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Foul! Kids, sports... and your ex

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Baseball season, football season, hockey season... when your kids have sports or other extracurricular activities, both parents should support them, even if you're not married to each other. But running into your ex at your kid's soccer match isn't most people's idea of pleasant. Some people (not you, of course, but maybe your ex) could use a reminder of how to behave in public around their ex-spouses.

I'm Jennifer Eberhardt, contributing editor for [Happen](#), a weekly magazine from [Match.com](#) about dating and finding love. I'll be sharing advice and personal insights into the world of relationships with Gather members.

Here's an article by Margot Carmichael Lester, who talked to real-life single parents (and a few experts) about the best way to handle a situation full of potential explosions.

Kids, sports—and your ex

written by Margot Carmichael Lester

Try as you might, when it comes to kids' sporting events, it's going to be hard to avoid your ex. Whether both of you coach Little League, turn up for the soccer playoffs, or otherwise support your child's athletic endeavors — let's face it — your paths are going to collide. And how to handle that — especially when new boyfriends or girlfriends are along for the ride — is crucial.

Put the kid's needs first

Consider this case history: Whenever their daughter had a gymnastics competition, Damian Jones and his ex-wife staked out opposite ends of the venue. "We figured that was the best way to keep things civil," Jones laughs. "But our daughter hated it because she felt torn in two at every meet—who to look for after a routine, who to seek out first after the meet. Sometimes, it affected her performance."

Jones realized that he, his ex-wife and her new husband had to establish détente. "We agreed to sit near each other, with no sniping before, during or after the meet," he says. "At some point, we migrated enough that now the three of us actually sit next to each other."

Susan Ellis Wild, co-author (with her ex, Russell Wild) of *The Unofficial Guide to Getting a Divorce*, says that's a great solution. "There is no better message that divorced parents can send than the one that both parents love them and can overcome their differences when it comes to their children," she says. "And if there's a new partner who comes along, there is no reason that you shouldn't all be able to act like grown-ups and hang together at the game." Plus, she says, "It's a good neutral ground on which to get to know the new partner(s)."

When a new love hits the field

Not everyone, though, wants to meet their ex's new partner on the playing field. Martie Anderson of Miami figured she'd see her ex-husband at their son's Little League game, but she certainly wasn't prepared for meeting his new girlfriend. "I felt like a loser because he was there with a new partner and I was there alone," she recalls. "And I really resented her being there in a semi-parental role. I was so wrapped up in those feelings that I missed the start of the game while I hid behind the bleachers to avoid them."

How can you handle it if you're feeling ambushed by your ex bringing a date to the game or meet? You can avoid missing the action by following this advice from Brette Sember, author of *How to Parent With Your Ex: Working Together in Your Child's Best Interest*. "It's easy to feel a sense of competition when you are in the presence of your ex and his or her new partner," she says. "Remind yourself that you no longer want to be with your ex, so it's no skin off your nose if he or she dates. And stop comparing yourself to the new partner." You're moving on along your own path.

This won't be easy, but practice makes perfect. And knowing that it'll get easier to be around your ex and his or her new love as time passes can help motivate you. Give it a try for a limited amount of time at first—stay for a couple of plays, one race or routine, and then go get some coffee. Even if you're still pining for your ex or plagued by the sting of rejection, work on ridding yourself of those feelings during your child's sports activities. Once you get the hang of it, you can extend the amount of

time—even allowing yourself to be free of these bad feelings when you're not watching your child play. And remember, when you're indifferent to your ex and his or her new romantic life, you know you're really over your divorce. Remind yourself of that often.

The final buzzer

The key to managing this awkward situation without being thrown in the penalty box is to focus on the best interests of your child and the best of yourself that you bring to parenting. "Remind yourself that you're there to cheer on your kid and have fun," Sember concludes. "Instead of seeing this as a confrontation with your ex, see it as a chance to present a united front to your child. It's a rare occurrence for your child to have both parents together, supporting him or her, so try to remember how important this is to your child."

Be a sport

If, despite these efforts, you still feel as if a personal foul is imminent when you run into your ex at your child's sporting event, listen up. We asked Roy Williams, master of sportsman-like behavior and coach of the 2005 NCAA championship UNC Tar Heels men's basketball team, for three tips — ensure good sportsmanship in high-pressure situations:

1. Immerse yourself in watching the game for enjoyment. That's the main event.
2. Congratulate each other with eye contact and a smile after the game. That way, you're taking the high road as you leave.
3. Remember, they're games. Leave the personal baggage on the bench.

Margot Carmichael Lester is a rabid Tar Heel fan and freelance writer living and playing in Carrboro, NC. Though she always tries to live up to Coach Roy's ideal, she gets a little chapped once in a while when a call goes in favor of Duke. She is the author of The Real Life Guide to Life After College.

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Comments: 7

[Angela W.](#) Oct 26, 2006, 11:43am EDT

Excellent!!

[Jennifer Eberhardt](#) Oct 26, 2006, 12:14pm EDT

Wow, fastest comment EVER. You must have seen it right when I posted it. Thanks!

[Angela W.](#) Oct 26, 2006, 12:28pm EDT

This is an excellent piece. Now how do I get my ex to not only read (which is a challenge in it's self) it but also to take the suggestions??

[William M.](#) Oct 26, 2006, 12:56pm EDT

Excellent article.

[Mickey B.](#) Oct 26, 2006, 2:27pm EDT

Very few of my divorce friends put their children's needs first ahead of their own selfish needs. Of course this is easy for me to say since I am not divorced.

I know one divorced couple where the wife cheated on the husband. Needless to say he has a grudge. When they go to an event he is at the opposite end of the room of his ex spouse. He will not speak to her unless it has to do w/ the kids.

Of course the ex wife wants to be friends and pretend nothing happen. This is easier said then done.

[Lisa S.](#) Oct 27, 2006, 3:18pm EDT

I agree so much that you have to put the kids first. My ex and I are fortunate to be able to do this. My son, 5, started playing soccer this year. His dad had him on practice nights so I let him do that with him by himself and didn't try to step in. We both went to his games whenever possible. I think it's always important to be respectful of each other and remember that you are there for your child!

[Jennifer Eberhardt](#) Oct 30, 2006, 10:00am EST

Thanks for all the input and 1st-hand knowlege, everyone. Sorry, Angela, you can't force your ex to read or do anything... but at least you know how to take the high road and be the bigger person. Sometimes that's the only reward you ever get.

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