

## YOUTH COACHING

# COMFORT IS THE KEY TO COACHING YOUNG ATHLETES

By Michael Nyitray, 2010 National USOC Developmental Coach of the Year

When we think of coaching – especially great coaching – we probably think of coaches that possess great technical knowledge of their sport along with intense personalities and strong motivational charisma. Although these descriptions may describe the most effective coaches, they are in most cases coaches of adult athletes. Coaching adults is quite different from coaching kids, especially very young kids.

**“Being able to win over the comfort and confidence of a young athlete involves more than being knowledgeable about a sport. It's also about understanding what young athletes want and being able to quickly show them you are there to help them improve their athletic abilities.”**

A talented young athlete is still a child. When we see a young athlete with extraordinary talent, it's easy to forget that talent is wrapped inside the body, and mind, of a child. Kids think differently than grown-ups, especially when they are younger. Their logic is pretty black and white. Abstract thinking and conceptualization – not to be confused with creative thinking or imagination – doesn't really start developing until the adolescent years. In short, kids lack the vocabulary, technical knowledge, and life experience to be able to effectively interpret abstract concepts.

Coaching explanations must be succinctly descriptive and presented with a vocabulary that's on the level of the athlete's intelligence and maturity, not age. Analogies are an effective method of explanation so long as they stay within a topic that the athlete already knows. For instance, nothing will be more frustrating to a bright young athlete than to be spoken to like “a little kid.”

Talking over the head of a young kid is equally counterproductive. Just because a kid may have superstar talent doesn't automatically mean they have superstar intellect. Using lofty jargon or complex concepts with a youngster of average intelligence may not only be interpreted as demeaning, but it also tends to be downright boring. Either way, the coach will lose the interest of the young athlete for no other reason than the coach was trying to coach the talent, not the person. Just keep in mind the two cannot be separated.

Coach the intelligence not the age. To be most effective, a coach needs to understand his or her young athlete not only from an athletic perspective, but also the child's

intelligence and athletic background. It's been my experience that finding out what other skills my clients have helps me relate to what they already know with what I want to teach them. Learning about their grades in school and what subjects they like helps me get tuned in with their intellectual capability. But it's that athletic background that can uncover additional athletic potential. Leverage, timing, alignment, etc., are universal constants in sports. If the young athlete has a competitive athletic background or even just a lot of experience in another sport, analogizing concepts from that other sport will better illustrate what you're trying to convey to the young athlete. (By the way, this works great with grown-up athletes, too.)

The younger the child, the more results-oriented they will be. Give them something tangible other than lower/higher score in their respective sport. Skill drills with specific challenges that offer some type of validation or reward is an effective way to get a kid's focus off of results and on to technical training.

### Height represents authority

When coaching young athletes, the coach is always taller, sometimes much taller. Kids have an instinctive recognition of authority for adults. The recognition of authority is amplified with regard to coaches. In many cases, the larger size of the adult coach creates a certain amount of intimidation. This intimidation will diminish over time, especially with athletic success. But some kids have trouble getting over this intimidating size difference.

Coaches need to be empathetic to a young athlete's comfort or discomfort, even when it comes to something as basic as how tall we adults are. Without any conscious intent, an adult coach can be impairing the coaching experience by simply

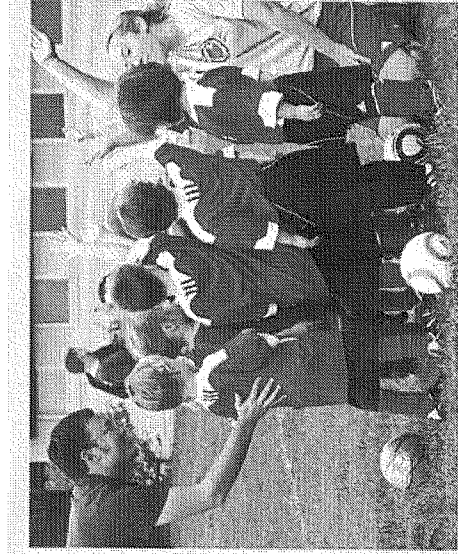
standing “over” the young athlete.

Fortunately, it doesn't take much to eliminate any height intimidation. All that's needed is to adjust your height, lower so to be more on a similar eye level with the child. This only needs to be done a couple of times for the young athlete to understand that there's nothing to be afraid of and no reason to feel intimidated. Once this comfort is gained, the coach can go back to standing normally, because the young athlete will be looking at the coaching, not at the big (intimidating) person telling them what to do.

From time to time, continue to find ways to lower or reduce your height by leaning against a table or other object that can bring you closer to eye level with the young athlete. It shows the child that you are sincere with your message, thus further gaining the child's trust and confidence. This is a perfect segue to the next topic.

### Non-verbal communication

With every gesture, every expression, we continually send messages with our body language. These signals are the most basic form of communication. The most telling of our non-verbal communication comes from our facial expressions. Going as far back to the 1800s with Charles Darwin, there are some in science that believed much of our reaction to facial expressions is “hardwired.” A great deal of what we think and feel originates from our subconscious as well as our instincts. We often don't realize how our happiness, disappointment, etc., is manifested in the face. Happiness and approval are first recognized with the smile, but the eyes and eyebrows also confirm the positive expression. Conversely, tension in the jaw muscles, pursing the lips, and lowering the eyebrows are classic expressions of displeasure, or even anger. And kids are very attentive to them, as well.



This paragraph might seem a bit controversial, but I'm including it to illustrate how unusual circumstances can be. Coaches who have eyebrows that are turned down toward the nose can be unfairly labeled as mean and/or angry.

The first "hardwired" impression interprets the down-turned eyebrows as an expression of anger and/or meanness. Some of you reading this article may find yourself reminded of when you met a coach – or other person – who had down-turned eyebrows and first thought that person wasn't going to be nice or was mean, only to discover they were actually a very pleasant person. This instinctive reaction is not only an incorrect assessment of the coach's personality; it's actually an unfair one. The simplest way for a person with these kinds of eyebrows to overcome this is to raise his or her eyebrows upon meeting a child and speak with a friendly voice. Employing this simple strategy upon first acquaintance provides a "nice person" image, promoting a genuine perspective of the coach and his or her personality.

Becoming aware of how we present these subtle, non-verbal messages can go a long way towards improving a kid's coaching experience. Smiling, as opposed to frowning, is much more effective towards helping a young athlete be more comfortable and open to coaching.

The same goes for what we do with our hands. How we gesture with our hands and arms also says a lot about what we are thinking and feeling. The two classics with the arms are: hands on the hips and the arms crossed. Hands on the hips can suggest a message of frustration or impatience, especially if standing over the young athlete who is struggling to perform a new skill or improve an old one. The same goes for crossing the arms.

Aside from saying "don't approach me or get too close," crossing the arms can also project frustration and impatience. The more animated a coach is when he or she is "talking" with their hands and arms (within reason of course), the more engaged the coach appears to be in the coaching.

#### Empower confidence by making the child's opinion count

The younger the child athlete, the more limited his or her cognitive skills and mental versatility. But that doesn't mean children don't have opinions or ideas. Coaching is a two-way experience. The coach, of course, is the source of knowledge, but listening to what the young athlete is thinking can actually enhance the coach's coaching. No one knows everything and inspiration can come from the most unexpected sources...sometimes even the kids you're coaching.

Improving a young athlete's ability is not limited to just his or her physical technique. Developing cognitive skills is the other part of improving a young athlete, which is far more than just compiling new information. Developing the inner athlete is a blend of acquiring and assimilating technical knowledge along with building the confidence for implementation. Aside from hearing a different perspective, allowing the young athlete to have a voice is simply good for the development of his or her self-esteem.

#### Personal space

When we think of feeling safe, the first thing that comes to mind is danger, not comfort. Danger is pretty much self-explanatory. Comfort, in this case, refers to the amount of personal space (actual physical distance) between the child and the coach.

Each person defines his or her personal space uniquely where he or she feels comfortable. It's your obligation as a coach to recognize and respect a child's personal space. Get too close and the child will begin to feel uncomfortable, thus undermining the coaching message. Think about it, what adult feels comfortable with a "close talker?" Kids are even more sensitive to "being too close" because they have to rely more on their emotions and instincts – which is another way to describe their personal comfort – due to their lack of life experience.

Whenever possible, having a table and bench or other objects in between the coach and the child will automatically help create space and comfort for a young athlete. As a bonus, the equipment can provide a platform to rest a video camera and/or printed material used during coaching. It's the coach's responsibility to recognize and respect the personal space of the coach/athlete association. Doing so will optimize the athlete's comfort and will, in turn, maximize the young athlete's coaching experience.

#### The Bottom Line...

As the coach, you are the boss and your athletes take their lead from you. Show that you are having fun and you will show your young athletes that you want to be there to help them improve. Finding out what makes the young athlete tick is the best way to keep them interested in learning and interested in training. The more enjoyable you make the coaching experience, the more you will inspire your young athletes to want to continue to improve.

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