

6A's for Youth Sport Coaches

The goal of youth sport is to help participants learn important lessons for life, such as character development, social skills, responsibility, teamwork, a healthy lifestyle, and to develop a love and lifelong commitment to sport and physical activity. Improving communication with the children you work with is an important part of this process. The 6A's offer a framework to help you interact with these children and create an optimal youth sport experience.

ANTICIPATING your athletes' youth sport experience will enable you to **ASK** good questions, which will provide an opportunity to offer **ADVICE** on strategies to promote a positive and enjoyable youth sport experience. You will also be able to **ASSESS** his/her understanding of youth sport, and then you can **ASSIST** him/her in enhancing the experience. It is important to remember, however, that as a coach the most important A is **ACTION** – your commitment to teach, enforce, advocate and model appropriate behaviors that will optimize the youth sport experience for your athletes.

ANTICIPATE (Silent dialogue with self)

The following are questions that may aid in your understanding of some of the issues regarding your athlete and the youth sport experience:

- What are the purposes of youth sport and why do children participate?
 - The purposes of youth sport are to learn important lessons for life, improve skills, and enjoy physical activity.
 - Children participate in youth sport primarily because its fun, to be with and make new friends, to learn new skills, as well as for thrills and excitement.
- Why do children drop out of youth sport?
 - Children often drop out of sport because there is too much emphasis on winning, they are not able to be with their friends, there is too much competition, fear of injury, or a lack of playing time.
 - For many children, moving onto another activity simply reflects a natural desire to try new things.
- What do youth understand about competition?
 - Before the age of 11, most children do not understand competition in an adult way. Young children play for the social interaction and physical enjoyment, rather than to test their skills against others.

Be aware of your influence in the process - you are a figure that student-athletes look up to and model their behaviors on.

ASK

Ask leading or open-ended questions that require more than a simple “yes” or “no” response from the athlete, such as:

- Why do you like to participate in sports?
- What do you think you learn from participating in different activities?
- What do you enjoy the most about sport participation, particularly this sport?
- Are there any things you don’t like about participating in youth sport activities?
- Who is most involved and influential in your sport involvement?
- Would you like to be more involved in other sports and activities?

ADVICE

Try to frequently provide the athlete with advice on various aspects of the youth sport experience.

- Emphasize that enjoyment and positive experiences gained through playing the game are far more important than winning and losing.
 - Help him/her focus on sources of success that are developmentally appropriate and within his/her control, such as trying new skills or giving a best effort.
- Discuss the importance of good sportsmanship and why it is so important.
 - Encourage your child to compliment good performances and show respect for pre- and post-game sportsmanship rituals.
- Discuss, and demonstrate through your actions, the importance of treating all teammates and fellow athletes, parents, teachers, coaches and officials with respect at all times, whether in practice or competition.
 - To enhance the sport experience for all athletes, emphasize thinking and working together as a team while encouraging each individual to work hard and improve.

ASSESS (Silent dialogue with self)

- Why are these children participating in youth sport?
- What is my athletes’ understanding of sportsmanship?
- What are the “red flags” that may hinder my athletes’ enjoyment of their youth sport experience?
- How do I keep this “game” in perspective?
- What are my athletes’ understanding of healthy lifestyle behaviors and challenges?
- How can I conduct myself both on and off the field to better exemplify good sportsmanship and healthy lifestyle behaviors that I want my athletes to follow?



ASSIST

We would recommend a dual approach for assisting the athlete. Be sure to maintain open lines of communication while emphasizing your willingness to talk about anything your he/she might want to discuss.

1. Set clear parameters and expectations in regard to your athletes' behaviors in youth sport. For example, you might say, "I want you to behave in a positive way: To try as hard as you can, respect your teammates, respect the opposing team, and respect the game."
2. Empower children to be able to make those good choices. For example, you might say:
 - "I trust you and know you will make good choices in life. Choosing to be a good sport and accepting responsibility for your behavior is an important choice that affects not just yourself, but the rest of the team."

ACTION

We believe that the most important A is Action, namely what you as a coach do. You've already taken an important step by reviewing the content of this website. Here are some other important steps to take:

- Teach, enforce, advocate, and model appropriate behaviors. For example:
 - Conduct yourself in a manner that demonstrates good character and sportsmanship, representing the team and your organization in a positive way.
 - Place more emphasis on sport enjoyment and positive experiences than on final outcomes.
 - Engage in healthy lifestyle behaviors around your athletes, avoiding negative behaviors such as tobacco, alcohol, or drug use.
 - Actively participate in providing education for your athletes to make good choices regarding healthy sport experiences.

For additional resources to aid in creating a healthy sport experience for your child, access the Healthy Lifestyle Information at www.aiaacademy.org.