture and motivational climate

- Promote a sport culture centered on the **quality of the sport experience**, emphasizing well-being, enjoyment, and personal growth. Remind parents and yourself that **youth sport is supposed to be fun** and develop children's confidence and self-esteem.



For more information on implementing a **positive team dynamic** that promotes' athletes motivation, functioning, sport enjoyment, perseverance, and achievement to be a model to parents, [view this this guide](#).

6 Recognize that each situation deserves a tailored approach

- Recognize that **each parent is unique**; they have different reasons for supporting their children's engagement, a wide range of experiences in sport, varied beliefs, attitudes regarding sports involvement, and unique relationships with their children,
- Parents have **different desires for information and support**, as well as different perceptions of appropriate or inappropriate behaviours toward their children,
- Take the time to **get to know parents** (e.g., personal and family situation) and use different approaches to foster parental involvement,
- Anticipate that **parents may react differently based on their backgrounds, skills, and expectations**.

Want to learn more?

For more resources on parental involvement in sport, see below.

Practical Guides for Coaches



[Click here](#)

Safe Sport – Developing great parent relationships

[Click here](#)

Parent Checklist

[Click here](#)

Child protection in Sport Unit - Involving parents and carers in sport

[Click here](#)

Active for life - Coaches and clubs: Supporting parents in their children's sport experience

[Click here](#)

Webinar - Creating safe and enjoyable sporting experiences: The role of parents

[Click here](#)

Putting it into practice

Pre-season meeting planning sheet

The table below serves as a template outlining various themes, discussion points, and sample documents to share with parents. It can be adapted to suit the specific context and needs of your sport.

	Points to discuss	Documents to develop and share
Presentation		
Staff presentation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Thank parents for their attendance and welcome them to the team,• introduce yourself and your coaching philosophy,• Allow coaching staff and parents to introduce themselves.	
Values, vision, and goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Describe the vision and values of the team or club: positive sport experience, focused on well-being, respect, fun,• Discuss how to deal with mistakes (e.g., encouragement, support),• Discuss and collaborate with athletes and parents on establishing global team goals.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Organization, club or school vision and values
Season schedule and game rules	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Present season schedule (practices, competitions, team events),• Present specific rules based on age, competition level, and any new changes to rules from the prior season,• Establish or present a policy on playing time	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Season calendar• Game rules• Rules/policies on playing time
Athletes' involvement		
Training and competition expectations toward athletes'	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Schedule,• Arrival time for practices and games,• Policy on punctuality and absence,• Dress code,• Appropriate behaviour and the importance of respect and being polite with everyone (support staff, parents, officials, etc.),• Cellphone use police,• Emphasize the focus on continued effort and development.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Code of conduct for athletes

Points to discuss

Documents to develop and share

Communication plan

Communication with parents

- Establish and present how parents should communicate with you (e.g., email), when (e.g., before 9pm), and set expectations for response times and potential delays in scheduling meetings,
- Determine a way of communicating with the team,
- For more serious discussions invite parents to make an appointment with you,
- Establish and communicate the roles and boundaries within the coach and parent relationship,
- Determine Mid-season or end-of-season meeting or activity involving parents, coaches, and athletes.



- See this [example](#) for inspiration.

Communication with athletes

- Present rules regarding communication with athletes.



- Communication and social media use Guidelines
- Code of conduct
- [Guide](#) on boundaries between coach and athlete

Parental involvement

Expectations toward parents

- Explain what behaviours are encouraged during and after competitions (e.g., cheering),
- Establish differences between parents' roles and the role of others (e.g., coaches and officials),
- Reinforce expected behaviour towards officials,
- Present the code of conduct.

- Code of conduct for parents

Parental involvement

- Emphasize that parental involvement is important to their child's development,
- Discuss different roles and tasks that parents can be involved in (e.g., social coordinator, snack).

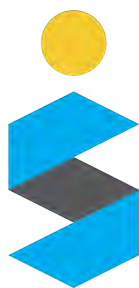
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