

Teaching Life Skills through Sport

by Sara Kramers & Corliss Bean posted on March 2, 2020 on SIRC.ca

Below are five strategies that can be used by coaches to intentionally teach life skills through sport.

1. Teaching life skills by design.

Reflect on what type of life skills you want your athletes to develop through sport and how you can help facilitate their positive development. When designing your coaching plan and articulating your philosophy, ask yourself “What are my goals and intended outcomes related to life skills development for the program?” and “How can these goals and outcomes be communicated to my team?” The following strategies will help you integrate these into your practice.

2. Focus on one life skill per session.

Introduce one life skill per session to maximize understanding and not overwhelm athletes (Kendellen et al., 2017). Facilitate a discussion with athletes about the skill and its perceived importance for their development. For example, if the life skill for the session is ‘focus’, coaches can facilitate discussion with athletes by asking: ‘Why is it important to focus during practices/games?’, ‘How do you try to focus before practices/games?’, and ‘What would you do if you were struggling to focus during practices/games?’.

3. Use teachable moments.

Use teaching moments to draw athletes’ focus to life skills development. This could include informal or spontaneous opportunities (e.g. when you witness athletes putting life skills into practice by mentoring another athlete or working to manage their emotions). Coaches should be aware of and look for opportunities for teachable moments for both negative and positive behaviours.

4. Draw connections.

Athletes may not be aware of the connections between life skills learned in sport and skills needed beyond sport (Danish et al., 2002). Coaches could enable this by creating elements within the sport context that are similar to other domains (Jacobs & Wright, 2018). Coaches can also discuss and draw connections between sport and youth’s school, home, or work environments. For example, coaches can ask athletes how they prepare for a big presentation at school and discuss how similar processes may be beneficial in preparing before competition.

5. Debrief throughout and at the end of programming.

By including moments to debrief throughout a session, coaches can encourage youth to reflect on life skills development experiences in real time. Intentional efforts will allow coaches and athletes to discuss how the practicing of life skills is perceived, provide recommendations for including other life skills into sessions, identify what strategies worked/did not work while practicing life skills, and engage in reflection after the session ends (Kendellen et al., 2017). For example, if your life skill for the session is

“communication”, coaches can ask athletes the following questions to facilitate a debrief: “How did you communicate with your teammates during the practice?”, “Did anyone have difficulty communicating?”, and “What are some tips you can share with your teammates on how to effectively communicate with others?”.

Life skills development is a process for youth, but can also be a process for coaches. It will take time to adopt this explicit approach, and will include effort, trial and error, and learning from and adapting your coaching behaviours over time. We encourage coaches to find ways to explicitly teach life skills that best fit with their own coaching philosophy and practices and the athletes with which they work. The Implicit/Explicit Life Skills Continuum may be used as a tool to help coaches identify their current level of explicitness and identify what level they wish to achieve.

This blog was published February 13, 2019.

About the Author(s)

Sara Kramers is a doctoral student at the University of Ottawa within the School of Human Kinetics. Her research examines the teaching and development of life skills within the youth sport context, coaching education, as well as the evaluation and quality of youth sport programming.

Dr. Corliss Bean is a postdoctoral fellow at the University of British Columbia Okanagan within the School of Health and Exercise Sciences. She is also the Research and Evaluation Specialist at Youth Research and Evaluation eXchange at York University. Her research has focused on program evaluation within youth sport programs. Corliss is heavily involved in research within the community and has worked with organizations at the local and national levels to develop curriculum and evaluate programs.

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