

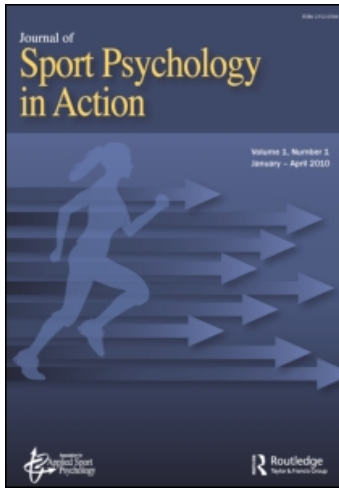
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### Creating a Positive Climate for Young Athletes from Day 1

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## **Creating a Positive Climate for Young Athletes from Day 1**

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*The purpose of this paper is to provide coaches strategies for creating a positive and supportive climate in sport. Strategies are provided that help coaches begin fostering motivation from the first day of meeting with their athletes. Specifically, strategies focus on helping athletes get to know each other better, gauge their success based on their effort and improvement, and bringing parents on board to be part of their children's experience.*

**KEYWORDS** *youth sport, motivation, caring climate, team building, parental involvement*

I know I'm here to win football games. I know if I don't I won't be here very long. But I understand my purpose, and I know it goes deeper than football.

— Turner Gill, Head Football Coach, University of Kansas

Turner Gill, the recently hired head football coach at the University of Kansas, has stated that his coaching philosophy centers on creating a positive and supportive environment for his athletes (Lawhorn, 2010, p. 3A). He has a no-cussing policy for his Jayhawks team that he requests that everyone associated with his football program honors. His goal is to create a climate where coaches and athletes treat one another with mutual kindness and respect and where everyone works to bring out the best in one another (T. Gill, personal communication, July 6, 2010). In Division I sports where

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there is high pressure to win, Coach Gill's approach to coaching is refreshing and is supported by a wealth of research in sport psychology about how to optimize athletes' experiences in sport (Clifford & Feezell, 2010; Smoll & Smith, 2002, 2005; Weinberg & Gould, 2007).

A caring and supportive climate is important for athletes of all ages and ability levels, as they have much to gain when they have positive experiences in sport settings. Research has shown that besides the tremendous health benefits that come with being physically active, children also can learn valuable lessons about the joy that comes from working hard, supporting friends and coaches in challenging situations, and improving skills over time (Smoll & Smith, 1999; Weiss & Wiese-Bjornstal, 2009). A key to helping athletes have positive experiences in sport and physical activity classes lies in coaches creating a positive and caring environment where children and adults treat one another with mutual kindness and respect (Fry & Gano-Overway, 2010).

Nel Noddings (2003, 2005), an educational philosopher, was the first to bring attention to the important role that a caring environment plays. She has written extensively on this subject and believes that if schools do nothing else, they should first and foremost establish a caring climate. Battistich et al. (Battistich, Solomon, Kim, & Schaps, 1995; Battistich, Solomon, Watson, & Schaps, 1997) have tested Noddings ideas through research projects in school settings and found that when students perceive the environment in their schools to be caring and supportive, they are more likely to enhance their physical, emotional and psychological development (e.g., enjoy their school experience, feel connected to students and teachers).

Noddings and Battistich and his colleagues' work in education have sparked interest in caring in the athletic world. In sport, a caring climate has been defined as one where athletes perceive the environment "to be interpersonally inviting, safe, supportive, and able to provide the experience of being valued and respected" (p. 70; Newton et al., 2007). It may well be that a caring climate is the very foundation that helps children optimize their sport experiences. In fact, a caring climate may play a key role in addressing critical issues including children's withdrawal and dropout from sport, as well as the obesity epidemic that has overwhelmed this nation. Playing sport in a positive and supportive environment can help children have fun, continue to be physically active over time, and develop positive life skills.

There are many strategies that coaches can employ to create a positive and caring environment, and when employed, these little strategies can add up to make a huge difference for kids. Though many of these strategies seem intuitive, they are not part of the standard mode of operation for many coaches. This article provides a number of strategies that can be used on the first day and first weeks of team meetings and practices.

## SETTING THE TONE FROM DAY 1: PROVIDE A WARM AND FRIENDLY GREETING TO EACH PARTICIPANT

Coaches can do a lot to create a positive and caring atmosphere by giving each youngster a warm and friendly greeting when they arrive. This can include introducing themselves to athletes and their family members, and equally important, helping the children introduce themselves to one another and begin conversations. These strategies can be as simple as a coach telling young athletes who have shown up for the first day of a softball camp the following:

“Ladies, while others are checking in and we’re getting ready to start, I’d like you to get in groups of three, introduce yourselves, and share five things about yourselves with your group.”

This gives athletes something to do rather than stand around and feel awkward, and helps them break the ice.

It is easy for coaches to forget what it is like to show up the first day, and be part of a new team. Many athletes are nervous and shy, and naturally may be wondering what the coach will be like, whether their skills are adequate, and if they will make friends or be left hanging alone.

## PROVIDE A POSITIVE WELCOME TO THE ENTIRE TEAM

I have observed many coaches on the first day check role and go right to business. For example, a swim program director came out to a large group of children and parents on the first day of classes and said, “Okay, we’re ready to start. When I call your name come forward and go where I tell you to go.” In a similar vein, I observed a baseball coach who on the first day of practice with a new team said, “Okay, we’re going to start by warming up our arms. Grab a ball and start throwing with someone.” Both of these adults missed out on a chance to generate excitement, ease fears, and help children feel welcome and invited. What a difference if these adults had something like this to say to parents and children right off the bat:

“Hello everyone. I’m \_\_\_\_\_ and I am really excited to welcome you to the team. All of us (coaches) have been looking forward to today and meeting each of you. We think you’re really going to enjoy being part of this team. It is going to be fun because you’re going to learn a lot, have a chance to improve your current skills and develop new ones, and most important, I think you’re going to make a lot of new friends.”

Other strategies that help prepare young athletes for the first day include sending them a postcard or e-mail or leaving a message on their home phone that says, "We are looking forward to seeing you on Saturday at our first practice!!"

Many coaches miss out on great opportunities to start creating a positive and supportive climate on the first day. Maybe this is not surprising because there are so many organizational details that must be taken care of, but what a shame when kids arrive at their first team meeting or practice, and no effort is made to make them feel welcome and excited about the possibilities.

### SETTING CLEAR EXPECTATIONS FOR ALL TO HEAR

Research in sport psychology has revealed that in addition to creating a caring climate, an emphasis on effort and improvement should also be the focus in sport when the goal is to maximize each athlete's potential (Duda & Balaguer, 2007). In the sport psychology literature, this focus on effort and improvement is referred to as creating a task-involving climate. This climate works well because the focus each day is on improving one's skills through effort. Effort is the one variable that athletes have more control over. For example, they have limited control over winning, because there are so many variables that influence the outcome like their opponents' ability and performance on a particular day. Likewise, they have little control over their ability level compared to others on their team. It is easy for athletes' to compare themselves to others and focus on their low skills and lack of ability.

Many athletes do not notice their own improvement without the help of a coach. How important it is when a coach says something like, "My gosh, Steve, you've become a wall at third base. Nothing gets past you anymore! Your improvement this season is amazing!!" or "Wow, Sydney, do you remember when you used to walk every other batter? Yikes, you sure have come a long way this season! You are a virtual pitching machine the way you lay those strikes right over home plate." Though the research on creating a task-involving climate, in general, has been conducted separately from the research on creating a caring climate, it should be noted that helping athletes gauge success based on their personal effort and improvement is a very caring approach. In fact, in a recent study adolescent soccer players reported that one way they know their coaches care is when they make training very challenging and give a lot of technical instruction to help all athletes be the best that they can be (Dodd, Brown, & Fry, 2009).

Coaches do a real service to the athletes they work with when they send a strong message that success is achieved when everyone is giving their best effort and seeing improvement over time. Parents need to hear this message as well.

Coach Ken Murczek, Head Volleyball Coach at the University of North Texas, always reinforces this philosophy when he's working with juniors in clinics. In fact, he has a banner hanging in his gym that reminds young athletes and their parents how success is defined in his program. It reads, "The definition of success = providing great effort, wanting to improve and being coachable!" He does not just tell young athletes and their parents this one time. He reinforces it each session by asking the athletes to remind him what success is really all about in his program.

Like Coach Murczek, youth sport coaches could benefit from developing a coaching philosophy, and defining success for their teams is a great starting place. When coaches are mindful of what they are trying to achieve they can employ many strategies to reinforce their philosophy. For example, the bottom-line for many youth sport coaches is that they want their athletes to have fun, build positive relationships with their teammates, and improve their skills across the season. Identifying their philosophy helps coaches think of the strategies they can use to help bring those aims to life for their athletes.

## HELPING ATHLETES BUILD RELATIONSHIPS WITH ONE ANOTHER

Coaches can do literally hundreds of little things to help athletes get to know one another and develop friendships on sport teams, and here are a few ideas:

- At the end of a practice, coaches can give athletes a chance to compliment one another and highlight what they notice as strengths in their teammates. Examples might be, "I love the way Trey hustles"; "Candace is really positive; she doesn't get down if she makes a mistake"; "Tabby does a great job keeping her kick consistent"; "Gene really follows through well on his backhand". This is a nice activity for helping athletes learn how to look for the best in their teammates, and it is also important for everyone to be on the receiving end of sincere compliments.
- Coaches can design drills where athletes have to say out loud the names of their teammates. For example, in baseball when infielders make a throw to a base they might call out the person's name that will receive the ball. In running or swimming drills, athletes might have to encourage a teammate every time they touch the baseline/side of the pool (e.g., Looking good, Jared!). In soccer, athletes might have drills where they call by name the person receiving their pass (e.g., "Mike, it's coming", and maybe the receivers say thanks in return (e.g., Thanks, Lindsey"). Besides learning names, these drills can help athletes learn to talk to each other. Coaches of interactive sports (e.g., basketball, soccer) want their athletes to communicate during games. So, in addition to saying their names it would

be beneficial for the coaches to suggest things to say to their teammates that relate to tactical maneuvers or skills (e.g., telling a teammate “Whitney, screen left”).

- During timeouts or water breaks coaches might instruct athletes to interact with a partner and find three things they have in common. At the end of practice pairs could share these with the team when time permitted.
- Coaches might take a short refocus break and have athletes find their assigned practice partner for the day and touch base quickly, give fist bumps and ask one another how practice is going. Athletes would be instructed to be back and ready for the next activity in 2 minutes.

The ideas for helping athletes interact is literally endless, and they go a long way in helping children get to know one another, learn to support one another, and discover what it means to have a strong social network. Research has revealed that sport settings provide a wonderful opportunity for children to build friendships, and quality friendships have been associated with higher self-esteem and more positive attitudes about physical activity (See Weiss, 2003, for a review).

### BRINGING PARENTS ON BOARD

Coaches have wonderful opportunities to educate parents when they work with athletes, and to help promote a positive approach to being physically active. Here are some ideas for bringing parents' on board and helping them benefit from their children's involvement in sport:

On the first day as coaches introduce themselves to the athletes, they can encourage parents to get to know all the participants and their parents, as well. For example, a coach might say,

“We're really hoping to build a strong sense of community on this team where every youngster feels supported by every adult associated with this program- not just his/her parents and me. It's nice when all of you [parents] take the opportunity to get to know all the athletes. Research has shown how important it is for youngsters to have many adults in their lives that support them and wish the best for them. So I encourage you to get to know all the kids. At the end of practice today the kids will be paired up and they will come and introduce one of their teammates to their parent(s). Today you'll have a chance to meet at least one of the kids on your child's team. This is just one small way that we start to get to know one another.”

This small gesture helps send the message to parents that they play an important role, and they contribute tremendously to the team environment.

Coaches would also do well to encourage the parents to introduce themselves to one another and get to know the team. A few parents sometimes naturally do this but it is rare to see a large portion of parents take this initiative.

Even when parents and children do make introductions, it is often difficult for parents to remember each other's names when they see one another days or weeks later. So another strategy that can be used to reinforce the value of building community is to provide a team/class roster with contact information for the athletes that includes the names of the parents. Besides giving parents a way to help learn names, by making this information readily available, families are more likely to make connections with one another (e.g., realize they live close to another athlete and could carpool when needed; schedule an outing for teammates to get together outside the sport activities). Coaches can even ask a parent to take the lead on pulling the roster together, and they can make sure they have permission of all parents to share the information with the team. These strategies all help set the stage for coaches to help parents be part of their children's sport experience.

In summary, the strategies provided in this article can help coaches send a strong message to athletes and their families that efforts are being made to create a positive and supportive environment for the team. Recent research highlights how beneficial such an environment can be for athletes. For example, studies have revealed that perceptions of a caring and task-involving climate (i.e., one focused on participants' individual effort and improvement) is associated with children having more fun, trying harder, demonstrating better sportspersonship, experiencing less anxiety, and reporting a better ability to handle their positive and negative emotions. Additionally, it is superb that such climates are linked with athletes interacting more positively and engaging in more caring behaviors with their coaches and teammates, and expressing more empathy for their peers (Fry & Gano-Overway, 2010; Fry & Newton, 2003; Gano-Overway et al., 2009; Smith, Smoll, & Cummings, 2007).

Over the last two years I've probably watched 20 "first days" of sport team practices, and the strategies described in this article are very rarely used. It is a shame because they could make such a difference in helping athletes have fun, develop sport skills, and maximize their interactions with coaches and teammates. While the strategies described in this article are centered on youth sport situations, they are relevant to athletes of all ages, as well as many settings including recreational swim lessons, community gymnastics classes, birthday parties, and other physical activity settings. Wouldn't it be great if, like Turner Gill, all coaches could say, "I understand my purpose, and I know it goes deeper than football" or swimming or whatever the sport. In fact, wouldn't it be excellent if every coach were using many little strategies such as those described in this article to maximize their athletes' sport experiences?

**TABLE 1** Questions for Coaches to Ask Themselves as They Develop a Positive and Supportive Coaching Environment

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What is my coaching philosophy? What do I want my athletes to get out of playing on my team?
If asked, would my athletes and their parents be able to describe or identify my coaching philosophy?
How can I highlight and reinforce daily my coaching philosophy for my athletes and their parents?
How can I make my athletes feel welcome and part of the team?
How can I help my athletes get to know each other?
How can I help my athletes' parents understand what an important role they play on the team?
How can I get my parents involved and supporting every athlete on my team?

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Coaches who want to create a positive and supportive environment for their athletes might consider the questions in Table 1. These questions are directly tied to aspects of the climate that are addressed in this article such as giving athletes a warm and friendly greeting, making every athlete feel welcome, setting clear expectations, helping athletes build relationships, and bringing parents on board. The questions are provided to help coaches think about what they currently do, as well as stimulate ideas for strategies that could help them enhance the environment they create for their athletes. The strategies provided in this article aren't suggested as ones that work for every coach and team. Rather, they are provided to help coaches think of strategies they could employ to help their athletes, and what a difference these kinds of strategies can make for young athletes.

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