Where I Learned (Almost) Everything I Know about Child Psychiatry

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Yes, my walls are papered with diplomas and certificates of all manner and distinction. They attest to years of passage through higher education, professional training, licensure, continuing education, and the usual trappings of professorial attainment. To the unwitting, they might be construed as proof of competence and sophistication in my chosen field. But I am here to assert, without any pretense or false modesty, that all my formal training pales in significance to the experience that truly formed my education in the identification and treatment of childhood psychiatric disorders.

With all due deference to that fellow who attributed the totality of his life learning to his kindergarten experience, in my case, much of what I know about child psychiatry comes from my many years as a Little League coach.

My career in coaching started as it does for most fathers whose personal history reveals not the slightest evidence of athletic proficiency. It all began when I brought our oldest son to a game on a day when one of the regular coaches was missing in action. In need of someone to mind third base, the head coach asked if I'd substitute.

"But I don't know anything about coaching third base," I warned him. "When I wasn't playing cello in high school, I took pictures for the school newspaper of other people running around the field."

"Trust me," he replied. "You'll figure it out quick enough."

Turns out he was right, at least when it came to coaching 7 year olds. The first batter managed to hit the ball off the tee and make it to first base. Because no one on the field had any particular inclination to run after the ball or skill should he happen to come upon it, I yelled to

the runner, “Go to second base.” He nodded and headed dead on for left field, apparently unclear how the bases were aligned. It dawned on me at this juncture that coaching at the tee ball level involved instructing children on aspects of baseball so basic that even I could be of some use. Emboldened, I yelled out to the little boy, “No, second base is over here!” He looked up from under the oversized helmet, realized that he had made a wrong turn, and ended up at second in plenty of time.

It became clear during the remainder of that first inning that the statistical probability of the fielders getting a runner out was so infinitesimally small that anyone who finally hit the ball would easily make it to home unmolested. I just waved everyone home once they made it to first base. This strategy was not completely appreciated by the opposing coach who indicated that it would be in everyone’s best interest if someone got out so that the other team might bat before dark.

And thus my career in Little League began as it does for many: A coach no-shows and you, the unwitting fool, fill the breach. From that moment forth, you’re captive to an all-consuming, time-sucking rite of spring that broadcasts human nature across the lifespan and in all its glory. I spent the rest of that season and all of the next as an assistant coach, mostly waving children on from first base to home plate. At the end of the coach pecking order and palpably limited in baseball acumen, my responsibilities rarely went further than waving my arms, identifying the next base in sequence, and avoiding major strategic blunders. Toward the end of the second season, I ventured into realms that required more skill: arranging lineups, working with the pitchers, and keeping the more challenging parents in line.

Delusions of competence being what they are, I began to feel I’d be capable of handling my own team should the opportunity arise. And arise it did, the next year when the sheer number of children wanting to play baseball required the addition of two more teams. By this point our

younger son, Josh, had accrued sufficient years to qualify for a place on the 9 year old team. I figured my time had arrived.

Most coaches will tell you that a team's won-lost record is largely determined by the outcome of a meeting that lasts no more than 45 minutes. It's when the coaches get together to divvy up the pool of aspiring players. I learned afterwards that most of the coaches invested heavily in this process, developing scouting sheets based on the prior year's performance, making meticulous notes from the initial tryout session, and handicapping the genetic odds of one player being talented if his older brother had been a star. I had the feeling that most of the assignments, at least of the A-list players, had already been negotiated by the veteran coaches at the neighborhood tavern less than a mile from home plate.

After a round or so of the annual draft, a dynamic emerged that destined me to a challenging season. Whenever a child's name came up whom everyone knew to be maladjusted or otherwise limited in some substantial way, the league organizer would look at me and say, "You should really take this kid because he has a lot of problems and you'd be able to help him given that you're a child psychologist and all." When I asked one of the other fellows, a criminal defense attorney, if that meant he'd take all the future felons, he indicated that he wasn't defending them, just coaching. I was not impressed by his logic.

But I did have sufficient sense to make the best of this trend by leveraging an Anxious Andy for an especially capable pitcher or third baseman. I was operating on the assumption that, in Little League if not also the Bigs, he who has the best pitcher is he who wins the most games. And everyone knew that a kid who could play third base competently was a skilled and athletic player who likely would also help out at the plate. With this strategy, I landed some capable players, particularly Big Jeff and his sidekick, Whinin' Joe. I was also quite fortunate that Josh, defying the forces of heritability, proved himself unaccountably adept at the game.

So I had these Bad News Bears-type kids on my team, but they were Bad News Bears-type kids on psychotropics. The impact of having that many players with a psychiatric history on one team was palpable. After practice I'd hear coaches on other teams counsel parents with bromides like, "You really should work on Johnny's throwing" or "Make sure you get in some batting practice over the weekend." I'd be saying things to parents like, "You know, it's becoming far more common practice nowadays to administer an afternoon dose of Ritalin" or "You might want to work with his therapist to develop strategies so Billy doesn't wet himself every time the ump calls a strike on him."

The most charming of my player-patients was a freckled-faced boy named Jerry. The first inkling that Jerry might be a bit of a handful was how quickly his parents bolted from the parking lot once they deposited him for that first practice. While their car tires might not have actually screeched from excessive torque, their wish to capitalize on Jerry-free time was conspicuous. The second clue came within a minute of parental departure. Dashing toward a friend he recognized on the bench, Jerry somehow managed to ignore the presence of a mountainous duffel bag of helmets, bats, bases, and balls. Because his enthusiasm for the encounter overcame his consideration of obstacles in his path, he hit the bag at full speed, became momentarily airborne, and landed face down on a container of pretzel packets one of the parents brought for snack. Bounding up with the speed and nonchalance of someone overly-accustomed to mishap, he darted toward his companion, oblivious to the fact that he was running between the pitcher and batter.

We all learned in short order that the parts of Jerry's brain the good Lord had intended to act as governor over behavior, if not absent, were in the least tardy. If Jerry had any frontal lobes at all, they were vestigial and noncontributory to exercising self-control. Guileless, sweet, and eager, this little boy had an inherent incapacity to anticipate consequences and hold off from

acting when such delay would have served him well. Imagine a sports car with faulty brakes and you'll have a sense of what it was like being Jerry.

Without a typical capacity for self-control, even the simplest activity -- remembering to brush your teeth, stopping long enough to make sure you have in your book bag everything you need for school, looking both ways before you cross the street, paying attention to the teacher when she tells you to take your seat -- becomes a challenge. And Jerry was challenged when he had to cope with nearly all such quotidian demands.

Alas, baseball can be especially demanding of attention, given the long intervals that can elapse between meaningful events. If you've ever endured a baseball game as a spectator or participant, you know there's a reason why stimulant use is reportedly high among professional players. Baseball can be a mind-numbingly boring experience with only brief moments of action. If you're like Jerry, that is, poorly engineered to handle the unexciting, the baseball field is tantamount to a flight of steps for someone with no legs.

Sending Jerry to the outfield unattended was not a viable option. The one time I tried, we just about lost him. Geared as he was to respond to whatever was most interesting at the moment (regardless of its relevance to the task at hand), Jerry found many a non-baseball event grabbing his attention. Airplanes flying above his head, dandelions growing below his feet, other children making noises to either side of him all competed with happenings at home plate. And they always won. He literally wandered off the field in the course of chasing a butterfly that had crossed his field of vision. Fortunately, one of the other coaches noticed Jerry heading toward the parking lot in the middle of an inning. He ran out to herd Jerry back toward the field of play.

One incident stands out in my mind as capturing the essence of Jerry and all those children like him who I've worked with professionally over many years: it was a big game for us because

we were playing the team reputed to be the best of the league. Like most coaches, I was trying to balance a desire to win with a mandate to make sure that all the children had a chance to play. Herein lies the ambivalence that all coaches at this level experience in the conduct of their duties. It's capitalism versus socialism played out on grassy fields.

Jerry had been begging me for three full innings to enter the game. Indeed, the only time he had let up was when he climbed the backstop fence after being told to stay on the bench, got his pants stuck on a protruding wire, and flailed about for a while like a trapped bird. I held off until the top of the fourth when innings and daylight were both waning. I called Jerry over, crouched down so I could look him in the eye, and held his chin so he'd look me in the eye.

"Now Jerry, you want to get into the game, right?" I asked.

"Yes, Coach, I wanna play second base," he blurted in response.

"If I send you in, will you pay attention to the game?"

"I promise."

"You won't start doing somersaults or making a bracelet out of weeds like you did last game?"

"No, I'll be good. You'll see."

"So when it's our turn to take the field, you'll run to second base and get right into the ready position like we've practiced."

"Yup."

"OK, Jerry, this is a big game so we all need you to help us out."

"Gotcha Coach."

After our team's third out, Jerry dashed toward second base, got himself in the ready position, and bounced on his heels to stay loose. The poor kid looked crestfallen when I asked the ump for a time out so I could visit with my second baseman.

"What's the matter, Coach? I'm at second base and I'm in the ready position. I didn't do anything wrong yet," he protested.

"Well, Jerry, you're right. You came out toward second base and you are in the ready position."

"So, what's the problem?"

"Jerry, you forgot your glove."

In contrast to Jerry, who had not an angry or defiant bone in his body, stood our shortstop, Greg. All his bones were angry and defiant. His internal organs weren't that nice either. While he was a decent ballplayer, he had managed to become a thoroughly oppositional and unpleasant human being by the ripe old age of ten. And it wasn't because he was hopelessly impulsive or inattentive like Jerry. Greg could control himself without any problem, if controlling himself were on his personal agenda. It was just that following directions and responding to authority weren't of much interest to Greg. He seemed to have this internal filter that heard every request as a challenge to his free will and every expectation as a rationale for resistance.

How it happened that Greg should develop such malevolence so early in life I'm not entirely sure, although I do have my suspicions. But relaying them to you will entail some reliance on stereotypes, for which I apologize at the outset. The fact is, though, that not one, but both of Greg's parents were attorneys with well-earned reputations for nastiness. The father parlayed his profound narcissism and pervasive disregard for decency into a lucrative practice in matrimonial law. He was the local go-to guy if you wanted to not just leave your spouse, but inflict upon him or her maximal pain and economic devastation in the process. The mother misconstrued the tenets of feminism as an intellectual rationale for unremitting bitchiness. Her specialty was arranging international adoptions, an otherwise noble enterprise she managed to

turn sinister and contentious. Trust me, you would be hard pressed to conjure a couple who were more: 1) deserving of one another; and 2) likely to produce a Greg.

Near the middle of the season we were playing a team whose t-shirts advertised Price's Funeral Home, yet another proud sponsor of juvenile athletics. I was minding my own business on the sideline, making sure that our talented but emotionally labile relief pitcher, Gabe, was in a psychological space that might allow him to enter the game without collapsing on the mound in a heap of self-recrimination and unmodulated dysphoria should something awful happen, like a base on balls. All of a sudden the second base ump, a high school student who was paid maybe $10 per game to help stave off chaos on the field, walked toward me with tears streaming down his face.

"What in the world's the problem, Dave?" I asked.

"Your shortstop. He's mean," came the response.

"What'd he do now?"

"Well, when I called the kid safe on second, your shortstop called me an idiot and said that he was glad he had sex with my sister on the back of the bus last week. And then he said that he heard that my mother was giving blowjobs to some of the other teachers at the middle school, which isn't true. And then he called me a . . ."

"Dave, go back out there and throw him out of the game," I exhorted the unraveled ref.

"I'm not going near that kid," he informed me.

And that's how I became the first coach in our league to evict his own player from a game. My nobility was much appreciated by the officiating staff and the many parents on both teams whose children Greg had terrorized. It was not a hit with his father. In a peak of indignation, he descended the bleachers to explain that the kid was out at second and that the ump was an idiot. I told the father that Greg and I had an understanding clearly articulated after the first

time he willfully disregarded some essential element of sportsmanship (which, if memory serves, involved telling an opposing first baseman to "stick a bat up his ass sideways"). I explained, "Greg knew the rule about not swearing at the refs, he broke the rule about not swearing at the refs, and ergo he was out of the game for swearing at the ref. Furthermore, Greg knows that he has one more strike at this behavioral at bat before he's off the team for good."

Greg's father persisted, appealing to what he misjudged to be my soft hearted, "he's a child psychologist so he must be a wimp" self.

"Well, you shouldn't be so hard on Greg because he's being treated for a psychological problem."

"And do you mind telling me what that might be?"

"He has Oppositional Defiant Disorder," came the response.

Time out for a bit of explanation: Committees that draw up official lists of psychiatric problems don't miss opportunities to characterize even minor perturbations of normal adjustment as a psychiatric disorder. If you're impossibly self-centered, you're not a big jerk. No, you have a narcissistic personality disorder. You prefer tending to your stamp collection to meeting people at Chili's? That's a schizoid personality disorder. Just gotta have the fringes on the hallway Oriental rug lined up perfectly else life seems off kilter? Obsessive compulsive personality disorder strikes again. Same for kids who defy authority, not because their brains are abnormal (a la Jerry's), but because monkeys do what monkeys see and experience. That's the dreaded Oppositional Defiant Disorder.

I explained to his father: "Well, now I understand why Greg's so poorly behaved. He has Oppositional Defiant Disorder. You should have told me. The problem is, though, that I have a disorder, too. It's called, 'I Can't Tolerate Rude Little Kids Who Have No Excuse For Being

Nasty Disorder.' You'll have to forgive me because it causes me to throw bratty children out of baseball games."

Enough years have passed that I'm no longer fearful of receiving a notice of legal action.

If Paramount made a movie of our season's end, you'd see the prerequisite ultra slow motion scenes of gloves outstretched, balls glancing off fence tops, and a dusty sneaker tagging the base a breath before the baseman's mitt. You'd witness the explosion of all-boy exuberance as Jerry's bat unaccountably met a pitch mid-barrel, sending the ball high over the left fielder's head for the winning run. You could enjoy scenes of parents, not on speaking terms for days before the championship, suddenly hugging one another with a passion normally reserved for newlyweds. And you'd see young Jerry get so excited by his improbable heroics that he tossed the bat far into the air, unconcerned that it would inevitably land on the head of a 6-year old girl who had moments prior thought about nothing other than how good her ice cream cone tasted.

You'd see me on the fringes of the melee with a scorebook in hand and a beaming smile. Thanks to a talented pitcher, a capable third baseman, and some effective interventions involving both modern psychotherapeutic technique and targeted medication dosing, we won the championship game. My post-graduate training in advanced clinical child psychology had ended with success.

The diploma arrived a month later, a team picture mounted on dark-colored wood with the words "League Champions" emblazoned across the top in gold leaf. It hangs in my office, next to my other certificates. The photo displays almost the entire team, standing in a line, mitts in hand. All the players except, of course, for Jerry. Just as the photographer snapped the picture, Jerry saw a cat, chased it along the plywood dugout, and fell headfirst into a tub of melted ice and Gatorade. Dripping wet, he was no longer in a condition to make another stab at standing

for the snapshot. Not that anyone will ever forget Jerry. Some children can achieve immortality without ever having to pose.