



Being a Positive Coach: Effective Communication with Young Athletes



St. Vincent
Sports Performance

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In my work with elite coaches (from the 10 years I spent with the U.S. Men's Alpine Ski Team and the five years I worked with the USA National Diving Team), I have found the majority of successful coaches adopt a "positive" coaching style in their interactions with athletes. For 20 years I have worked as a sport psychologist in collegiate, Olympic, and professional sport, and for the majority of those years, I've done coaching workshops and consultation. It is essential who a coach that desires excellence from his or her athletes develops a "positive" approach to coach-athlete communication.

Here are some basic "tips" for effective communication with young athletes.

Know your Coaching Philosophy

Why do you coach? What is your goal for your athletes? Most coaches would not state their goals as "crushing my athlete's ego" or "making them feel bad about themselves"; in fact, most coaches see their profession as a chance to develop, enhance and optimize an athlete's potential (athletically as

well as personally). If your philosophy is based on "enhancement," then recognize that a positive approach favors that outcome better than a critical/negative approach.

Reinforce Desired Behaviors (vs. critiquing undesired behaviors/mistakes)

A comment I share with coaches is based on "Psychology 100" principles. ...The best way to achieve a desired behavior is to reinforce that

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behavior when it occurs. So, if a Level 8 gymnast hits her beam series for the first time, make sure to reinforce it immediately when it occurs. I encourage coaches to keep a note card in their pocket that reminds them to watch for correct skills and reinforce them... minimizing the mistakes (which often receive the majority of attention and thus become harder to overcome).

Use a “Sandwich” approach to making corrections

The sandwich approach is based on the following: When an athlete makes a mistake (technical), FIRST....praise the effort the athlete is giving (“Hey Cindy, you are working hard...great job...keep up the hard work”)...SECOND...make the correction, using positive (e.g. “Your legs should be straight... like this...”) language vs. the language of “don’ts” (avoid using statements such as “Don’t bend your knees...” or “Don’t release the bar when you’re here”). Remember that for every “don’t do this” correction there is an even better “Do it this way...” reinforcement. THIRD...praise ongoing effort (“I know you can do it, just keep working”).


Remember that mistakes are a “normal” and expected process of developing skills

It is important to recognize that athletes rarely “intend” on making mistakes or having bad meets; it is just part of sport. A positive coach allows his/her athletes to learn from their mistakes without “beating themselves up” in the process. A coach cannot

control what a parent or teammate says to an athlete after a tough practice or competition; however, the coach CAN control how he or she communicates with the athlete in moments of learning and growth (especially in adversity). If the coach creates an environment that recognizes that mistakes will occur, but that a positive, focused and composed approach will be the response to mistakes, ...then he or she may generate the most optimal environment for growth.

Every gymnast is going to experience a form of frustration, doubt, and hesitancy as they develop their skills. It may appear early in their development or later in their development (e.g. Level 8), but challenges and mistakes will occur. An effective coach will have a strategy to assist each gymnast in his/her ability to overcome mistakes and improve her performance. Being a positive communicator, especially in managing mistakes/errors, is a key component to being an optimal gymnastics coach. Good luck! ✘

Dr. Carr is the sport & performance psychologist for St. Vincent Sports Performance in Indianapolis, Ind. He's currently the consulting sport psychologist for the Indiana University Athletic Department. He is on the USOC Sport Psychology Registry and was the Team Sport Psychologist for USA Men's Alpine Skiing (1992-2002) and USA Diving (2004-08); he was on the USA Olympic Teams at both the 2002 Winter Olympic Games in Salt Lake, Utah, and the 2008 Summer Olympic Games in Beijing, China. He also has a daughter who is a Level 9 gymnast.



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