

Coaches of Character: Optimizing Positive Youth Development through Sport

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<https://www.character.org/sports-and-character>

Long before COVID's disruption of youth sport, rigorous academic research and convincing life experience made it clear that **organized athletics** develop broad, deep, and malleable character strengths and social-emotional skills that positively influence outcomes in many arenas – including relationships, school and career, and mental and physical well-being – throughout life.

Sport competition, from recreational to elite, is marked by practicing, losing, winning, adjusting, feeling, and thinking – all of which not only fosters qualities such as attention, curiosity, and grit, but also provides those moments of intense stress or joy that can shape the lives of young athletes, sometimes forever.

It is in large part due to the emotionally engaging aspect of sport that learning is so powerful, particularly during childhood and adolescence. These early chapters of life are known as “*sensitive periods*” in **development**, when experiences – both positive and negative – can have lasting ramifications for brain structure and function as well as immune health.

This neurobiological “stickiness” has important life-long implications for emotional, mental, and physical health. Because our life experiences provide the context (nurture) that shape how our DNA (nature) is read and expressed, it's easy to understand that by forming healthy habits around regular exercise, sleep, nutrition, meditation, and mindset choices – and associating them with the positive feeling of engagement in sport fueled by an empowering relationship with a coach – such choices are likelier to become a part of one's daily *routine* as an athlete moves through adolescence and into adulthood.

And as we know from decades of biosocial research, healthy lifestyle choices and mindset habits are, quite simply, the most effective way to protect our health – the indisputable foundation upon which all else in life is scaffolded.

This begs the question, *what might be possible for young athletes* – particularly our most vulnerable, for whom sport can *transform multi-generational life trajectories* – if we placed priority, programming, and resources towards educating and developing emotionally intelligent *coaches of character*?

While many coaches across the country are respected, admired, or even beloved, we can do more to support them in building the high-quality coach-athlete relationships that are key to unlocking positive youth development through sport. By high-quality we refer to safe, consistent, and nurturing relationships, ones that build trust and fortify athlete engagement by establishing the appropriate context and emotional climate in which lasting learning can happen.

At present, only between 10 and 30% of coaches receive *any* kind of formal training. Background checks are limited – particularly outside of schools – and coach education consists primarily of learning about rote but necessary requirements such as CPR and concussion management, and in a minority of cases, motivational techniques.

While volunteers – who understandably have limited time – comprise the majority of the coach population, there are *no minimum standards* for educating coaches on how children grow, learn, and develop, nor basic instruction on emotion-regulation skills that can help them “get their own oxygen masks on first” in order to capitalize on teachable moments with their athletes, on or off the field.

We must turn this around and provide coaches with the tools and mindsets to understand their role as powerful educators with a comprehensive curriculum: one that prepares a child for the future they choose

and deserve. By equipping coaches of character (from volunteer, to competitive, to NCAA) with **level-specific knowledge and skills** linked to accreditation and certification, we can elevate the profession of coaching and more effectively harness sport as the extraordinary learning context that it is.

Many coaches come to their roles with a passion for sport, with character virtues they may have gleaned as athletes themselves, with an instinctive understanding of human nature, and with an understanding of the power of play as a vehicle for learning and growth. Some may have tools to manage stress and use emotions – positive and negative – wisely and thoughtfully. Others are able to express and activate a “long game” mission of optimizing the development of the *whole* child – regardless of age, race, culture, religion, gender, and socioeconomic background.

Coaches who bring to bear *all* of these qualities for their athletes *change lives*.

For example, an excellent coach can help a young person *discover what they are capable of* by:

- embodying character and courage under fire
- showing them it is possible to prevail when the odds are stacked against them
- responding with empathy and grace in a critical moment
- freeing them to see, feel, and embody self-narratives of hope and possibility

The positive stories that young people construct about the world and their experiences within it reshape brain network connectivity in a way that develops confidence and competence, and cross-pollinates into transferrable skills. This meaning-making process – the *way* in which the mind thinks – is predictive of key life outcomes – from relationships, to career, to health – across life. Such self-narratives are often possible because of *one particular coach, in one particular sport, at one particular time in the athlete’s life*.

Young people get to *own* these priceless moments in their **metaphorical trophy cases** – awards that can never be taken away – and ones which generate the molecular level rocket fuel that nurtures the seeds of possibility.

Coaches of character understand the importance of the “The Big 3” of Positive Youth Development:

1. Positive and sustained relationships between youth and adults
2. Activities that build important life skills
3. Opportunities to use these life skills as participants and leaders in valued community activities

Sport offers all of these in spades, and coaches of character are the conduit.

But the non-negotiable prerequisite is *safety* – emotional, psychological, and physical. Without safety and trust, the opportunity for growth and talent development, no matter how extraordinary, can cause lasting damage. As such, we must ensure that accreditation and certification standards are appropriate and effective, and – first and foremost – serve the healthy development of our children.

The coaches of character and integrity that our young people deserve know how to lead by example, have the emotional intelligence and stress-management skills to navigate charged moments, and possess an understanding of how their athletes develop, each in his or her own unique way. The very presence of such a coach amplifies the odds that the young athletes they work with will unleash their talent and potential into the broader world, and further, into the lives of their own children.

Youth sports can help rebuild America, and a societal commitment to equipping coaches of character with the skills, tools, and mindsets to optimize the potential in *all* of our diverse youth is step one toward making that happen.