

Playbook: Sports Coaches

(Page 1 of 2)



Coaches hold a distinct place in the lives of young people, guiding them through experiences that blend challenge, teamwork, and growth. Unlike many other adults, coaches witness moments of triumph and disappointment in real time, creating powerful opportunities to shape how young athletes respond to success, failure, and effort. Through this role, coaches can cultivate the core beliefs by creating a positive team environment, engaging in meaningful conversations, and fostering opportunities for growth and resilience. By modeling respect, integrity, and encouragement, coaches become trusted figures who affirm a young person's worth, strengthen their confidence, and inspire resilience on and off the field.

Create the environment.

1. Recognize and celebrate the whole person.

- Celebrate non-performance contributions like teamwork and empathy.
- Attend events outside sports (e.g., school concerts, other league competitions, volunteer activities) to show you value athletes beyond the game.
- Highlight assists and collaboration during scrimmages.
- Review and celebrate personal goals before each event.
- Build in time to debrief practices and games, emphasizing life lessons like humility and respect.
- Frame team rules as life skills.
- Collaborate with other coaches to model connection and relationship-building, providing athletes an opportunity to see first-hand how these facilitators can enhance relationships.

2. Build psychological safety and healthy norms.

- Reframe mistakes as learning opportunities.
- Find ways for each athlete to contribute meaningfully and feel valued (e.g., leading drills, coordinating ball pickups, keeping time for the team). Have youth rotate a position such as a "spirit" captain that helps mediate between teammates when needed and serve alongside the coach eliciting team feedback on how everyone is feeling following events.
- Communicate your belief and acceptance in youth in every interaction.
- Create team norms for constructive peer feedback.
- Explore sources of strength and hope, making healthy coping part of team culture.

3. Reinforce ethical behavior and empathy in real time.

- Highlight acts of fairness and teamwork to emphasize character over results.
- Share stories of sportsmanship and discuss real-life applications.
- Encourage team rituals that celebrate integrity and growth, like acknowledging a teammate who demonstrated humility during a game.
- Explore ethical choices through scenarios and discussions on values.
 - Pose scenarios to discuss various values and sportsmanship principles such as integrity and courage.
 - Discuss balancing competitiveness with respect for others, connecting choices to long-term character development.
- Help athletes set personal behavior standards and check in regularly.

"If you see a teammate bending the rules, how would you respond?"

"How does it make you feel when your team is overmatched and the opposing team mercilessly runs up the score?"

*"The other team is down a player. What should be our play here?
How does that choice fit with our team's values?"*

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(Page 2 of 2)



Have conversations.

1. Foster connection, reflection and self-awareness.

- After tough moments, invite athletes to reflect and share how you can better support them.
- Foster team discussions on personal growth and lessons learned.
- Reflect together on effort and mindset patterns.

2. Connect choices to health and performance.

- Discuss how sleep, nutrition, and mindset choices affect both sport and life outcomes.
- Help athletes link lessons from sport to school, work, or family challenges.

"What did you notice about how you reacted under pressure? I was really struck when you reached out to your team for support. In doing that, you showed courage and really lived up to our values of relying on one another."

"You seemed a bit off today. I'm curious what's going on for you? When you come back tomorrow, what strategies do you think can help?"

"You took on a tough role today in leading the team out there. What did that role teach you about yourself, and your impact on others?"

"Which of your personal strengths off the field do you bring to the team?"

"Your teachers shared that your grades are starting to dip a bit. Out here, all I see is grit and perseverance. I'm curious how your approach here can extend to your schoolwork."

Promote growth.

1. Empower leadership and agency.

- Allow athletes to design practice drills or lead team warm-ups.
- Create a rotating youth assistant coach role where athletes can explore different coaching positions.
- Facilitate team discussion and decisions on rituals, goals, or conflict resolution.
- Debrief leadership or other experiences with reflection questions.

2. Turn disappointment into structured growth opportunities.

- Discuss losses outside the moment. No team wins every match forever – disappointment will come, how will we face it and learn from it?
- Let youth know they can get through hard times as a team. Model shared responsibility.

3. Build peer support, mentoring, and life skills.

- Pair older athletes with younger teammates for skill-building and guidance.
- Use team accountability partners to check in on goals and well-being.
- Pairing weaker athletes with stronger ones creates powerful opportunities for both. It fosters agency and the belief that "I have support". This type of pairing approach can also be used within the coaching staff, normalizing humility and the practice of seeking and offering help, support, encouragement, and nurturing.

Sportsmanship Principles

- Respect everyone.
- Encourage teammates.
- Always do your best.
- Learn from mistakes and get back in the game.
- Play fair.
- End with a handshake.

"The team earns the wins, the coach takes the losses. I learn more about what I can coach them on from each loss."

—Soccer Coach