

Tips on How to Deliver a Quality Youth Sport Program

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Below are five tips that coaches and program leaders can use to facilitate quality sport programs that support positive youth development, adapted from a recent Research-to-Practice report (Bean & Kramers, 2017). These strategies require that coaches be intentional in their approach, understanding that outcomes don't happen magically but are a result of good design and leadership.

1. Use a Consistent Program Structure.

Many frameworks have been developed and validated within the sport context that help coaches adopt an intentional approach to athletes' holistic development. For example, Hellison's (2011) Teaching Personal and Social Responsibility Model and Danish's (2002) Sports United for Recreation and Education (SUPER) program can be used as guides in both recreational and competitive sport contexts. Both frameworks, and others, suggest breaking down a program session into components to support program goals and outcomes. For example, starting every session with a check-in helps foster relationships, while ending every session with a reflection or debrief allows youth to reflect on lessons learned and how they can apply skills beyond the program context.

2. Foster Positive Relationships with and between Youth.

Coaches and program leaders play a critical role in achieving positive youth outcomes through sport, and can use informal and formal strategies to foster relationships with youth on their team or in their program (Petitpas, Cornelius, & Van Raalte, 2008). Checking in with youth through individual or small group conversations; showing an interest in the person beyond who they are as an athlete; and integrating formal activities, such as ice breakers, cooperative games and team dinners can be used to intentionally build strong relationships.

3. Integrate Both Sport and Life Skills.

Similar to structuring a practice to develop physical and sport skills, coaches should work to explicitly teach life skills that help youth succeed in contexts off the court or outside the gym (e.g., communication, leadership, managing emotions). Youth in sport programs structured to support the development of life skills perceive the program to be of higher quality and developed greater life skills compared to youth participating in sport that did not explicitly teach life skills (Bean & Forneris, 2016).

4. Empower Youth.

Youth-centered approaches that foster youth voice and autonomy is critical to effective program planning and delivery, and let youth know coaches care and are listening. Coaches can illicit youth voice during an end of practice or game debrief and incorporate feedback into the following practice. This can be done through attaining input on what is done (e.g., types of drills or activities) or how things are done (e.g., order of activities, choice of positions). Additionally, coaches can offer leadership opportunities to youth to facilitate a drill or activity of their choice

5. Use the Power of Reflection and Evaluation.

Reflection and evaluation are critical at personal, program and organizational levels in order to learn, improve, and understand effectiveness. Three tools have recently been developed to assess the youth sport context: the Program Quality Assessment in Youth Sport (Bean et al., 2018), The Implicit/Explicit Life Skills Continuum, and Sport for Life's Quality Sport Checklist for Communities and Clubs. The tools provide an intentional strategy to reflect on program processes, including one's coaching philosophy, one's program environment, and the teaching of life skills development and transfer, with the goal of delivering a quality youth sport program.

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