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## Considerations for Coaching the Child Athlete

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### Introduction

Coaching the child athlete is one of the most demanding roles for a parent or coach - and even more so when we combine the two! The basis of a successful child coach is your clear philosophy and vision for the athlete(s) and having the kids' best interests at heart because these influence the way you coach and treat children. It will also influence children's attitudes towards sport! One excellent coaching philosophy for the coach of children is: "Sport is not so much a competition between our bodies as a celebration of them". This belief shows a coach who sees sport for children as a time when kids can delight in their bodies, learn to use their physical abilities and explore their bodies' potential. The competition and its results are not given the same priority as the opportunity for children to participate in all aspects of their sport. Celebrating our bodies is done through the joys of running, throwing, kicking, passing, or hitting a ball, movement, passing or sharing with friends in the team and exploring contested space.

It helps your coaching if you know what the children in your team like about a good coach? What do their parents ask of a good coach? How do you know? You must get to know the parents - and remember that when we say 'parents', we are meaning the child's parents, caregivers, de facto parents, guardians, step/ foster/ adoptive parents, and home care providers. Do be sensitive to this when you refer to adults in the children's lives. That is why the one-to-one meetings with the child athletes, as discussed below, are important.

### Parents and coaching

If you coach a team or squad, frame the rules with the parents. The coach has to have the final say on these but give the parents and youngsters opportunities for input into the formation of rules. What rules are needed? Are they fair? How will they be enforced?

What will the punishments be for transgressions? Will everyone have to conform in similar ways or will there be exceptions? Will the players know the punishments for each broken rule? Will the rules be framed positively? What will rules cover? (Consider attendance and punctuality, clothing for training and match, effort, conduct, language and gestures, treatment of team-mates, training application, abuse on the field, etc.)

It is also an excellent idea to have an early or pre-season meeting of the parents to outline your philosophy and team vision. Explain what this means in the practical context of their children. Tackle ethics head-on and set out your proposed team rules. Listen to the parents' views and seek their questions. You may shift some emphases but do not agree to any aspect of your responsibilities with which you feel uneasy or compromised. You could discuss any of the factors listed in Table 1.

<b>Table 1. Factors to discuss with parents at the beginning of the season</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the importance of a supportive attitude</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• use of a team notebook which is for child players and their guardians (this has basic season outlines and training days and times, match schedules, team goals, eligibility, parents' code of behavior, team rules and penalties, medical information and contact persons, season's social events, award information, captain and vice-captain roles, team and family functions)</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the start-of-season one-to-one meeting with their child</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• parents taking groups at practice time</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• how the kids in your team best learn new techniques</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• any age or residential qualifications for selection</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• clearance form for emergency treatment</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• financial costs of the season: subscriptions, fundraising, special costs</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• instruction sessions for parent helpers</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• parental acceptance of responsibility for gear issued to a young player</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the emphasis upon joyful participation and effort</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• parents versus children game midway through the season</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• how basic skills are acquired</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• nutrition and meals</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• water and who will bring it to competitions</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• coaching sessions and training times</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the one-to-one sessions</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• available resources for parent and child on the sport and its rules and skills</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the importance of fitness</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the risk of injury is small, is less when players are well-coached but is present in the sport</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• talk frankly about outstanding players' futures and the need for caution on assumptions of a professional career</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the importance of correct gear that is the right fit</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• your policy on players' opportunity for participation, with all children having an equitable number of games</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the full involvement of players in games</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• discipline and team rules</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• a parents' contract which sets out the commitment of home and club or school and the parents' acceptance of responsibility for their offspring.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parent signed consent form for searching a child's gear and bags</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Selection of the valued team-mate of the day</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How sensible and considerate training and instruction reduces the risk of injury</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the season and its structure</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• contingency plans for wet weather, cancellation information, transport unavailability</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• any representative teams that might be selected</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the necessary personal gear and clothing</li> </ul>

• the importance of academic work and results
• the need for a balanced life for the athlete
• transport requirements
• assistance required or desired
• possible sponsors through parent support, contacts, businesses or suggestions
• parent suggestions on how to publicise player effort and success
• assistance with: telephone networks
Fundraising
specialist knowledge of technical aspects
first aid or medical expertise
assistance with umpiring or refereeing
assistance in observing, recording or videotaping players notification of wet days, cancellations, special notices
team functions or social committee who will organize a team barbecue and end-of-season function and a stand-by coach if the coach is unexpectedly absent

### **Practical Considerations**

Inform the parents that if any special circumstances affect a youngster in the season, you would appreciate some information on these, if this does not involve disclosure that could embarrass the child. It is better to know that Jacky's grandmother is very ill and that is affecting Jacky's commitment, involvement or attention - so you can be understanding and supportive - than not to know, and perhaps assume that Jacky cannot be bothered to concentrate or doesn't care. To earn such trust from parents you must be respected and have compassion and integrity. Parents can soon see through a coach who does not genuinely children! If you feel uncomfortable with kids then consider coaching a different level. There are coaches who prefer certain age groups or levels of competition.

Care for your child athletes should include consideration of their safety. Make sure that parents and yourself know clearly what the team policy is regarding players who are not picked up at the agreed time from practice, training or a concluded match. Do you know who is permitted by the child's parents or guardians to collect them? Child safety is

paramount!

Equipment and gear can be expensive - does your school, or club, have a discount system with a sport chain or specific shop? Do you have a swap-meet or buy-and-sell day, at the end or start of a season, so outgrown gear can be sold and bought?

Is there a parent or older sibling or team supporter who is a computer whiz who can work on simulated match situations or quizzes on the laws, match situation visualization, or tactical layouts for the boys and girls to understand? Similarly, does one of the team families have a video camera that can be utilized to film play, or a specific player, for later evaluation and positive development of the player?

Carefully consider the basic information you would like on each child and explain this, with your reasons for its inclusion, to the parents and children. A good example of important information is included in Table 2.

<b>Table 2. Child Athlete Information Record</b>	
Address and telephone numbers	Guardians and contact persons
Next-of-kin	Left or right handedness
Religious affiliation	Medical conditions & allergies
Doctor	Siblings (sisters and brothers)
School, grade and teacher	Dentist
Age/birthday	Job
School subjects	External exams to sit
Extra-curricular involvement	Hobbies
Previous sport involvement	Personal goals
Sport goals	Driving license
Special circumstances: access to the child	School sport involvement
Club sport involvement	Cultural identification
Why does the child play this sport?	Access to the child
Medical insurance	

## Coaching Children

The fullest involvement from child athletes is more likely to come if they feel welcome, appreciated for their effort and not put down for errors. Give verbal and non-verbal praise and support. Use a smile, a nod, a pat on the shoulder, a wink or clap. Praise for thoughtfulness, effort, skilful application, keeping to team rules, not responding to adverse provocation and ethical actions. Praise specifically and honestly and recognize individual and team improvement. Children warm to a caring coach who is positive and constructive - with a sense of humor. You will need these qualities!

Children also respond to coaches who make them feel unique and valued as individuals, who relate to them on a personal level, and in a sport environment where the personal goals of the child athlete fit with the coach's goals. Encourage the players to make supportive comments. You might consider a reward system each week so that, (somehow!), different children "win" or are recognized each week. Emphasize the basic skills, understanding of the rules and elementary team tactics. It is the effort, enjoyment and ability to learn that are important - more than, be it emphasized, the result. Provide training and practice activities that fit the child's level of development. Greet the players individually, by name, as they arrive. Create settings where the child will be "successful" and feel good. This does not mean the realities of life are avoided! The child should experience more successes than failures. Some losses are growth conducive - "What have we/you learned from this?"

Practice and training must reinforce your basic philosophy and values and vision for the team. Plan carefully, with goals that are understood by the team with a resultant full involvement of children. The goals should be ones that all can achieve. Organize your practices, so children vary their partners and group membership for training activities. Look for the shy children or those lacking confidence. Do any children in your club team not attend the same school as most of their team-mates, for example? If so, what could you do to help them become integrated? Make practice something that is far better to be part of than to avoid. Vary the activities. Have the children suggest some.

Perhaps parents can attend practice and training and be group assistants or instructors. Don't have kids hanging around. If you have a basic pattern to practice then early arrivals can assist in preparation or/and engage in self-monitored activity. Why not give children activities they can do at home, with success likely to outweigh failure? Provide enough equipment! Make sure that as you instruct or train the children understand the relevance of the activity and how it relates to a match situation - but don't labor the point! It pays to consider putting an emphasis upon positional play to help all children understand their position and experience the basal requirements for this. This must not be boring or static! Apply the team rules fairly, openly, and with consistency.

Make sure that those who arrive early have enjoyable activities to do and, when all are present, do your warm-ups, stretching, and drills that are readily understood and enjoyable. Then introduce a new technical or playing skill simply, with well-prepared demonstrations and reinforcement. Reinforce the skill learning and have the basic skill drills repeated until they are automatic. Consider the youngsters' learning styles. Use simple and evocative keywords that help make the skills and its sequence easy to recall. Then move from these skills to tactical skills and game skills. Have the players operate individually, then in pairs, then in larger groups. You might wish to set a problem for

groups to solve relating the skill to a game situation. Have the equipment ready for each phase of practice. You could have a parent, injured player, or team member responsible for this. Be honest with the children in a positive manner by telling them what they are doing correctly and what they can correct - and specifically how to do this. Look for player behaviors to reinforce with a supportive comment. You might find it helpful to keep a simple record of each player's involvement in practice - the positions they play in, responsibilities they had, the opportunity to umpire, coach or referee, gear monitoring, captaincy or team leadership roles, or strengths and needs revealed.

Speak to each child at every team practice. Be realistic in what you expect from your players and team and stress the values of performance and thoughtful effort rather than the result! Model the way you want your young folk to accept winning - and losing. Happiness, humility, dignity are integral to children's sport - and at all other levels.

You have the choice of making positive or negative comments when you speak to your child players. Consider the comments you make, such as: "Way to go Sue"; "That's excellent Dale"; "Good stuff Joe, that's great play because... "; "Don't worry about it..."; "Great kick"; "I know you're hurting.."; "You played well"; "You played like girls"; "What are you thinking about?"; "That damned referee cost us"; "Shut up and listen"; "I can't believe you'd do something so stupid..."; or, "I don't know why you play the game."

Make sure your players know each others' names and vary partners at practice. The practice should be challenging so that the players are experiencing success more than failure. They should also have fun times included. Develop skills in a socially supportive atmosphere. Again, ideas from any of the wider team can provide circuits and modified games or drills. Vary your drills and cover essential skills in different games. You could include self-paced activities that emphasize personal achievement. Each practice should end with a team goal being scored, a positive air and children having feelings of accomplishment. Cool down sensibly. Then review the training session with your players in terms of the goals and drills. What did they find helpful? What was enjoyable? What was difficult? Can we make up new practice games? Who would like to organize and run part of our practice? Are there positional changes for the next practice and, if so, what preparation of individual players is needed for this? Most children want to be goal shooter or pitcher or goalie! Give them the chance! Also use this experience as the basis for discussing with the player what they now understand about the "new" position. You may find an athlete is well-suited to a position other than one originally planned for them! Do not label youngsters into set and unchanging positions but consider these when you plan the next session.

Be specific when giving feedback. Don't just say, "Good effort, Bill" or "You played well, Louise" but indicate what it was about the effort or skilled play that evokes commendation. That gives the players personal recognition but this specific comment also informs them of a skill or action or quality they have mastered and how this fits in the team and players' development. Make your comments socially engaging or supportive and then give specific performance information. Give feedback in clear and simple language. Rather than a comment like, "How could you have missed that easy ball?" you could say "Sam, keep your eyes on the ball and your head still and that will help."

Make children feel they are good and valued young persons, commend them for something they are doing well or have done well, and then be supportive and clear in specifying what the child needs to do to improve their performance. Positive

reinforcement is more valuable than negative reinforcement! Children in sport, like adults, are motivated by their relationship with team-mates, achieving in performance, their amount of effort, skill level they reach, the competence of their task behaviors, and participation-work output. Do not create or allow situations that embarrass players or "put them down". Sometimes it will be helpful to give youngsters activities that they can practice at home.

On competition or match days do make the effort to chat with parents and grandparents and be positive and supportive about the young people in your care. Listen to the adults - even if you see their children differently from them - perhaps, especially if you see the young ones differently! If you have a special match, why not give out the new uniform for that game or a special short "pep talk" or have a past player, whom the players admire, talk to them. Keep yourself under control and model good behavior. Ensure that the team do sit quietly and have the reflective time to think about themselves and their personal and team goals.

Plan how you will select team leaders and how you will both recognize and develop children's leadership capabilities. Rotate your team captains and vice-captains. Give players certain responsibilities and involve them in decision making when you can do so. Plan ahead for this. If you have a captain, how will you select this person - do the parents and players know how this is done and the skills and qualities you value? Perhaps there is real merit in rotating the captaincy. You will be surprised at some child's unexpected insights or abilities! Train your captains! Give players tasks of self-responsibility. Consider having a vice-captain. Have a planned program for their development. Can any parents help in this process?



**Table 3. Knowing Your Child Athletes**

Basic skills particular to the sport (e.g., throwing, pressing weights, 50 metre swim, spike knowledge, passing to either side, tackling, base running, goal shooting)
Relationship with peers
Leadership
Effort put into practice and match
Punctuality
Dressed in correct uniform
Adheres to rules in competition
Accepts blame for errors and does not blame others
Enjoys the sport
Enjoys practice
Is thoughtful of others
Is injury prone
Listens to the coach and team leaders
Makes excuses, complains
Has positive/negative attitude
Accepts team position
Athleticism (agility, running, mobility, fitness, flexibility, strength, hand-eye co-ordination, jumping ability, kicking ability, field vision, reaction time)
Willing to repeat activities or skills to master them
Peer acceptance
Rate of learning

## Ethics

It is at this level of sport that we instill a positive sense of sport ethics. We emphasize enjoyment, and respect for team-mates, the rules, officials, and the opposition. It is here that the lure of media replays, of such unsporting acts as gratuitous violence and verbal abuse, are countered. The children will learn a lot from your good example! The smallest, most uncoordinated or technically challenged kids have their own dignity. Let's support them keeping that dignity. We do that best through keeping our own, and by being fair. Some of the key points about "playing fair" are listed in Table 4 below:

<b>Table 4. Key Points to Playing Fair</b>
• model the behavior you expect from your athlete
• look for the positives in each of your players
• give equal time to your individual players
• do not call out derogatory comments or criticize the referee or umpire
• help your athletes to clearly understand the basic rules and the reason for these
• discourage cheating and acts that are clearly against the spirit of your sport
• place the emphasis upon effort not competition result
• if a player is a bad example or too aggressive then substitute or bench them
• do not avoid the fact that sport is competitive - you are the coach with an understanding of the life lessons inherent in this
• give your players experience at training, or in practice games, of officiating and discuss what they have learned from this experience
• teach your players value the opposition as they give us the opportunity to discover and delight in ourselves and our team-mates
• help your players set specific goals that relate to their own performance as they have control of this can not expect to control an opponent's performance
• the coach must be objective with no favorites
• if another team uses illegal plays, then discuss that issue honestly with your players
• no drugs or weapons

- drawing up a team board or checklist of "GOOD"; (desirable) and "BAD" (undesirable) behaviors
- be honest - do not mislead or deceive a player
- help players to consider the goalie who lets in a goal, the catcher who misses a pitch, the goal-shooter who misses a penalty, the relay runner who fumbles the baton - and how they would wish team-mates to respond to them if they were in such a position
- be positive with your player and seek to be constructive
- encourage supportive behavior towards a player who has difficulty, such as a comment or a pat on the back
- it is natural, as a player, to feel annoyed or upset at times - how we handle this is the key
- it is not easy to accept some umpires' or referees' decisions but we must do this
- have fun

Team or squad culture is vital to a group's wellbeing in children's sport. Consider how you can positively influence this. It is important for children to feel valued for themselves and accepted because they are part of your team - not on the basis of their skills. What are the most significant aspects of being in your team? How do you know? Do you review this with parents whose views you respect? In one of your team sessions you could discuss actual situations where ethical decisions are needed.

**Table 5: How A Successful Coach Makes Young Athletes and Teams Feel Valued**

- Treat all players alike
- Have uniforms that are new and attractive and well-maintained
- Use team slogans that are not derogatory but encouraging, descriptive and have meaning for the athletes
- Team functions should have purpose and facilitate team unity and enjoyment of the company of team-mates.
- Safe and attractive equipment is critical. Test the gear!

• Good facilities can enhance a team's self-image. Can you have an area cleaned up, redecorated, made the team's space? What facilities do other sports have in your district, what facilities do other teams have in your sport? What facilities are most valued by the players?

• Equipment in good condition

• Use school or club colors

• Mascot

• Assign lockers or gear bags

• Put inspirational past players on lockers

• Have players' names on lockers

• Do up a team room

• Have a team notice board

• Designate a season board where results and awards are listed

• Utilize music

• Have track suits donated

• Design a team logo and put this on transport and gear

• Get sponsored gear bags for each team member

• Utilize all public relations opportunities

## Kids and Discipline

At some time you will have youngsters who will be rude, insolent, unpunctual, overly-inflated with self-opinion, demanding beyond reason, or confrontational. Make sure you know your club or association's rules and sanctions - and the extent to which they will support the coach. Then:

- Ensure that the team and individual goals are clear and you establish the one-to-one meetings with players. Give them the opportunity to talk through their personal goals.
- Reread the discussion above on the first meeting with parents and get parental understanding of the team discipline and sanctions.
- Be prepared to handle disruptions in team sessions
- Don't get caught in debate with a trouble-maker. Respond pleasantly and firmly and get back on task - ask the player to meet with you afterwards
- You could have a "three strikes and out" rule for the players but make sure they all understand this and what constitutes breaking team rules
- When you meet with the player, address the problem and not the person. "This is how I saw it Dale...", "It seemed to me that...", "Would you explain how I might have seen that situation...?", "Beefsteak, could you explain what happened...?"
- Contact the player's club or parents and be rational and clear about the concern and possible outcome
- You do not have to provide entertainment or fun or put up with ill-disciplined athletes
- So do not be a martyr - coaching should be a fulfilling experience - it is a legitimate feeling to be hurt or annoyed or disappointed
- Talk through the concern with your assistant coach, captain, a mentor or another experienced coach - is there a coach or teacher who has had this player before you?

## Summary

- The coach of children must have a child-centered philosophy
- Plan your first parents' meeting with care and cover your philosophy, basic aspects of coach care for the children, and the goals for the team
- Have a file on each child and make this available to the parents
- Treat training seriously and give the youngsters the opportunity to participate in various roles, with an emphasis upon enjoyment
- Know the abilities and skills of your athletes
- Make sure that your athletes have a clear understanding of your ethical expectations and communicate these to the parents
- Make all children feel valued in their positive experience of sport