

Developing a Positive Culture

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The Ice Skating Institute (ISI) and Positive Coaching Alliance (PCA) have joined forces in a National Partnership to make ice skating and hockey positive, character-building experiences for every athlete associated with ISI and to make the experience a positive one for athletes, coaches, officials and parents.

By partnering with PCA, ISI provides a pace-setting example for other youth sport organizations of how youth sports can be transformed at the national level when Positive Coaching becomes an integrated part of the culture of the organization.

When asked what it is we love about sports, our responses are many. The excitement of competition, viewing athletic prowess, witnessing the display of admirable character traits are all elements that draw us to the sports environment.

When it comes to youth sports, we can add to these the joy we get from watching our daughters, sons, brothers, sisters, and spouses play and coach their way toward excellence. Feeling personally tied to what takes place on the field serves to strengthen our attraction and connection to sports.

Fortunately, the majority of our experiences as fans at youth sports events are favorable and enjoyable. Most often, we leave the field feeling entertained by the efforts and virtues of the young athletes before us, and we anticipate our next opportunity to be a supportive family member or friend. However, increasingly, we too often witness poor behavior by adults in the youth sports arena; conduct on the part of fellow fans, parents, and coaches that taint our experience, and threaten the environment that can, should, serve as a haven for all participants.

Think of the last time you attended a game and thought to yourself “I wish that guy would be quiet...” or “She must be embarrassing her child...” or “I can’t believe he said that...” Unfortunately, you probably don’t have to think too far back. Somewhere along the line, conduct that is deemed unacceptable in all other social contexts has become tolerated, and thus encouraged in the youth sports world. Ironically, for every individual who is exhibiting poor behavior, there are probably 10 people standing nearby who find the conduct deplorable. What’s troubling is that for some reason, the overwhelming majority does little or nothing to put an end to it. This tolerance is what allows bad behavior to exist. Without question, this is a disturbingly visible sign of an eroding youth sports culture.

Our definition of “culture” is the way we do things here. In other words, what types of behavior will we demand, what will we tolerate? What can we do as parents, coaches, and league administrators, to maintain a positive culture in youth sports, one that creates an environment where young athletes can experience all of the benefits that sports have to offer? To start, here are two important steps:

1. Be proactive - Recognize that a positive culture doesn’t just happen by accident. Stakeholders must collectively decide what type of environment is most suitable to meet the goals of the league, school, and community. Ask and answer the question, “What do we want our organization to stand for?”
2. Spread the word - Once the elements of the desired culture have been determined, it is imperative that it be communicated clearly to all organization participants. This communication should take many forms; mission statements, codes of conduct, buttons, banners, flyers, etc. Because culture is

often intangible, it's important to have, and distribute cultural artifacts as proof of its existence.

Taking these steps will undoubtedly get any organization off to a good start. However, we can't stop here. A major question is: What do we do when, despite our best efforts to prevent poor behavior in our environment, instances of negative conduct still arise? Though the answers may vary based on your role in the organization (parent, coach, administrator), the underlying spirit is the same for all interested parties.

1. Recognize the need for action - The integrity of a positive culture is far too important to let a few individuals put it in jeopardy. Though very few of us enjoy confrontation, we must prepare ourselves to take appropriate, non-confrontational action when necessary.
2. Find allies - Most often, we are not alone when we feel bothered or offended by conduct around us. Communicate with other fans, league administrators, and team parents to build a consensus that something needs to be done. Collectively, a clear message can be sent regarding appropriate behavior.
3. Rely on stated consequences - To be useful and effective, codes of conduct must clearly and explicitly state the consequences that will follow unacceptable behavior. In addition, there must be a pre-determined process through which all reported incidents will be handled. Enforcement is a critical component of any meaningful code of conduct.
4. Prepare in advance - It's much easier for us to respond to a situation if we've prepared for it. We should think, ahead of time, how we might intervene if the need arises. Play out hypothetical scenarios in your head, reflect on effective interventions that you've witnessed, and think about past instances and how you might have handled them differently.

Simply stated, none of this is easy. The instinctual aversion most of us feel toward confronting one another is most often a healthy one. We are wise to avoid engaging others when the likely result will be further antagonism and belligerence. However, there is a tremendous challenge facing all of us who cherish the youth sports environment as an arena that is an immeasurably valuable component of the education of our children. Is this playing environment important enough to defend? Can we summon the moral courage it most often takes to uphold a positive culture in youth sports? Can we demand that the noble conduct exhibited by the majority will refuse to tolerate the negative behavior of a few?

The answer must be "YES, YES, YES".