

Positive Coaching: A Behavior Checklist for Youth Sports Coaches

by Dr. Darrell J. Burnett

When the UCLA Sports Laboratory surveyed children for the main reasons why they continue to participate in youth sports, the number one reason given was positive coach support. Research points to the benefits of getting kids to continue to participate in youth sports, noting that kids who stay in sports tend to stay in school, get better grades and have fewer behavioral problems.

It seems obvious that the key to a successful youth sports program where the kids keep coming back is positive support, which the kids feel from their coach.

It is extremely important that we, as coaches, remember that a successful youth coach is defined not in terms of a won-loss record, but in terms of how many kids decide to return to play again next year.

As a helpful reminder here's a checklist of some behaviors connected with positive coaching.

Youth Sports Coach Behavior Checklist

- I praise kids just for participating.
- I look for positives, and make a big deal out of them.
- I stay calm when my kids make mistakes, helping them learn from their mistakes.
- I have reasonable and realistic expectations.
- I treat my kids with respect, avoiding put-downs, sarcasm, and ridicule.
- I remind my kids not to get down on themselves.
- I remember not to take myself too seriously during the game.
- I maintain a "Fun is #1" attitude, with lots of laughter and a sense of humor.
- I emphasize teamwork, and help my kids think "we" instead of "me."
- I am a role model of good sportsmanship:
 - (a) Winning without gloating
 - (b) Losing without complaining
 - (c) Treating opponents and officials with fairness, generosity, & courtesy.

I praise my kids just for participating.

It's important for us, as coaches, to put youth sports in the proper perspective. Kids have lots of pressures growing up today and it seems silly for adults to add more pressure in an area which is supposed to be "fun and games." The first thing we need to do is to give the child credit for choosing to play a sport rather than hang out during free time. We need to credit each player just for being there. The youngster chose to sign up, come to practice and come to the games. Even when the child is having a bad day at practice or the game, at least he/she is participating and not dropping out. We need to remind ourselves not to notice and praise kids only when they achieve. It's easy to praise the kids who do well in a sport. We also need to praise the youngsters who don't shine but who stay with a sport day in and day out, showing up for practice and games, even though their playing time is limited.

I look for positives and make a big deal out of them.

It is said that a major source of a child's self-view is what they hear about themselves from others, especially from adults. If we want to help promote a positive self-view in kids while they play sports we need to concentrate on looking for positives and then noticing them with animated praise.

Research shows that a healthy relationship has a 4 to 1 ratio of positives to negatives. That's a good rule of thumb for coaches. As we arrive for practice or games, we should be thinking of trying to keep a healthy ratio of positives to negatives.

Moreover, if we want kids to hear the positives, we have to be specific. "Nice try" and "good game" are too vague. Kids need something specific so they can visualize it and remember it (i.e., "I like the way you hit the cutoff man," "I like the way you kept hustling until the whistle blew.") Helping a youngster notice his/her specific progress are all ways of noticing positives.

Finally, it's not enough simply to notice a positive. It's equally important to "make a big deal" out of it, to praise with animation. Why? Because kids hear, respond to and remember action. The bigger public commotion we make as a coach when a kid does something right, the better. In fact, a good motto is: "Praise in public and criticize in private."

I stay calm when kids make mistakes, helping them learn from their mistakes.

The key to positive coach support is the art of interacting with a child after a mistake has been made. Ideally, youth sports offer kids great lessons in life: 1) it's OK to make a mistake, 2) mistakes are inevitable and 3) mistakes are stepping stones for learning.

When a youngster makes a mistake in a sport, one of two things can occur: 1) the youngster can learn from the mistake and try to improve the next time; or 2) the youngster can become preoccupied with the fear of making another mistake.

If a coach stays calm and tries to instruct the child, there's a chance that the child will see the mistake as an opportunity to learn. If the coach stays calm there's a chance that the kid will stay calm, focus on the mistake and learn from it.

Unfortunately, as human beings, we often tend to have more animation in our reactions to negatives than in our reactions to positives. So it takes an extra effort on our part as coaches to remind ourselves to do all in our power to try to stay calm when mistakes occur.

I have reasonable and realistic expectations.

A major frustration for kids, in sports or in life, is trying to live up to expectations of adults in their lives. At times, youngsters have a strong need for adult approval. If they don't get it, due to unrealistic expectations from adults, it can be a major source of low self-worth. Since a coach often plays a major role in the life of a youngster, it is important to keep expectations reasonable. A good coach's skill expectations are based on the knowledge that all youngsters in youth sports 1) vary in their development of physical coordination skills, 2) go through plateaus in their skill development and 3) have growth spurts which can affect their coordination.

A good coach's motivation expectations are based on the awareness that there are three levels of motivation for kids in youth sports: 1) some kids, especially the entry-level youngsters, are playing because their parents enrolled them, 2) many youngster are playing because it's a social event allowing them to be with their friends, 3) a smaller group of youngsters, beginning at about age 11 or 12, are playing because they enjoy sports for sports' sake.

A good coach's dedication expectations are based on the knowledge that the level of dedication to practice and mastery of skills depends upon the level of motivation in a youngster. A good coach also knows that dedication wanes when playing the sport is no longer fun.

I treat kids with respect, avoiding put-downs, sarcasm or ridicule.

When a youngster signs up to play sports, he/she deserves to be treated with respect. This means no put-downs, no sarcasm and no ridiculing by the coach. Dr. Thomas Tutko, renowned author, lecturer and sports psychologist, notes that any youth sports coach who volunteers to take on the job of guiding kids in any given sport needs to be careful of how he/she comes across to the youngsters. He uses the words "potential child abuse" when describing the verbal and emotional harassment that sometimes takes place in the name of "coaching" in youth sports.

I remind kids not to get down on themselves.

I once observed a brilliant piece of youth sports coaching at a basketball game. A youngster missed a lay-up on a fast break. The coach substituted for the youngster. He then said to him, "Son, I didn't take you out because of the missed lay-up. I took you out because after you missed the lay-up you hung your head, delayed in getting back on defense and allowed your opponent to score an easy basket. If you get down on yourself after you make a mistake all it does is give your opponent an advantage. Now, get back in there, learn from your mistakes and quit beating yourself up!"

Youth is a time of mixed feelings. Kids can go from "cocky" to "unsure" in seconds. A steady reminder from the coach can help them to keep from falling apart when things aren't going well.

I remember not to take myself too seriously during the game.

Cartoons have a way of reminding us about some of our weaknesses. In an obvious parody of the singing fat lady, a cartoon depicts a youngster coming off the playing field after a defeat. The parents are beckoning him to the car. He responds, "Not yet mom and dad, the game's not over 'til the coach cries!" In yet another cartoon, as the scoreboard indicates a loss for the home team, a youngster has his hand on the coach's drooping shoulder, saying, "It's OK coach, it's just a Little League game!"

Although it's a volunteer position, some youth sports coaches seem to have made it their "life." The same person who appears so relaxed and easy going away from practice and the game takes on a whole new persona as "coach." At times, there seems to be entirely too much ownership and identity tied in with the position. In youth sports involving a "draft" there seems to be the danger of a little too much ego involvement. In other words, it's as though the coach was thinking; "I drafted you kids. If you don't produce it makes me look bad."

I maintain a "Fun is #1" attitude, with lots of laughter and a sense of humor.

Fun is the major motivator for kids in sports. In survey after survey, whenever youngsters are asked why they play sports, the number one reason is always the same - to have fun. Winning is on the list but it is last on the list. Kids like to compete, but it's the fun of competing, the excitement of competing, not just the winning.

Research shows that kids learn better when they're having fun. The effective coach is the coach who learns what's fun for the kids by getting into their shoes and seeing the world from their point of view, the world of fun. The effective coach knows that fun, laughter and humor are second nature to kids.

I emphasize teamwork and help kids think "we" instead of "me."

One of the major cornerstones of self-esteem is developing a sense of belonging. We're social animals and we need to feel as though we belong to a group. Youth sports offer an automatic sense of belonging (team name, team uniforms, team photos, team picnics, etc.) However, a coach plays a central role in making the "team" concept become a reality. The coach makes sure that all kids on the team get recognized, not just the "stars." The coach does not allow teammates to criticize each other. The coach encourages parents to notice and compliment all the players on the team, not just their own kids, and not just the "stars."

I am a role model of good sportsmanship.

In an age where sportsmanship is struggling to survive in professional, college and often in high school sports, the youth sports coach is the key role model of good sportsmanship. Youngsters are looking to the coach to show them the way in the three areas of sportsmanship; 1) winning without gloating, 2) losing without complaining and 3) treating opponents and officials with fairness, generosity and courtesy.

The task of the positive coach is to teach youngsters to be in control of their emotions throughout the competitive contest and afterward in their interactions with opponents and officials.

A final note...

As coaches we are human beings, not robots. In spite of the best intentions we may all have our bad days. Hopefully, using the items on the behavior checklist as guidelines, we will stay on task throughout the season, working toward our goal of offering positive coach support, doing our part to make each season a success where youngsters decide to come back next year and to stay involved in youth sports during their formative years.

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