

The Positive Approach to Coaching Youth Sport

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Maybe soccer has been your passion since you were a little girl or boy. Or maybe, you thought that coaching your child's soccer team couldn't be that hard, and would be an opportunity for you and your child to bond. Whatever your motivation for coaching PCSL soccer, we know that you want to do a good job. But what does it mean to be an 'effective' youth sport coach? Is it having a positive win-loss record? Developing the next generation of players to win the World Cup? While it's possible you may have then next Pele on your team, your goals as a youth sport coach should have a different focus, and that is the topic of today's article.

Coaches obviously have a significant impact on young athletes' behaviors, thoughts, and feelings, and research provides some guidelines on what coaching behaviors may be more or less effective in certain situations within the context of youth sports:

1. First, design practices and instructional activities to meet the needs of all the athletes on your team. While many may be at the same developmental level, some may be less or more skilled for a variety of reasons. Use the resources provided by PCSL to structure your practices, and abide by the rules for your age group. Be flexible, however, to meet the needs of all your athletes.
2. Use a positive approach to coaching. The basic premise of reinforcement is that the frequency of behaviors will increase or decrease depending upon the consequences associated with it. In other words, positive consequences lead a higher likelihood of a behavior being repeated, and negative consequences lead to a decreased likelihood that the behavior will happen again.
3. For example, if you are doing a drill to practice the drag back turn, and you praise or reinforce your athletes for performing it correctly or showing great effort, you are using a positive reinforcement, which will motivate your players to continue using and practicing this skill.
4. Some coaches use intimidation, criticism, sarcasm and guilt, or even physical punishment, and these might *seem* effective on a short-term basis, but they lead to athletes' increased anxiety, poorer performance, fear of failure, risk of burnout, less enjoyment of sport, and higher risk of injury. Thus, avoid aversive punishment as much as possible. Instead, use the positive approach to behavioral coaching. Here's what you need to know to implement the positive approach in your own coaching style
 - a. Focus on and reinforce behaviors that you want to see continued or increased, rather than on behaviors you want to avoid. Let players know when you see them working on and improving a skill, and reinforce those behaviors with praise, encouragement, a high five, or some other positive response.
 - b. When you give feedback, be specific. Let the player know what you saw them do correctly, name it, and tell them that what they did was a good thing. So, instead of giving a general, "Good job!" say, "Sam, that was a great drag back turn! Look how quickly you changed directions!"

- c. Break down, or 'shape' behaviors and skills that are challenging into more manageable parts. Some skills and techniques can be complicated, especially at young ages, and need to be broken down into steps. In psychology, we call this shaping or scaffolding, behaviors. Teach and praise each part of the skills when it's done correctly, rather than waiting for the athlete to get the entire technique correct.
- d. While it's important to provide positive feedback, particularly in the early stages of learning (Smoll & Smith, 2002), for it to be effective, feedback must be contingent and appropriate to performance. In other words, don't just praise athletes for the sole purpose of praising them a lot – do so when they learn a challenging task, show perseverance, have a great performance, or show tremendous effort. Provide praise and feedback immediately. This means more to the athlete and is taken more seriously than generic praise given at random times.
- e. Providing instruction is as important as providing praise and encouragement. Coaches need to take steps to make sure that they are teaching developmentally-appropriate skills, and PCSL has a number of resources to help you design practice plans specific for your team's developmental level.
- f. React to mistakes as learning opportunities. Criticism isn't a bad thing, so long as it is used correctly. Use the sandwich approach of finding something that the athlete did right. Then, point out what was done incorrectly, and provide corrective, technical instruction to fix the error. This communicates that you think your athlete has the ability to learn a skill and do better. Be sure to end with encouragement.
- g. If you use criticism, make sure you do so only with behaviors that are within the athlete's control, such as lack of effort.
- h. Teach your players that winning should not be viewed as everything, nor as the only thing, and that failure is not the same thing as losing. While young athletes like to win, they need to understand that the true measure of success is defined not by a win-loss record, but by giving maximum effort.

Does the positive approach to coaching work? Research suggests it does, and that athletes whose coaches are trained in this approach enjoy sport more, perceive more team cohesion, have higher self-esteem, lower stress and anxiety, and are more likely to return to play soccer again next year.

Reference:

Smoll, F. L., & Smith, R. E. (2002). Coaching behavior research and intervention in youth sports. In F. L. Smoll, & R. E. Smith (Eds.), *Children and youth in sport: A biopsychosocial perspective* (pp. 211-233). Dubuque, IA: Kendall-Hunt.