

Taking your communication skills to the next level

Communication is not just what we say, but rather a two-way street where we send a message, and that message must also be received as we intended.

Take a moment to reflect:

Why do you coach? What do you love about coaching? What do you find challenging about being a coach?

Often when working with coaches, I hear how much they love teaching kids, how they enjoy seeing their athletes grow and develop, and how much fun they have being involved in youth sports. I also hear over and over how communication as a coach can be a challenge so I've outlined some ideas about how to enhance your communication skills, because communication is just that: a skill. Communication can be improved on, developed and refined over time.

Communication is not just what we say, but rather a two-way street where we send a message, and that message must also be received as we intended. Read on for ideas to consider to help enhance how you communicate as a coach.

Positive communication

This may seem obvious, but can be easy to forget: communicate in ways that are positive. This means acknowledging what your athletes do well, framing things in ways that say what you *want* someone to do, rather than what you *do not* want them to do, and finding the positives in tough situations like defeat. By highlighting the positives for young athletes, you help to build confidence, instill positive beliefs and also make it more likely that



As a coach, you are able to share lots of great lessons with your athletes, and modeling is a more silent way of imparting your wisdom.

they will hear and respond when you have to tell them something to correct or change. The corrections will stand out more if you have many more positive points of feedback than negative points.

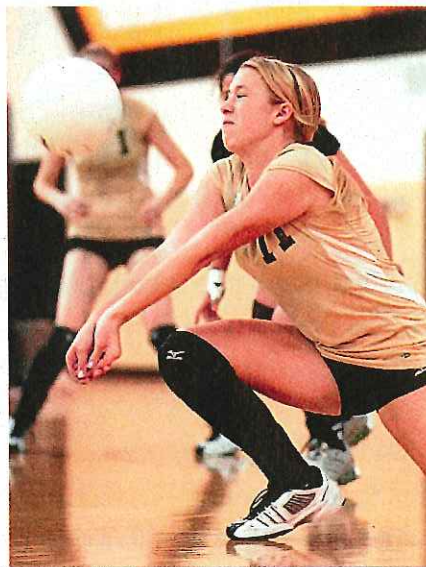
Clear communication

It can be easy to use a lot of words and ultimately say very little. Remember that developmentally, for young athletes, that if you keep your communication short, to the point, and easy to understand, you have a much better chance of them comprehending what you say. If it is complex or

convoluted, the message will go in one ear and out the other, and possibly leave you frustrated. Instead, simplify: make your message clear and to the point.

Acknowledge and account for different learning styles

All of us learn in different ways: Some of us learn by hearing instructions, and that learning may be further improved by repeating back what we've heard. Others need to see the information, and still many will not fully understand until they can get out there and "just do it." As coaches, tap into all of these learning styles when



language you are showing and make an effort to have it be consistent with the words you say. Research even shows that by changing our body language, this can have a positive impact on how we feel. So, if you're feeling stressed and frustrated, change your body position to something more relaxed and open and see if you feel better. Positive body language (head up, smile, arm down, etc.) is a good complement to positive communication.

Model strong communication

As a coach, you are able to share lots of great lessons with your athletes, and

Our body language can send a message of its own, whether we intend to or not. Things like crossed arms, a stern look, or a head shake can send a very clear message to a young athlete, even if you're trying to give them positive words.

you communicate instructions. For example, don't just tell your team what you want them to do; you can start with telling them, but also show them, ask them to repeat what they heard, and then let them try it. Legendary coach John Wooden used a model of giving short pieces of information and modeling what he wanted his athletes to do before having them try it on their own.

Body language

Your words can say one thing, for example, "Good job," but your body can say something completely different. Our body language can send a message of its own, whether we intend to or not. Things like crossed arms, a stern look, or a head shake can send a very clear message to a young athlete, even if you're trying to give them positive words. Stay aware of the body

modeling is a more silent way of imparting your wisdom. Modeling allows you to educate your athletes, assistant coaches and parents on principles of communication by using the above ideas. If you are communicating positively, those you work with will be more inclined to do so. If you work hard to teach by catering to the different learning styles, you may notice that your assistant coaches do that as well, without having to tell them directly. In life, we all make observations and often repeat what we see when it seems to have a positive impact.

The above are just a few ideas to get you started at strengthening your ability to communicate effectively with those around you. Just like the physical skills in sport, communication is a skill that can, and should, be practiced, so take some time to work on communication today, both on and off the field. ✨

Sara Robinson, MA, is a Mental Skills Coach with a Master's Degree in Sport Psychology. She works with parents, coaches and athletes ages 8-18 to teach the mental skills necessary for sport and life. To receive her quarterly newsletter or for more information on Sara and her work, visit her website at www.trainingthemind.com or email her at Sara_SportPsych@hotmail.com.