© 2007 Ice Skating Institute

# What is "Good" Coaching?

**EDGE - Mar/Apr 2004**
**by Jim Thompson**

Perhaps no aspect of youth sports is more perplexing to parents than how to deal with their child's coach. How can you tell if your child's coach is a "good" one? When and how should you intervene with a coach when things aren't going well for your child? Let's start with what makes a good coach.

What makes a "good" coach? This could be the subject of a very long book. Good coaches are technically knowledgeable about the skills and tactics of their sport. They are excellent communicators who know how to teach to the developmental level of their athletes. They love the game and share this love with their athletes. They are positive role models who honor the game and teach players to do the same.

Here I want to highlight a single defining characteristic of a good youth coach. If you have this in your child's coach, I think you can overlook many other deficiencies. What is this critical aspect? The ability to maintain, even to increase, a child's love for the sport.

A youth coach recently told me his goal was that "no child will drop out of the sport on my watch." He proudly described his most recent season with a team that lost many more games than it won. Every player had attended every practice and game, and he was confident that he had made it fun for the players, even though they didn't have a winning season. He was confident that he would see each of the players coming out for the sport the next year.

A study led by Benjamin Bloom in 1985, "Developing Talent in Young People," looked at how talent manifests and is developed. Bloom studied children who evidenced talent at an early age in art, music, mathematics and sport (swimmers and tennis players).

Bloom's study divided the careers of talented young people into three stages. Adapting terminology from Alfred North Whitehead, I will call them the "romantic," "technical" and "mature" stages.

Romantic stage
This is the beginning. The child just loves to skate. She can't wait to get on the ice. The child experiences immediate success. She is better at this activity than her peers, which increases her enthusiasm. As Bloom puts it for the swimmers he studied, "These are the years of playful encounter with the sport of swimming."

Enjoyment is critical. "Had there been no excitement during the early years … there would never have been a middle or later period." One swimmer remarked, "Practices were fun … you're having so much fun that you don't realize you're exhausted."

The role of the coach at this stage is interesting. A positive first coach is crucial. Early coaches were not usually technically expert, but they were great encouragers and enthusiastic about the sport. "Perhaps the major quality … was that they made the initial learning very pleasant and rewarding." They gave lots of positive reinforcement, and only rarely were they critical of the child. But they were not soft or easy: "… they did set standards and expected the child to make progress, although this was largely done with approval and praise."

In the early years of your child's sport experience, it is more important to look for a coach who makes the sport fun and gives lots of encouragement, rather than possessing a high degree of

technical expertise.

Technical stage
The transition from the romantic stage to the technical stage is fraught with danger. The technical stage is inaugurated by the appearance of the technically proficient coach, who is brought into the picture to ensure that skills are being taught correctly. The arrival of this technically proficient coach is important because learning and developing new skills and abilities brings increased joy. However, it's critical that the focus on technique and hard work do not drain the sheer fun out of the activity. When your child makes the transition to the technical stage, make sure his coach continues to nurture a love for the sport, so your child does not join the 70 percent of kids who drop out of sports by age 13.

Mature stage
Here the child has developed her talent to the point where she is performing at a high level. Most kids never make it to this stage. Why? Many say they have lost their joy for the sport, which powers the commitment and effort needed to become great.

So what is a good coach? First and foremost, it is someone who keeps the joy of the sport a part of the experience. If your child's coach does that, you should be willing to overlook any number of other, smaller deficiencies. You should count your child lucky, because in the very most important way, she has a good coach.

A perplexing question for parents is "What do I do if my child's coach does not measure up?" In the next EDGE, we will address what parents can, should and should not do when they find themselves in this position.

*Jim Thompson is the founder and director of Positive Coaching Alliance (positivecoach.org), an ISI partner.*