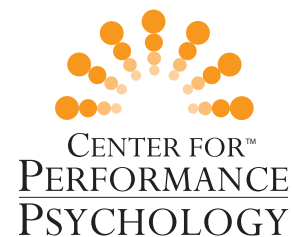


# COACHING AND RELATIONSHIP EXCELLENCE

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## THE NATIONAL UNIVERSITY SYSTEM CENTER FOR PERFORMANCE PSYCHOLOGY



COACHES PLAY A CRITICAL ROLE IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF YOUTH ATHLETES. Coaches not only teach the technical and tactical skills of a sport, but help athletes grow psychologically, sociologically, physically, and mentally. Dan Cardone, the Athletic Director of North Hills School District and 2010 Sports Ethics Fellow for the Institute for International Sport and the Positive Coaching Alliance, points out that coaches have a wide range of responsibilities including psychologist, counselor, and relationship manager. Coaching is a major responsibility, especially when it comes to developing young athletes. Coaches need to be multi-faceted experts with the awareness and communicative ability to reach diverse athletes. At their heart, coaches must be relationship experts, capable of interacting well with, and often leading, athletes, parents, administrators, and the community.

Many circumstances in sport that can cause unnecessary conflict can be minimized by coaches with this type of expertise. Dr. Craig Stewart, Professor of Coaching Education and Adapted Physical Education at Montana State University, emphasized that before coaches agree to work within a program, they must have a clear understanding of it. Dr. Stewart suggests that coaches communicate with members of the organization and ask questions: "Does the team want to be competitive, elite, recreational, or improvement based?" Different members of a team or organization have different expectations, and

coaches should sit down with key administrators, parents, or athletes to develop consensus for team goals. Once a focus has been established it is vital that coaches reflect this appropriately. Having everyone on the same page will cause teams to operate smoothly and be more enjoyable for everyone involved. To accomplish this, coaches need to be able to handle many different interactions among people within the organization.

While relationships with administrators and parents are highly important, the most important relationship coaches build is with their athletes. In youth sports, coaches have a large impact not only on athletic development but the overall development of the youth involved. Young athletes can place as much or more trust in the hands of their coaches than they do their parents. For instance, coaches can often get their athletes to cut their hair, go to bed early, and cooperate with each other (behavioral modifications that might be difficult for any parent to achieve). According to Dan Cardone, this respect and power should not be taken lightly, and coaches should recognize this power and use it in ways to positively influence athletes. Dr. Lindsey Blom, an Assistant Professor of Physical Education at Ball State and author of *Survival Guide for Coaching Youth Soccer* offered that athletes are often more open on certain issues with coaches than they are with their own parents. In these situations, coaches need to balance the necessary amount of confidentiality to allow athletes to share openly and still relay important information to parents.

It is important to maintain the trust that athletes give them, while giving parents the proper tools/ information to benefit the child. Therefore, coaches need to prepare themselves to communicate with both adults and children. In this respect, Dr. Blom reminds us that children are not miniature versions of adults and that coaches must adapt to them, rather than the other way around. Establishing an effective relationship with young athletes needs to be a specialized process. As in any positive relationship, communication needs to flow both ways. It is not always easy to get children to tell you what they are feeling, but coaches have a good avenue in which to use. It is essential to the development of an athlete that coaches be taught how to effectively build beneficial relationships.

While most coaches are skilled teachers, parents, community members, and athletes, all have opportunities for growth in one or more of the many components of the profession. Most coaches could benefit from a deeper understanding on how to effectively deal with people. Youth coaches have a large impact on the lives and happiness of athletes. It is therefore essential that coaches be well prepared to assist in the development of the children that they impact. Coaches should not be expected to do this by themselves, but through proper training can be taught to appropriately interact with the members of their organizations. ●