

Strategies to Promote Transferable Life Skills in Youth Sport Programming



EVIDENCE
BRIEF

This Evidence Brief summarizes a continuum of strategies across six levels of life skills teaching that can be used to promote life skills development in youth sport programming.

DEFINITIONS OF KEY TERMS

Implicit and Explicit Life Skills Teaching

Implicit teaching occurs when youth participants learn life skills through the natural features of the sport programming environment (for example, engaging in competition or following rules) and transfer these skills to non-sport settings with minimal or no intervention from coaches or other program staff.^{1,2}

Explicit teaching occurs when coaches and other youth sport program practitioners intentionally discuss life skills with youth and implement these skills into their coaching practices to enhance personal and athletic development. For example, a basketball coach may discuss the importance of emotional regulation and have participants practice taking three deep breaths before taking a free throw.¹

KEY MESSAGE: CAREFULLY DEVELOP YOUR COACHING PHILOSOPHY

Prior to teaching life skills, coaches and other youth sport program practitioners need to reflect on and establish a coaching philosophy that addresses the physical, psychological, and social development of youth sport participants.³

Critical questions to reflect on include:

i) Are these youth new to the sport or are they experienced?

ii) What skills and messages do I want to teach youth through sport?

iii) Are these youth having positive experiences in sport?

iv) Am I balancing 'winning' with both athletic and personal development?

SUMMARY OF EVIDENCE: STRATEGIES TO PROMOTE LIFE SKILLS DEVELOPMENT ACROSS SIX LEVELS OF LIFE SKILLS TEACHING

LEVEL ONE: STRUCTURING THE SPORT ENVIRONMENT

01. Create a sport environment in which youth participants feel motivated, engaged, and safe to make mistakes.¹

Coaches and youth sport practitioners need to provide structure to the youth sport context, as this has a significant impact on whether youth develop life skills.⁴ This could include:

- a) Ensuring the program space feels both physically and psychologically safe for youth participants.
- b) Providing adequate supervision.
- c) Facilitating a sequence of activities that requires focus.
- d) Providing activities that are challenging for the age group *and* level of sport.

02. Set rules and clearly communicate these rules to youth participants.

An environment in which coaches and practitioners openly communicate rules and enforce them fairly can facilitate experiences to influence life skills development.¹ This could include:

- a) Establishing clear expectations.
- b) Holding athletes accountable.
- c) Determining what inappropriate behaviours look like and discussing consequences.

d) Communicating with other adults in youth participants' lives (for example, parents/ caregivers and teachers) about upholding the same or similar rules regarding behaviours outside of sports programming.

LEVEL TWO: FACILITATING A POSITIVE CLIMATE

03. Model positive behaviours for youth participants.

Acting as a role model and demonstrating ideal behaviours for youth participants can encourage life skills development.¹ This could include:

- a) Demonstrating patience.
- b) Having realistic expectations of youth participants.
- c) Being respectful to youth, parents/ caregivers, teachers, officials, and other coaching or program staff.
- d) Communicating clearly.
- e) Considering mistakes as learning opportunities.

04. Foster positive, long-term relationships with youth.

Building trusting relationships with youth participants supports the development of life skills because it enables coaches and other youth sport practitioners to learn more about youth's skill levels, difficulties, and goals.² Connect with youth about their lives both in and out of sport to establish trust and facilitate the transfer of life skills developed in sports programming to other contexts.

For example:

“I know you’re working hard in math class; have you set some goals about what you want to improve on, just like how we do on the team?”

“You know the strategies you use to control your emotions before a game? Try using those same strategies before you go on stage for the school play.”

05. Support young people’s sense of efficacy and mattering.

Incorporating practices that support young people’s autonomy and sense of efficacy and mattering can increase the development of life skills and contribute to youth wellbeing.⁵

This could include:

- a) Involving youth in decision-making and solution-finding processes.
- b) Providing a rationale for decisions made by coaches or program staff.
- c) Giving youth a choice when it comes to different physical activities or drills.
- d) Acknowledging youth’s feelings and perspectives.

LEVEL THREE: DISCUSSING LIFE SKILLS

06. Define ‘life skills’ for youth participants and talk about their importance.

Facilitating conversations about life skills engages youth in a reflective practice that can encourage further development and the process of internalizing critical life skills.^{6,7}

For example, at the beginning of a practice or program session, coaches and other youth sport practitioners can ask open-ended reflective questions, such as:

“What does teamwork mean to you?”

“How can you work effectively as a team?”

“Why is it important for you to develop teamwork skills in sport?”

Practitioners can then provide more structured definitions of life skills – as in the example above, teamwork and collaboration – which will support youth in understanding what these skills are and why they are important.¹

07. Integrate the language of life skills into coaching and take advantage of naturally occurring teaching moments.

These ‘teachable moments’ happen when coaches or program staff recognize an opportunity to facilitate discussions about life skills in ways that are integrated with their coaching practice. For example, when a football coach is going over a play that requires communication and teamwork, or when a soccer coach is discussing the importance of communicating when passing the ball, they can also discuss the importance of teamwork and communication in other areas of life, such as at school or work.

08. Enhance youth participants' confidence for life skills development.

This could include:

- a) Openly encouraging youth to attempt applying life skills in sport.
- b) Acknowledging when youth successfully apply life skills.
- c) Encouraging reflection on life skills. For example, having a debrief session at the end of practice or program and asking youth additional reflective questions, such as, "Can you provide examples of how you were able to regulate your emotions today?"

LEVEL FOUR: PRACTICING LIFE SKILLS

09. Provide youth with concrete opportunities to apply and improve their life skills.¹

Intentionally create opportunities for youth to practice life skills, as deliberate practice increases the internalization of skills.⁸ For example, a basketball coach can have youth practice taking three deep breaths before shooting a free throw while explaining the importance of being aware of what they are feeling and relaxing one's body before completing a movement.

Once young people have practiced life skills in sport, coaches and other youth sport practitioners should provide participants with opportunities to reflect on their life skill attempts through techniques such as journaling, team/program debriefs, and open-ended discussions.³ For example, the basketball coach could ask youth how they felt after taking those deep breaths and what else they think they could do to control their emotions on the court.

LEVEL FIVE: DISCUSSING LIFE SKILL TRANSFER

10. Facilitate opportunities for youth to reflect on how life skills developed in sport can be applied to other contexts.

Youth may find it difficult to conceptualize how skills learned in sport can also be useful when applied to contexts outside of sport.⁹ Coaches and other youth sport practitioners should dedicate time during practice or program to discuss what life skills transfer is and why it is important for their development.¹

This could include asking youth to:

- a) Identify areas of their lives (such as home, school, and work) where they could apply the many skills they've learned in sport.
- b) Reflect on how the skills they thrive at in sport can also enhance their performance in these other areas.⁹
- c) Consider and explore both successful and unsuccessful attempts at transferring these skills.

This could also include:^{6,7}

- a) Providing youth with real-life examples by discussing practitioners' own successful and unsuccessful skills transfer.
- b) Offering specific and positive feedback for transfer attempts shared and discussed.
- c) Recognizing mistakes and failures as learning opportunities.
- d) Working with youth to develop realistic goals to practice different skills outside of sport.

LEVEL SIX: PRACTICING LIFE SKILL TRANSFER

11. Promote opportunities for life skills transfer in the lives of youth participants.

This could include:

- a) Building relationships with parents/ caregivers, teachers, and community leaders and sharing a coaching philosophy about life skills transfer.^{1,2}
- b) Inviting athletes and former youth participants to speak about their personal experiences with life skills transfer to emphasize the value of applying these skills beyond sport.
- c) Providing youth with opportunities to participate in leadership activities (for example, in peer mentoring or coaching).
- d) Encouraging youth to volunteer and engage in community service to practice their life skills (for example, volunteering as a group for a local service organization, or organizing a car wash or other fundraiser to support program costs for attending a tournament).

HOW DID WE COMPILE THIS EVIDENCE?

We searched YouthREX's online Knowledge Hub, Google Scholar, and Google using the following key terms: "positive youth development", "life skills", "life skill development in sport".

ENDNOTES

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