

## For Coaches



# Conquering communication challenges

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Take a moment to reflect: *What brought you to coaching to begin with? What do you love about it? What do you find challenging about being a coach?*

Often when working with coaches, I hear how much they love teaching kids, how they enjoy seeing their athletes grow and develop, and how much fun they have being involved in youth sports. I also hear over and over how communication as a coach can be a challenge.

As a youth coach you can enhance your communication skills, because communication is just that: a skill. Communication can be improved on, developed, and refined over time. Communication is not just what we say, but rather a two-way street where we send a message and that message must also be received as we intend. However, receiving the message we intended to send does not always happen. There is much room for breakdowns in communication. Read on for ways to help enhance how you communicate as a coach.

## **Positive communication**

This may seem obvious, but can be easy to forget: communicate in ways that are positive. This means acknowledging what your athletes do well, saying what you *want* someone to do, rather than what you *do not* want them to do, and finding the positives in tough situations like defeat. By highlighting the positives for young athletes, you help to build confidence, instill positive beliefs, and also make it more likely that they will hear and respond when you have to tell them something to correct or change. The corrections will stand out more if you have many more positive points of feedback than negative points.

## **Clear communication**

It can be easy to use a lot of words and ultimately say very little. Remember that developmentally, for young athletes, if you keep your communication short, to the point, and easy to understand, you have a much better chance of them comprehending what you say. If what you say is complex or convoluted, the message will go in one ear and out the other, and possibly leave you frustrated. Instead, simplify: make your message clear and to the point.

## **Acknowledge and account for different learning styles**

All of us learn in different ways: Some of us learn by hearing instructions, and that learning may be further improved by repeating back what we've heard. Others need to see the information, and still many will not fully understand until they can get out there and "just do it," or be physically helped to understand the information (such as moving an athlete's body to put him in the correct batting stance). As coaches, tap into all of these learning styles when you communicate instructions. For example, don't just tell your team what you want them to do. You can start with telling them, but also show them; ask them to repeat what they heard; and then let them try it. Legendary coach John Wooden used a model of giving short pieces of information and modeling what he wanted his athletes to do before having them try it on their own.

## **Use positive body language**

Your words can say one thing, for example, "Good job," but your body can say something completely different. Our body language can send a message of its own, whether we intend to or not. Crossed arms, a stern look, or a head shake can send a very clear message to a young athlete, even if you're trying to give them positive words. Stay aware of the body language you are showing and make an effort to have it be consistent with the words you say. Research even shows that by changing our body language this can have a positive impact on how we feel. So, if you're feeling stressed and frustrated, change your body position to something more relaxed and open and see if you feel better. Positive body language (Head up, smile, arm down, etc.) is a good complement to positive communication.

## **Model strong communication**

As a coach, you are able to share many great lessons with your athletes, and modeling is a more silent way of imparting your wisdom. Modeling allows you to educate your athletes, assistant coaches, and parents on principles of communication by using the above ideas. If you are communicating positively, those you work with will be more inclined to do so. If you work hard to teach by catering to the different learning styles, you may notice that your assistant coaches do that as well, without having to tell them directly. In life, we all make observations and often repeat what we see: this is true of positive and negative behaviors and habits, so make a conscious effort to model positive behaviors and communication strategies to have a positive impact.