Coaching Social and Emotional Skills in Youth Sports

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Introduction

Research demonstrates a wide range of positive outcomes for children who are physically active, including higher academic achievement, higher likelihood to attend college, increased success in the workplace, lower heath care costs, and decreased risk for obesity and other health problems (Aspen Institute Sport for All Play for Life; Menestrel & Perkins, 2007; Barber et al., 2001; Eccles et al., 2003; Eccles & Barber, 1999). Participation in sports has also been associated with a variety of social and emotional competencies and related skills that we know from extensive research are essential to success and well-being in school, work, and relationships. For example, children with strong social and emotional skills are more likely to have positive work and family relationships, enter and graduate college, succeed in their careers, and have better mental and physical health outcomes (Jones & Kahn, 2017; Jones & Kahn, 2018; Moffit et al., 2011; Greenberg et al., 2017; Weissberg et al., 2015). Focusing on social and emotional development also has important implications for long-term social and economic outcomes. Evidence indicates that stronger social and emotional competencies are associated with higher labor market earnings and productivity as well as reduced criminal behavior and substance dependence (Jones and Kahn, 2017; Moffit et al., 2011; Greenberg et al., 2017; Weissberg et al., 2015; Brunello & Schlotter, 2011). While all children, regardless of background benefit from social and emotional learning, benefits are particularly strong for supporting low-income or at-risk students. (Jones & Kahn, 2017; Jones, Brown & Aber, 2011; Aber et al., 2003; Capella et al., 2016). Taken together, it is clear that supporting social and emotional development is essential not only to the success of individuals, but to society as a whole.

Social & Emotional Skills and Physical Activity

A growing body of research suggests an underlying reciprocal relationship between physical activity and social and emotional development. Physical activity requires core social and emotional competencies, and in turn, physical activity serves as an important context in which to build and promote social and emotional skills.

For example, physical activity requires the use of executive functions such as working memory, attention control inhibition, and planning (McClelland & Cameron, 2018; Daly, McMinn, & Allan, 2015). Research also demonstrates that these important executive function skills are associated with long-term maintenance of physical activity participation (Mullen & Hall, 2015). Moreover, there is evidence that higher physical fitness is associated with improved performance and problem solving (Mullen & Hall, 2015; Lubans et al., 2016). Physical activity also provides youth with opportunities to build self-efficacy and perceived competence, which in turn, are associated with initiating and sustaining physical activity (Kipp & Weiss, 2013). Participation in physical activity provides opportunities for participants to learn and use important social and emotional skills that ultimately improve performance and well-being in sports, school, and life.

While it is clear that physical activity and social and emotional learning are deeply connected, there is still much to be learned about the underlying mechanisms that link the two.

In this brief, we define what it means to build social and emotional skills, particularly in the context of youth sports, and how coaches can integrate these practices in their work with youth. It is important to note that psychosocial health (e.g., social and emotional well-being, positive youth development, etc.) and physical health are interconnected (see box on

page 2), however, this brief focuses primarily on the development of social and emotional competencies and how these skills and competencies can be acquired and applied in sports settings.

What is Social and Emotional Learning?

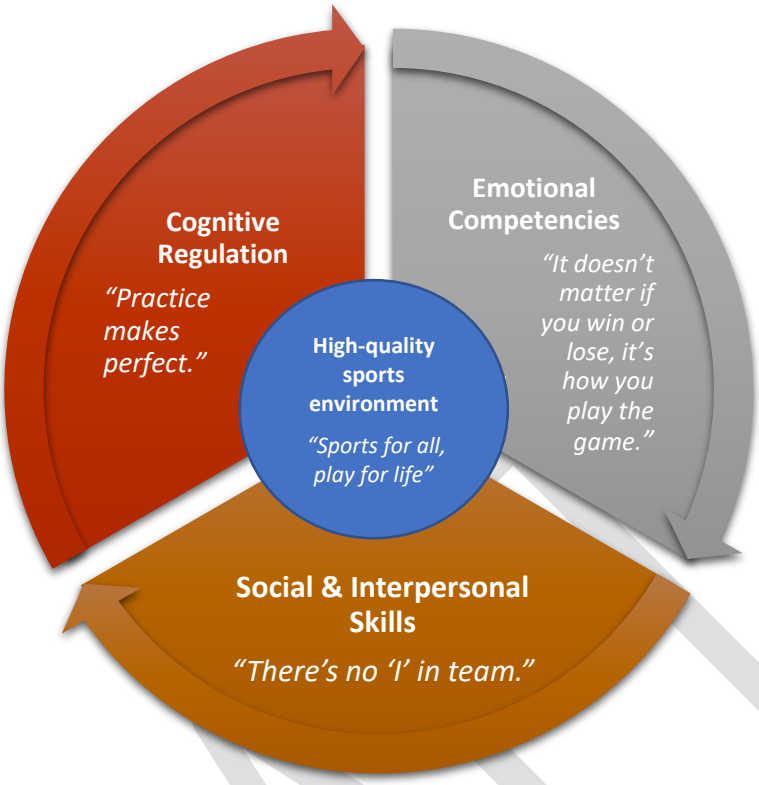
In recent decades, increasing attention has focused on the importance of the social and emotional competencies, due in large part to the substantial and growing body of evidence demonstrating their positive effects on academic, interpersonal, and mental health outcomes. However, this set of skills has been defined and organized in a variety of ways across a large number of fields and disciplines that go by many names, including character education, social and emotional learning, personality, positive youth development, 21st century skills, conflict resolutions, and bullying prevention. Among these fields and disciplines, those focused on social and emotional learning appear to have the largest and most rigorously evaluated evidence base. For example, social and emotional learning programming in the early school years has been shown to improve the culture and climate of schools and other learning settings, as well as children's social, emotional, behavioral, and academic outcomes (Jones et al., 2017).

Broadly speaking, social and emotional learning refers to the process through which individuals learn and apply a set of social, emotional, behavioral, and character skills required to succeed in schooling, the workplace, relationships, and citizenship (Jones et al., 2017). Looking across a variety of disciplines, organizing systems, and correlational and evaluation research, there are at least a dozen specific social and emotional skills that are relevant for both students and the adults who teach and care for them (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). These skills can be grouped into three interconnected domains (Jones et al., 2017):

I. Cognitive regulation can be thought of as the basic skills required to direct behavior toward the attainment of a goal. This set of skills includes executive functions such as working memory, attention control and flexibility, inhibition, and planning, as well as beliefs and attitudes that guide one's sense of self and approaches to learning and growth. Children use cognitive regulation skills whenever faced with tasks that require concentration, planning (including carrying out intentional physical movement), problem solving, coordination, conscious choices among alternatives, or overriding a strong internal or external desire (e.g., Diamond & Lee, 2011);

II. Emotional competencies are a set of skills and understandings that help children recognize, express, and regulate their emotions, as well as engage in empathy and perspective-taking around the emotions of others. Emotional skills allow children to recognize how different situations make them feel and to address those feelings in prosocial ways. Consequently, they are often fundamental to positive social interactions and critical to building relationships with peers and adults; and

III. Social and interpersonal skills support children and youth to accurately interpret other people's behavior, effectively navigate social situations, and interact positively with peers and adults. Social and interpersonal skills build on emotional knowledge and processes; children must learn to recognize, express, and regulate their emotions before they can be expected to interact with others who are engaged in the same set of processes. Children must be able to use these social/interpersonal processes effectively in order to work collaboratively, solve social problems, and coexist peacefully with others.



Sports as an ideal context for developing social and emotional skills

There are many reasons to suggest that participation in sports and physical activities provides a promising context in which to build social and emotional skills. Many children already participate in sports and physical activities, be it individual or team-based, structured or unstructured, and these contexts are filled with opportunities to build important skills such as teamwork and cooperation, empathy and prosocial behavior, planning and problem solving, just to name a few. The Sports & Fitness Industry Association, which tracks participation across 120 sports, recreation, and fitness activities in the United States, recently released a report indicating that more than 70% of children ages 6 through 12 participate in team or individual sports at least one day a year (Sports & Fitness Industry Association, 2016). In addition, unlike school settings that typically face curricular demands, out-of-school time settings like sports and recreational contexts tend to enjoy greater flexibility in terms of goals and programming (Jones, Bailey, Brush, & Kahn, 2017). Like other out-of-school time settings, sports settings also tend to be less formal and structured, providing increased opportunities to develop relationships and build social and emotional skills (Hurd & Deutsch, 2017). Sports and other physical based activities also provide ample opportunities to build what have been coined in positive youth development frameworks as the "Big Three" described below (Lerner, 2004; Agans et al., 2015):

- Youth-Adult Relationships—positive sustained relationships with adults
- Skill Development—opportunities to develop and practice life skills
- Opportunities for Leadership—opportunities to use life skills as leaders in valued activities

Given the considerable amount of time children spend participating in sports and other organized physical activities, and that these settings are particularly conducive to social and emotional skill development, sports settings represent an important context in which to intentionally build these skills.

While may sports programs develop social, emotional, and physical skills in youth participants, few state they explicitly target social and emotional competencies. There is some evidence indicating the effectiveness of sports and physical based programming for building this set of skills. For example, Playworks is a recess-based program that aims to build social and emotional skills through safe, healthy, and inclusive play and physical activity. Playworks has been evaluated in four randomized control trials, demonstrating gains in positive language, physical activity, positive recess behavior, and readiness for class, as well as reductions in bullying (Jones et al., 2017). Other programs, such as Girls on the Run and The First Tee leverage specific sports or physical activities to build social and emotional skills in afterschool settings. Girls on the Run, for example, is a positive youth development program centered around running. The program provides coaches with suggestions for setting up a successful physical activity-based positive youth development program, including ideas and suggestions for setting up a safe and inclusive environment, building positive relationships, setting goals, celebrating success, and addressing behavior challenges. Girls on the Run has been evaluated in multiple quasi-experimental and non-experimental studies. These studies have demonstrated gains in character, caring, self-esteem, self-confidence, positive connections with others, body size satisfaction, physical self-concept, running self-concept, commitment to physical activity, physical activity levels, frequency of physical activity, and positive attitude toward physical activity, as well as reductions in sedentary behaviors (Jones et al., 2017). Another program, The First Tee, uses golf as a context for teaching life skills and enhancing core values such as honesty, integrity, sportsmanship, respect, and responsibility. Studies of The First Tee program have demonstrated higher levels of confidence, integrity, responsibility, honesty, judgment, perseverance, behavioral regulation, and cooperation (Weiss, Bolter, & Kipp, 2016; Weiss, Stuntz, Bhalla, Bolter, & Price, 2013). It is important to note that this is not meant to provide a comprehensive overview of programs that focus on youth sports and physical activity, but rather to provide a brief look at evidence-based programs that explicitly target social and emotional learning and related competencies.

Key factors that support healthy social and emotional development

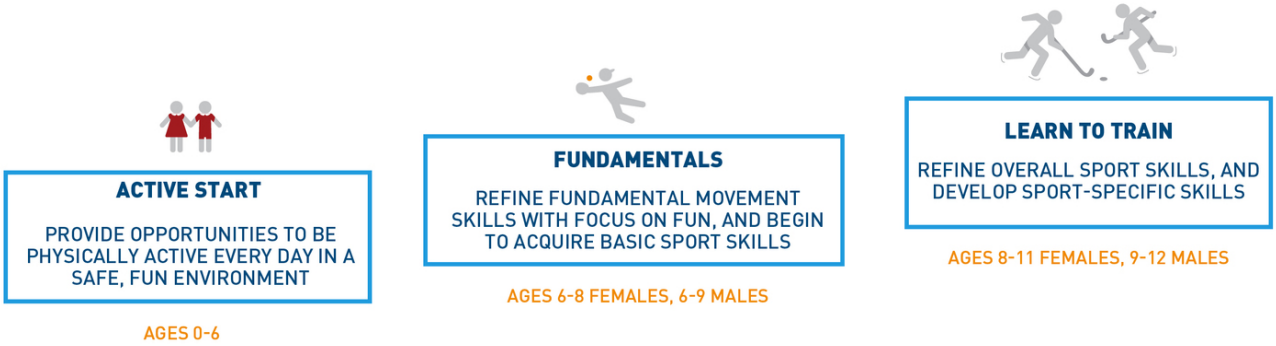
1. Relationships are an important context in which to build social and emotional skills

Drawing upon evidence across disciplines, including positive youth development frameworks, mentoring, social and emotional learning, and sports psychology, it is clear that high-quality relationships are foundational and provide important opportunities to strengthen the development of social and emotional competencies. Social and emotional development takes place across contexts, including through interactions at home, school, in the community, and during after school or recreational settings (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998; Jones & Bouffard, 2012). The development of social and emotional skills is also influenced by several environmental factors, including culture and climate. As such, the adults with whom young people interact in these settings play a vital role in the development of social and emotional learning.

While parent-child relationships are the first and perhaps the most important context in which children develop these skills, relationships—with both adults and peers—are also important contexts for shaping social and emotional development (Jones & Bouffard, 2012; Jones et al., 2017). There are many opportunities for youth to benefit from the relationships that occur through their daily interactions with non-parental adults (e.g., coaches, teachers, community members), particularly when these relationships are characterized by warmth, acceptance, and closeness (Bowers et al., 2015; Jones et al., 2017). Positive relationships with nonparental adults are beneficial for all young people. Research demonstrates that these relationships can be compensatory, buffering or lessening the effects of poor relationships, or challenges in other areas of their lives (Bowers et al., 2015; Jones et al., 2017). Given the potential impact, it is clear that adults across settings have a unique opportunity to support the development of healthy relationships that facilitate the acquisition and expression of social and emotional skills (Jones et al., 2017).

2. Development of social and emotional skills occurs over time, and some skills may be particularly relevant or salient at a particular developmental stage

A growing body of research also suggests there is much to be gained from understanding the ways in which social and emotional skills develop across the first decade of life. Research suggests that some skills act as building blocks, laying a foundation for more complex skills that emerge later in life (Jones et al., 2017). This suggests that children must develop certain basic social and emotional competencies before they can master others. For example, basic cognitive regulation skills such as attention control and impulse control begin to emerge when children are 3-4 years old and go through dramatic transformation during early childhood and early school years (ages 4-6), coinciding with the expansion of the pre-frontal cortex of the brain (Jones et al., 2017). These skills (often called "executive functions") lay a foundation for more complex skills later in life such as long-term planning, decision-making, and coping skills, among others, and are therefore important skills to emphasize during early childhood and the transition to kindergarten. As children move through the elementary grades, there is an increased need for a focus on planning, organizing, and goal-setting, as well as attention to the development of empathy, social awareness, and perspective-taking as children develop an increased capacity for understanding the needs and feelings of others (Jones et al., 2017). In late elementary and middle school, many children are able to shift toward an emphasis on more specific interpersonal skills, such as the capacity to develop sophisticated friendships, engage in prosocial and ethical behavior, and solve conflicts (Osher et al., in press; Jones & Bailey, 2015).

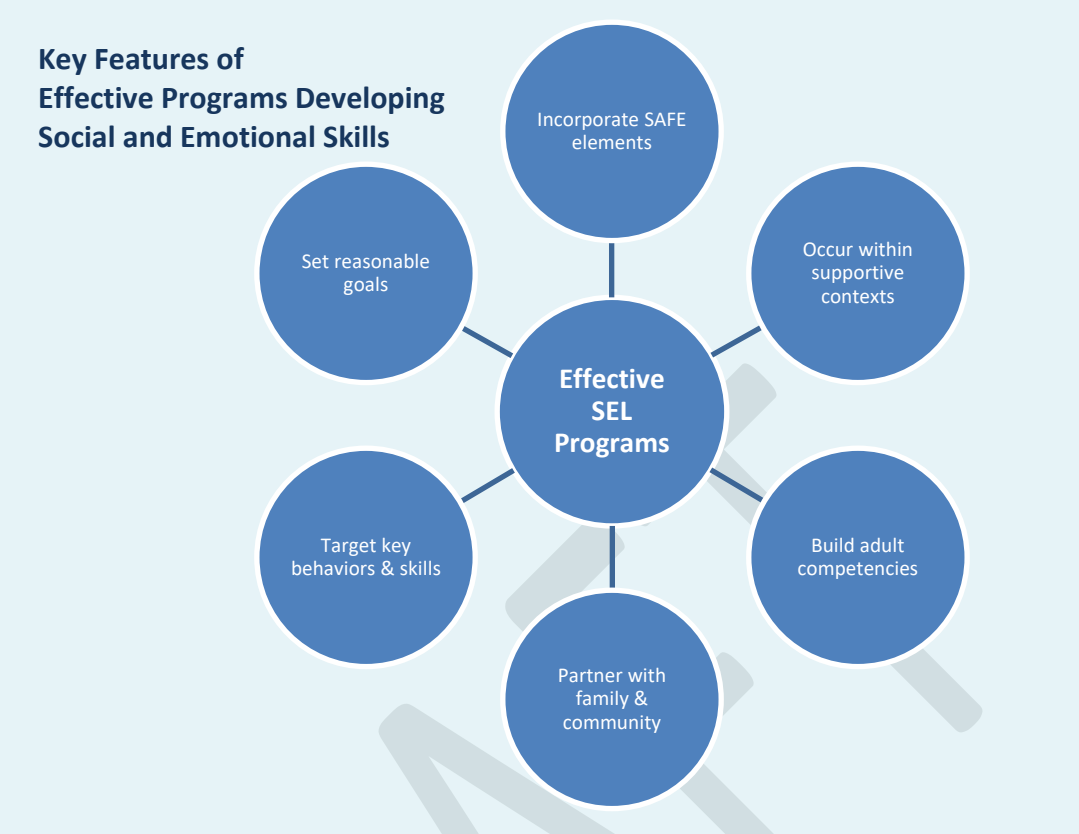


This graphic represents the first three stages of the USA Hockey American Development Model.

3. Effective implementation is necessary to achieve positive outcomes

A growing body of evidence indicates the importance of effective implementation in delivering positive outcomes. In their review of more than 200 school-based, social and emotional learning programs, Durlak and colleagues (2011) found that the most effective programs were those that incorporated four elements represented by the acronym SAFE, that is, they (1) sequenced activities that are led in a coordinated and connected way to skills, (2) active forms of learning, (3) a focus on developing one or more social and emotional skills, and (4) explicit targeting of specific skills. Building upon these recommendations, Jones and colleagues (2017) add that social and emotional skill development efforts are most successful when they:

- **Occur within supportive contexts.**
  School and classroom contexts that are supportive of children's social and emotional development include (a) practices and activities that build and establish prosocial norms; and (b) a climate that actively promotes healthy relationships, positive behavior, and support.
- **Build adult competencies.**
  This includes promoting teachers' own social and emotional competence and the ongoing integration of teacher social and emotional competence with pedagogical skills.
- **Acknowledge features of the broader community context.**
  This includes taking into consideration the environments in which children are learning, living, and growing by building family-school-community partnerships that can support children at home and in other out-of-school settings.
- **Target a key set of skills across multiple domains of development.**
  This includes targeting, in a developmentally appropriate way, skills across multiple domains of development.
- **Set reasonable goals.**
  This includes articulating short- and long-term outcomes that are reasonable goals or expectations for the specific effort.



4. Adults need adequate training and support to effectively influence the social and emotional development of the children with whom they interact

Perhaps equally important to the success of strategies developed to build social and emotional skills is training and support for adults. Research from school settings has shown that teachers who do not have adequate training report limited confidence in their ability to respond to students' needs, and in turn, to support social and emotional learning (Reinke, Stormont, Herman, Puri, & Goel, 2011; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015; Jones & Kahn, 2017). When teachers received training, they feel better equipped to implement positive, active classroom management strategies that deter aggressive behavior and promote positive classroom climate (Alvarez, 2007; Jones & Kahn, 2017). Research in sports settings has also highlighted the importance of training and professional development. In a series of studies examining coach effectiveness, coaches who received training were better liked and their participants reported higher levels of self-esteem and enjoyment than participants with coaches who did not receive training (Smith, Smoll, Barnett, 1995; Smith, Smoll, & Curtis, 1979; Smoll, Smith, Barnett, & Everett, 1993; Gould & Wright, 2012). Across settings, adults also need training and support dedicated to building their own social and emotional skills. It is difficult for them to help children and youth build these skills, if they themselves do not possess them. Research shows that adults with stronger social and emotional skills have more positive relationships with students, engage in more effective classroom management, and implement social and emotional programming more effectively (McClelland et al., 2017; Jones & Kahn, 2017).

Guidelines for Coaches: Setting the stage for positive social and emotional development

Taking into account the considerations above and drawing upon research from in-school and out-of-school settings, including findings from sports settings, the following sections provide guidance for how coaches and other adults can foster positive outcomes for participants, particularly healthy social and emotional development.

1. Build positive adult-youth relationships

Research across disciplines consistently highlights the importance of sustained, high-quality relationships for promoting positive youth outcomes and decreased levels of risk behaviors. Features of adult-youth relationships that may foster social and emotional learning include the following:

- Communicate with youth in ways that demonstrate respect and is developmentally and culturally appropriate (Hurd & Deutsch, 2017).
- Build emotional connections with youth in ways that are positive, natural, and contextually appropriate (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Li & Julian, 2012).
- Develop reciprocal relationships characterized by sustained and frequent joint activities in which the adult provides support and guidance that is adjusted to meet the developmental and contextual needs of the youth (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Li & Julian, 2012; Bowers et al., 2015). This means that adults and youth interact with one another—practicing and playing together.
- Engage with youth in progressively more complex ways over time, such as discussing more challenging or personal situations and emotions (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Li & Julian, 2012; Bowers et al., 2015). For example, coaches should initiate discussion about things that are hard, frustrating, or require perseverance.
- As the relationship progresses, allow for shifts in the balance of power, that is provide youth with the opportunity to drive the relationship and assert more independence (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Li & Julian, 2012; Bowers et al., 2015). For example, have participants lead practice or act as team captains.

2. Create a safe space that supports social and emotional learning

As described above, contextual features, such as culture and climate can facilitate or challenge the development of social and emotional competencies. Fortunately, there is a growing body of evidence highlighting key features of environments that are conducive to building these skills.

- A safe and caring climate, characterized by support, safety, belongingness, respect, positive attitudes, caring behaviors, effective emotion management, empathy and prosocial behavior, and by adults who are caring, competent, and compassionate (Weiss, Bolter, & Kipp, 2016; Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003; Fry & Gano-Overway, 2010; Wiess, Kipp, & Bolter, 2012; Weiss & Wiese-Bjornstal, 2009; Eccles & Gootman, 2002). This also includes communicating with youth in ways that are culturally appropriate and ensure that all participants, regardless of background or social identity feel respected and connected to others (Hurd & Deutsch, 2017).
- Appropriate structure and norms, characterized by setting clear rules and expectations and positive social norms (Weiss, Kipp, & Bolter, 2012; Vandell et al., 2015; Hurd & Deutsch; Eccles & Gootman, 2002). Norms should seek to facilitate an environment that is conducive to creating a safe, caring climate. This may include establishing expectations for behavior and communication that are

respectful, inclusive, and prosocial. When appropriate, youth may also benefit from working together to set group norms and expectations (Hurd & Deutsch, 2017).

3. Embody effective leadership strategies that emphasize effort, autonomy, and learning

Significant research has focused on understanding and identifying the coaching styles and qualities that best support the motivation and satisfaction of participants. Studies have consistently found the following key take-aways to be most effective:

- Mastery-oriented coaching that emphasizes and reinforces effort, improvement, and cooperative learning (Weiss, Kipp, & Bolter, 2012; Weiss & Wiese-Bjornstal, 2009). This includes emphasizing a communal sense of learning and valuing and rewarding effort, improvement, and learning as opposed to focusing on performance, winning, and comparisons to others (Roberts, 2012; Agans et al., 2015; Chelladurai, 2012). Coaches should also strive to treat all participants equally and include all participants in activities (Chelladurai, 2012).
- Positive and informational feedback, characterized by encouragement and praise that is appropriate to performance. Specifically, research suggests that high frequencies of positive, supportive, information-based feedback, especially in response to specific behavior or performance and low frequencies of punishment-oriented feedback appear to be most effective (Horn, 2008). This style of coaching can help to facilitate the development of healthy self-esteem, perceived competence, positive social relationships with peers, enjoyment, and continued participation (Horn, 2008; Weiss, Kipp, & Bolter, 2012; Smoll & Smith, 1989, 2002).
- Leadership style characterized by autonomy supportive behaviors, that is providing participants with choice within specific boundaries, providing a rationale for activities and rules, recognizing participants perspectives and feelings, providing opportunities to take initiative, and avoiding the use of criticism or rewards to shape behavior (Weiss, Kipp, & Bolter, 2012; Vandell et al., 2015; Hurd & Deutsch, 2017; Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Amorose & Anderson-Butcher, 2007; Amorose & Horn, 2000, 2001; Mageau & Vallerand, 2003; Vallerand, 2007). This style of leadership is consistently associated with greater perceived competence, enjoyment, self-determined motivation, and well-being.

4. Prioritize social and emotional learning and provide opportunities for direct skill building and practice

The development of social and emotional competencies should be intentional. Coaches and other adults can create environments that are conducive to developing these skills by prioritizing and integrating social and emotional learning into daily routines and providing opportunities for youth to practice and apply these skills across settings. For example, studies reveal that when coaches prioritize and facilitate skills such as relationship building, goal setting, and decision making, participants were more likely to report positive outcomes (Gould & Carson, 2010; Holt, Tink, Mandigo, and Fox, 2008). The following provide key principles for prioritizing and integrating social and emotional learning:

- Provide opportunities for direct and indirect skill building, adapting strategies to the specific context when appropriate (Collins et al., 2009; Gould et al., 2007; Gould & Wright, 2012).
- Integrate skill building instructions, practice, and application into daily routines.
- Encourage participants to plan, practice, and perform specific skills and apply skills in other settings (Hurd & Deutsch, 2017).

- Model and scaffold skills for youth.

5. Model positive behavior and social and emotional skills

Coaches and other adults who spend time with youth can act as important role models who can foster the development of social and emotional learning, citizenship, moral behavior, and other desirable outcomes. Coaches can also be an important source of feedback, instruction, and support for youth participants (Bolter & Weiss, 2013). Consider the following guidelines when working with youth:

- Model positive behavior and show youth what it looks like to use social and emotional learning through your interactions and behaviors with other adults and with youth. For example, demonstrate respect and listening skills when talking to team members or other adults, model steps to conflict resolution.
- Demonstrate the difference between right and wrong, showing integrity, displaying empathy, and helping others (Weiss, Kipp, & Bolter, 2012; Lerner et al., 2005; Shields & Bredemeier, 2007).
- Take advantage of opportunities to discuss conflicts or dilemmas that arise. Discuss possible solutions that benefit themselves and others.

6. Seek opportunities for support, training, and professional development for adults

As noted above, training and support for staff are essential to social and emotional learning. While community and organizational policies and practices play a significant role in the opportunities available to adults, there are many ways in which coaches can utilize strategies and opportunities for professional development:

- Collaborate with other staff and/or coaches to plan activities and debrief afterwards. Set aside time to discuss and reflect on progress, conflicts, staff and youth responses, and ways in which you might adjust future activities or processes (Hurd & Deutsch, 2017; Smith et al., 2016).
- Build foundational knowledge about social, emotional, and physical development, including developing awareness and knowledge about how development evolves over time and specific cultural or ethnic considerations.
- Reflect on your learning and interactions through journaling, video analysis, and group discussion (Gilbert, 2006).
- Seek professional development opportunities and develop your own social and emotional competencies. This may include formal learning situations such as coach education courses or informal opportunities such as conferences, webinars, books, etc.

7. Seek opportunities to engage with families, schools, and other community organizations

Effective youth development programs also engage parents and families (Bowers et al.; 2015; Deschenes & Malone, 2011). It is easier for youth to develop patterns of positive behavior when there is consistency across contexts. Coaches and staff can share information about social and emotional learning with families, schools, and other community organizations so that other adults can reinforce and help young people practice these skills. In addition, coaches and organizations should aim to increase opportunities for participation in sports and physical activities for all children and youth. For example, findings indicate that sports participation rates among youth living in households with the lowest incomes ($25,000 or less) are about half that of youth from wealthier homes ($100,000+) (Aspen Institute Sport for All Play for Life).

Coaches and organizations can work with schools and community organizations to ensure access to physical activity for all children.

Conclusion

Supporting social and emotional development in young people is essential for the success and well-being of individuals, as well as society at large. While these skills are developed across settings, sports environments provide an ideal setting in which to build this important set of skills. Considering the amount of time children spend participating in sports and physical activity, there is a unique opportunity for coaches to model and teach social and emotional skills. Coaches can intentionally build social and emotional skills into their sports by doing the following: building positive youth behaviors; creating a safe space that supports social and emotional learning; embodying effective leadership strategies that emphasize effort, autonomy, and learning; prioritizing social and emotional learning and provide opportunities for direct skill building and practice; modeling positive behavior and social and emotional skills; seeking opportunities for support, training, and professional development for themselves; and seeking opportunities to engage with families, schools, and other community organization. Fostering this important set of skills benefits all children and builds sports environments that are higher in quality and ultimately, more satisfying and valuable for coaches and athletes.

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