



Team Climate Tips for Youth Sports Coaches

Coaches have far more power than youth athletes to affect team climate. A climate of safety and respect will foster pro-social behavior and support success. A polluted climate will foster increasingly problematic behavior and inhibit teamwork. You can:

- **Be aware and split your attention.** Avoid tunnel vision. Stay aware of what everyone is doing, even as you focus on just one. Notice what is happening *around* you as well as *inside* of you.
- **Set, respect, and value boundaries.** Communicate team, league, and personal boundaries clearly and consistently. Show that boundaries are important by investing time to teach and talk about them. Accept that people spending time together focused on a shared goal *will* cross each other's boundaries at times, so make those into teaching moments. Respond and take the lead swiftly when boundaries are crossed. This can be difficult, but failing to act can be destructive and erode trust in your leadership.
- **Stop problems early.** Problems are easier to address when they are smaller. By wishing and hoping a problem will take care of itself, you are giving it space to get bigger and more difficult to solve.
- **Don't take negative behavior personally.** People do things for reasons that make sense to them, reasons often related to safety, connection, and vulnerability. Avoid making assumptions about intentions. Instead, seek to learn, understand, and positively address the reasons underlying behavior.
- **Immediately address the use of identity attack language.** By allowing, ignoring, or using disparaging words related to race, gender, religion, ethnicity, ability, size/weight, or sexuality, you end up furthering a culture of domination, oppression, and disrespect. Acting with caring and compassion in this case requires great courage; ignoring the behavior undermines trust and investment in your leadership, pollutes your team culture, and inhibits individual and team well-being and performance.
- **Manage your own emotional triggers.** The words or actions of youth, parents, referees, supervisors, or other coaches and colleagues will trigger you at times. This is unavoidable. Choose not let your emotional triggers rule your words or behavior. Practice centering and screening strategies that work for you, such as Calm Down Power or the Screen Technique.
- **Honor every athlete's dignity.** Avoid engaging in an open power struggle with an athlete. Leave 'an out'. Make *everyone's* safety and well-being a priority. Never underestimate the power of a coach's words or actions to shame or humiliate. Manage your triggers. Model thinking before acting.
- **Stay in charge.** The safety of a youth sports team is always, ultimately, an adult responsibility. Youth should be held accountable for using their own power safely and responsibly, and they can influence peers positively. But, just like one driver on a road should follow the rules but cannot make others drive safely, students should follow the rules but lack the power and skill to enforce them effectively.
- **Beware of the 'solve it yourself' trap.** When youth have the knowledge, skill, and developmental capacity to solve a problem themselves, expecting them to solve it is reasonable. When people have little life experience, are developmentally immature, and have not received regular social-emotional skill coaching, expecting them to solve a complex social problem without guidance is unreasonable.
- **Get help when you need it.** Seek out peers, mentors, colleagues, and supervisors whose actions show a commitment to maintaining a climate of safety and respect and who recognize that proactively seeking help communicates wisdom and confidence. In a culture that so often equates 'needing help' with 'weakness', youth frequently have few positive models of powerful help-seeking behavior. Use your power to model it well.