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Kid-Friendly Criticism Part 2

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The second part of this series provides coaches with tools to give their players "Kid-Friendly Criticism."

Avoid non-teachable moments: There are some moments when it's harder for people to hear and receive criticism. The moment after your athlete finishes her routine is not the time to give technical instruction. There's just too much emotional turmoil in some moments for any criticism - no matter how accurate, well meaning, well founded or perfectly delivered it is - to be heard. So control yourself; don't even try to give criticism in non-teachable moments. Wait for later when the skater is more likely to be able to hear what you have to say. Non-teachable moments are not kid-friendly.

In private: In general, it's much easier for people to take criticism in private rather than in front of the whole world. A wise practice is praise in public, criticize in private.

Take great pains to deliver criticism to your athletes in private, where they are more likely to be able to hear it without having to deal with embarrassment. This can be a challenge during the heat of a competition when there isn't the opportunity to pull them aside and have a quiet conversation. But whenever possible, it's worth the effort. Criticism, to be kid-friendly, should delivered in private where it's easier to hear.

Ask permission: This tool works well with all kids and can be an especially powerful technique with certain kids. Here, you simply ask if the skater is open to hearing your thoughts about how she could perform better. Most kids will say, "Sure." Now the dynamics are changed. They have invited you in with your kid-friendly criticism, which makes it easier to hear.
Sometimes a kid will say, "No!" Then what?

Since you asked, you need to honor her answer. I recommend saying simply, "OK. Let me know if you change your mind." Now, as you turn to walk away, what is going on in the mind of the skater at this point? She is curious! "What is Coach thinking of?" This curiosity can work for you.
Often the child will come to you later in the practice or the next day and say, "OK, I'm ready to hear your suggestion." Or you can ask at the next practice session, "Are you open to hearing my idea about how to make you a better competitor today?" Most of the time the athlete will agree at this time. And now the dynamics have changed for the better.

Criticism "sand-wish": This is a simple (but not so easy) technique. Think of the criticism you want to give your skater as a piece of meat or cheese sandwiched between two positives. For example, if you have a player who needs to release the puck out of his defensive end sooner, you can simply tell him, "You need to release the puck sooner!" However, by putting this criticism into a sandwich (positive, criticism, positive), you get more mileage. "Your passes are very accurate. Now you need to release the puck sooner. Keep up the great work backchecking!" Finally, rephrase your criticism as a wish: "I wish you would release the puck sooner!"

By "sand-wishing" the criticism you have done two things. You've reinforced two good habits of the athlete. We've all seen kids lose good habits, and we want to reinforce them so they keep and strengthen them. You've also filled his E-tank by noticing what he does well. And you've delivered the criticism in the form of a wish for his improvement, which makes it much easier for him to hear without getting defensive.

Information v. control: The way a coach gives directions to an athlete can make a huge difference in how receptive the athlete is to taking the direction. Deborah Stipek's wonderful book, Motivated Minds: Raising Children to Love Learning, includes the following story: "Last night I was driving while a friend gave me directions. Instead of 'Get over to the left lane,' she said, 'The left lane goes toward Pasadena.' It may seem like a trivial difference, but I realized I didn't feel pressured or controlled when she put it that way."

One way of stressing the information component is through use of "if-then" statements. Focusing again on our player who is holding the puck for too long in the defensive end rather than starting the transition quickly, you could say, "You need to release the puck sooner," which is heavy with controlling - you are telling the athlete what to do. Many athletes will not have a problem with this, but some will tend to resist being told what to do, especially if it happens a lot.

On the other hand, you can stress the information piece with an if-then statement: "If you release the puck sooner, then you'll give our offense a great advantage with a quick counter-attack." It's a subtle difference, but one that can keep an athlete in a receptive mode for criticism that will make him better.

Learning to deliver kid-friendly criticism can make a huge difference to your players' love of skating. It can also contribute mightily to improved performance, because if they are able to hear your criticism, they are going to be more likely to take it to heart.

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