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HEADLINE: ADULTS RUINING KIDS' HOCKEY

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MEMO TO hockey parents: Drop your kids off at the rink and go do something on your own. Pick your budding Gretzky up later.

No, I'm not telling parents to shun their kids' games entirely. But I am saying that one of the greatest threats to the kids' enjoyment of the sport is the constant, critical pressure of having parents watching, cheering and even loudly moaning your every move.

Too often parents are such zealous supporters they become too wrapped up in the game.

It's a shock to hear what appear to be civilized, decent parents using gutter language to lash out at kids on opposing teams who are 10 or 11 years old. Or giving the referees and opposing coaches even worse.

And when some actually attack officials and even some of the youngsters, it has to make a real hockey fan groan.

Too many seem to be living in a fantasy world when it comes to their children's hockey. Instead of treating it as fun, they project their own frustrations as players onto the hopeful careers of their children.

I've heard more than a few parents rinkside discussing the chances of their kids getting a hockey scholarship to a U.S. college or hoping to point their young star towards a fat NHL contract.

In fact, hockey has become so organized -- spurred on by ambitious parents -- that kids who can hardly walk find themselves on skates and engulfed in full equipment.

True, they are fun to watch -- earnestly falling around the ice -- often unable to make it from one end of the rink to the other. But too many kids find themselves thrust into organized hockey at such a young age that by the time they are 13 or 14, they are sick of the sport and drop out.

Too many early-morning games and heavy schedules. And too much being pounded into the boards or glass by overgrown defencemen whose main weapon is a cross-check and bash from behind.

Personally, I've enjoyed a lifelong love affair with hockey. And I credit much of it to the fact my parents hardly ever saw me play.

My dad saw me play one high school game, although I went on to play junior, university and semi-pro. My mother never saw me play, although she proudly kept a scrapbook of my sports career.

It wasn't that they weren't interested. It was just that sports was something you did after you finished your studies or your chores.

And you made it to the games on your own, toting your gear in a canvas dufflebag.

In fact, some of my fondest memories as a kid were playing shinny for endless hours on a frozen pond near our house.

I would stickhandle, try any kind of play, various types of shooting -- including the now-neglected backhand -- and work at skating backwards until it got dark and I was called to supper. I never played in a rink until I was 10.

Today kids are so regimented by organized hockey that they aren't even interested in shinny. For instance, this winter I've noticed two outdoor rinks often sitting empty with good sheets of ice and nets but rarely used for shinny.

So what do we do to save this great Canadian sport?

First of all, encourage your kids with backyard or nearby park shinny rinks. Keep them out of organized hockey until they're eight or nine. And just let them have fun.

We should also all push hard to clean up what was once an artistic, fantastically fast sport noted for hard but clean bodychecking. The NHL and other leagues should restore and strictly enforce the rule that any check with the stick above the waist is high-sticking or cross-checking -- a penalty.

As I write this, I'm looking at a photo in the Sun showing 17-year-old Sidney Crosby, a truly exciting and gifted player, getting slammed to the ice by a giant of a Quebec junior league defenceman using his stick and long arm. It's no bodycheck but it's apparently legal in today's hockey.

True, a star like Crosby is a marked man, but why allow his career to be cut short by this stuff? Hopefully, he'll survive and give us years of enjoyment.

Meanwhile, parents -- start dropping the kids off at the rink -- and head off to do something of your own. You also have a life to live -- and not just through your kids.