

SUPPORTING OFFICIALS TO 'SET THE STANDARD': EMPATHETIC LISTENING

IT'S ALL ABOUT STAYING CALM:

C

CONNECT

- Make eye contact, use a calm tone, remember you are the expert!
- Start with empathy: "I can see and hear that you're upset."

A

ACKNOWLEDGE

- Validate the emotion, not the behaviour
- "I can see that something important has happened /that really matters to you/you feel has affected you/your child."

L

LISTEN

- Invite them to share and listen attentively and with empathy
- "Please tell me what you saw from your side/what has happened from your point of view"
- Continue to 'Connect' and 'Acknowledge'

M

MOVE FORWARDS

- Offer next steps or clarify
- "Let me explain what I can do to help in terms of the rules...", "Let's look at what we can do now."
- "Can I offer some guidance for you, or a recommendation that may help"

1. CONNECT

Strengths first (it's not personal), you are the expert, and you can model composure in a way that builds a connection with the parent.

What to do

- Pause before responding and take one slow breath in situations where you have time
- Adopt a calm, neutral posture (open stance, relaxed shoulders, steady eye contact).
- With a calm tone, start with an initial empathic statement: *"I can see that you're very upset"*. This will help you lead into further acknowledging their feelings in the next step, as opposed to heading immediately down a punishment route.

Why

- Emotional states are contagious. If you escalate (become defensive, abrupt, show offence), the situation worsens.
- Self-regulation models the behaviour you want to see from the parent (in time) and helps you think clearly under pressure.
- A calm presence increases perceived authority without confrontation.

2. ACKNOWLEDGE

Acknowledge their Emotion(s) (and create physical space as necessary)

What to do

- Give space to further name the emotion(s) and space to start a de-fusion process:
 - *"I know you're really concerned about something; can we talk it through over here?"*

- *Ok, I can see how frustrated you feel and that something important has happened /that really matters to you/you feel has affected you/your child. Can we talk through this?"*

Why

- Parents often want to be **heard**, not “won over.”
- Acknowledging emotion reduces threat perception and physiological arousal.
- You validate their feelings **without validating their behaviour**

Further support/encourage to create Calm Boundaries if they won't move or engage, or continue showing an emotional response

What to do

- State expectations clearly and respectfully to disarm gradually:
 - *“I'd really like to listen and talk it through, but I can't do that while you are shouting. Can we take some time over here?”*
 - *OK, I can see you're upset, but I'm here now and really want to listen to you/try to help and explain. Can we talk about this together?”*

Why

- Boundaries protect officials and others
- Calm limits prevent normalising aggressive behaviour.
- Clarity reduces confusion about what is and isn't negotiable

3. LISTEN

Invite them to explain what has happened and listen actively/attentively (with steady eye contact) and empathically.

Emotional or empathic listening involves an acknowledgement of the emotions connected to explanations with appropriate understanding gestures (e.g., head nods).

Secondly, it involves reflecting back to the parent so that they see you understand what has happened (**even though you don't condone or validate their behaviour**)

a. What to do

- Ask a calm, bounded question:
 - *“Can you tell me what specifically has happened from your point of view / what you're worried about right now? It is important that I listen.”*
 - *“Please tell me what you saw from your perspective/Please share what has made you feel so frustrated, so that I can understand the context more”*
- If needed, move further aside from the competition/courtside area to help them feel that they are getting individual attention without the scrutiny/over-hearing and judgement of onlookers.

Why

- Giving them important space to speak reduces their urge to shout or fume with intensity
- It shifts the parent from emotional reaction to verbal explanation.
- Physical repositioning reduces public involvement and audience effects.

b. What to do

- Let them talk freely without interruption, acknowledging their points
- Reflect back key points to illustrate your emotional listening in action:

- *“So, I can see why you are upset and that you feel that [the situations in this match so far] have affected your child’s enjoyment/ concentration/ performance. I sense too that it has been a challenge for you to encourage their participation after prior experiences. That must have been difficult.”*

Why

- Such reflective listening demonstrates respect and competence, as well as understanding.
- It corrects misunderstandings early.
- Feeling understood is one of the strongest de-escalators of anger.

In step 3 – ‘Listening’ – you are consistently reinforcing the C-A-L loop because you will be actively continuing to Connect and Acknowledge as the conversation progresses. This helps to emotionally disarm and de-escalate the situation further.

4. MOVE FORWARDS

An important final stage is moving forwards with next steps, offering your perspectives and any options, mindful of the rules of the game and facilitating a positive experience. Hence, there could be few decisions and considerations here for officials.

What to do:

- *“Thanks for explaining this to me, it is appreciated....*
 - *..Would you allow me to explain what I can here to help in terms of the rules...”*
 - *...In terms of the rules of the game....etc”*
- *“Let’s look at what we can do now.”*
- *“Can I offer some guidance for you, or a recommendation that may help”*
- *“Would you allow me to suggest a few options here?”*

In the case discussed, the following elements or sequences depend on how you want to further support the de-escalation process, facilitate the match to continue, apply the rules (e.g., a warning), and also offer /suggest further support ideas to the parent.

a. Make and Explain a Decision around the Parent Behaviour - using your discretion within the Rules of the Game

Why

- Simple explanations reinforce fairness and consistency, and you can make decisions while still maintaining an empathic stance – understanding the parent’s emotions and their underpinnings.
- Transparency builds trust—even if the decisions made are not easy.

b. Look out for the child’s best interests, and where possible, supporting both players to continue the match

Why

- Most parental anger is rooted in protection or fear.
- Re-centring to the child shifts focus from blame to care.
- This aligns you and the parent on a shared value.

You could reinforce the rules and spirit of the game to both players – i.e. remind/re- ‘set the standards’ for the second set (first set has gone).

c. Offer the next step and move forward solution or plan (e.g., watching the match, engaging the court supervisor to watch)

Why

- Offering a pathway for the parent reduces a sense of helplessness.
- A reasonable solution prevents ongoing confrontation.
- Fair play is a key value which is important to uphold in your role, and the other player may not be adhering to the rules of the game
- You cannot change the past, but you can assist with the future

d. Make yourself approachable and available to share useful information

Why

- Reinforce that if you notice a problem emerging that they can come and approach a referee or court supervisor. A parent cannot intervene with the player, but they can approach an official. Parents will be reassured if you create a climate of 'availability' for parents
- The LTA Parents webpage could have important educational guidance for the parent – promote the online courses and material which contain useful information and support on how they can optimally support their child.

Author – Professor Chis Harwood, Nottingham Trent University