

# Kids Deserve a High-Quality Youth Sports Coaching Climate:

How Blending Developmental Relationships and Compete-Learn-Honor Habits Can Make It Happen

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It's estimated that about 45 million U.S. children and youth participate in formal sports programs (DiFiori et al., 2014; Merkel, 2013). Their 6.5 million youth sports coaches (Aspen Institute, 2018) are among the most potentially influential adults in these tens of millions of young people's lives. In one of Search Institute's national samples, nearly 80% of 15 year olds spent at least some time every week doing sports as part of a club, team, or organization (Scales, Roehlkepartain, & Benson, 2010), and 62% of a sample of nearly 90,000 6th-12th graders from 26 states reported they did as well (Unpublished Search Institute Attitudes & Behavior Survey dataset, 2010). But a majority of youth coaches are volunteers (and most of them are parents coaching teams their own kids are on), and only a minority have had training beyond the basic Xs and Os of their sport.

The Aspen Institute estimates that only about one-third have been trained on effective motivation techniques (Call for Coaches, 2020), and other studies suggest even fewer, more like 10%, have had *any* kind of formal training (Merkel, 2013). The training they do get has been largely limited, for most coaches, to biomechanics, and strength and conditioning, not the science of coaching or positive youth development (other than, in recent years, increasingly-required sex abuse prevention video training). Is it any wonder, then, that roughly 1 in 3 young people quit sports every year, largely because of negative experiences with their coach undermining the #1 reason they play—for fun!—with inappropriate kinds of stress and pressure, rejection, and disrespect (Aspen Institute, 2019; Beatty & Fawver, 2013)?

High-quality youth sports coaching relationships don't just happen, any more than sports automatically builds character in student-athletes—intentionality is required for these positive things to happen. Coaches often rely on what comes naturally or what they experienced with their own youth coaches growing up. This may work for some coaches that have had strong relational models and good social emotional skills. But other coaches with the best of intentions can perpetuate negative relational actions in their efforts to bring out the best in kids. There is no doubt that coaches can be transformational in the lives of young athletes when adequately equipped with the tools necessary for building healthy relationships with their athletes. And that starts with coaches, administrators, parents, and student-athletes all having a better shared understanding of and commitment to what a “high-quality youth sports coaching relationship” looks like, and accepting nothing less. Thankfully, organizations like the Positive Coaching Alliance, National Alliance for Youth Sports, Aspen Institute’s Project Play, the Susan Crown Exchange, Progress Through Athletics (P/ATH), the Changing the Game Project, Way of Champions, and the Women’s Sports Foundation, among others, are committed to a new way of educating coaches based in a deeper understanding of the coach-student athlete relationship.

Search Institute is planning to mount a positive youth development through sports initiative that adds to these efforts. Our new initiative plans to draw on several approaches to positive youth development: the Developmental Relationships Framework, the Developmental Assets Framework, Building Youth Sparks, and the Compete-Learn-Honor Approach to mental and emotional training for sports. We believe that *all* youth are entitled to a sporting experience that involves positive relationships with caring adults and peers while also having the opportunity to grow in character and perform at their personal best.

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All of these are research-supported ways sports programs can help their players develop positively as people, not just as players. The Developmental Assets are relationships, opportunities, values, and skills that every young person needs to succeed in life (Benson, Scales, & Syvertsen, 2011). The Developmental



Relationships Framework (DR) expands on the 5 key ways coaches and other adults can deepen their interactions with student-athletes so they can become even more influential role models and mentors, on and off the playing field: Express Care, Challenge Growth, Provide Support, Share Power, and Expand Possibilities (Pekel, Roehlkepartain, Syvertsen, Scales, Sullivan, & Sethi, 2018; Scales, 2016; Scales, Pekel, Sethi, Chamberlain, & Van Boekel, 2019). Youth Sparks are about helping young people find and develop the personal interests they have that express who they are and might become, and that give them energy and purpose (Benson & Scales, 2009). And the Compete-Learn-Honor Approach (C-L-H), originally designed for tennis, helps coaches build new mental and emotional habits in their players so young people can play their sport with greater purpose, less focus on winning and losing, giving 100% effort, being an open, curious, and humble learner, and loving and honoring the game (Scales, 2020a, Scales, 2020b; Scales, 2019).

Coaches have an excellent opportunity to support their athletes' positive development by striving to have their programs pay attention to building these relationships, assets, sparks, and compete-learn-honor habits. These strengths lend themselves to being especially supported by what a well-functioning sports program is and does. This isn't about money or equipment, but about coaching philosophy, messages and values, and the relationships we have with our students and their families.

Through the combination of DR and C-L-H emphases, youth sports coaches can enhance both the competitive skill levels and the social-emotional strength of their student-athletes. In short, they can help young people improve as players, and grow as people of strong character. We also have found that when young athletes define themselves based on character and a greater purpose (i.e., purpose-based identity) rather than on the results of performance (i.e., performance-based identity), they not only benefit in their emotional wellbeing (Houlberg et al., 2018) but they also can perform better (Shubert et al., 2020). In our research, we've found that sports consistently is named by youth as one of the biggest "sparks" in their lives, that give them energy and purpose (creative activities is the other one in the top two). And guess what? In our national study, we found that higher levels of sparks—that are related to all sorts of positive youth outcomes—are more likely to happen in activities that require *energetic social engagement*, relationships, and that provide more "opportunities for the kinds of scaffolded support and challenge that are more characteristic of the sense of flow" (Ben-Aliyah et al, 2014, p. 85).

Relationships in the sports performance context are crucial for success and well-being, but high-quality coaching relationships don't miraculously happen, especially if coaches have received little to no training. Our initiative is meant to help coaches be more intentional and thoughtful about their relationships and coaching culture, and improve the youth sports experience for everyone.

In the DR framework, we plan to measure how coaches and the overall sports program are creating sustained relationships with their players that are built around these elements of interaction: Appropriately and safely Expressing Care for their players, Challenging their players' Growth, Providing Support for their players, Sharing Power with their players, and Expanding Opportunities for their players. Within these 5 elements, 20 more specific actions (e.g., listen, guide, inspire, navigate) further define what a developmental coaching relationship looks like.

In the C-L-H approach, we will assess how much coaches define success, not in terms of

wins and losses, but by whether players are Competing (giving 100% effort), Learning (being an open, curious, and humble learner), and Honoring the Game (respecting all, making no excuses, and showing high character under stress and adversity), with Honor held up as the foundation for all Learning and Competitive development. Within those 3 pillars, two-dozen specific mental-emotional principles reflect habits we want coaches to help student-athletes develop (e.g., love the game more than how you perform, lose your "self"—humility allows you to learn, mistakes are necessary to improve, love the battle-solve the puzzle). The C-L-H approach was originally designed for application in tennis coaching, but has increasingly been highlighted as a recommended approach for both recreational level and elite performance athletes, by organizations such as the Positive Coaching Alliance, National Alliance for Youth Sports, Way of Champions, Changing the Game Project, and the United States Tennis Association.



By implementing these principles and nurturing these habits, coaches can change the coaching, learning, and competing culture to one that does not ignore winning as a goal, but that increases the odds of winning by strengthening the relationships between coaches and players, and players and teammates. The goal is to help coaches and players create a team and player development culture that puts respect, love of the game, team, and selflessness first.

Creating this kind of a team and player development culture works at all levels, from youth sports where winning should be a “pleasant by-product” of life skills development, according to the National Federation of High School Associations, to college sports and even elite professionals whose job it is to compete and win. A study of the Super Bowl-winning Seattle Seahawks by USC’s Performance Sciences Institute that one of us directed (BH), for example, found that the team culture Head Coach Pete Carroll was committed to creating, based on belonging, accountability, fun, and purpose, has resulted in leadership that empowers players and has resulted in a competitive climate based on shared values of excellence, growth, and effort: “There is no whining, complaining, or making excuses”; “Everyone is expected to work hard, from coaches to players”; “There is a curiosity at all times for how

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we can get better.” The people in this highly competitive culture feel valued, respected, and connected to each other, with bonds of mutual trust and accountability, which for many, is transformational: “People come in rigid. Then the culture loves them up, loves them for who they are.” This sounds, from a professional sports culture, so much like what one of us (PS), who is also a professionally-certified high school tennis coach, communicates as a central message to his student-athletes: “How I feel about you doesn’t change depending on whether you win or lose. I love you whether you win or lose—that doesn’t change.” When players know they are loved for who they are, what a difference that makes in their enjoyment, connectedness, willingness to make mistakes as part of growth, and desire to work hard!

Our intent is to integrate these DR concepts, C-L-H principles, our other research on youths' deep interests and sparks, and development of a purpose-based orientation to sports, into new practical measures and tools for coaches and players. Both our existing survey measures and the ones we will create can be a useful resource for the national organizations already mentioned that are engaged in positive coaching efforts, and many others at the national, state, and local levels who would like to adopt a new approach or strengthen their current methods of youth sports coach preparation. Over the next year, our plan is to 1) develop survey tools that both coaches and players can complete, in order to help sports programs see more clearly where they are already strong and where they could improve in building better relationships between coaches and student-athletes, and 2) build approaches and activities to help them then promote a larger, purpose-more-than-performance driven culture for mental,

social, and emotional strength development in youth sports. With the help of those new measures and tools, coaches will be able to strengthen their relationships with their student-athletes, provide them developmental assets to draw on, help them connect their interests and sparks to learning and life purpose, and guide them to developing more mature mental and emotional habits rooted in competing, learning, and honoring the game, that will enable them to deal better with the inevitable ups and downs of both competition and life off the playing field. In short, all this is intended to help coaches in their dual responsibility: Help student-athletes improve as players, but more importantly, grow as people of character who live, now and in the future, successful and satisfying lives, and who positively contribute to their wider communities. That's what they deserve from youth sports.



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