Doing the right things when interacting with your players:
The "Checklist" for Youth Hockey Coaches

Youth hockey coaches have a difficult job. They are the key decision-makers. They set examples. Players look to them for leadership. Club administrators – and parents -- look to them to make good choices.

As adults we often speak to our young people about making choices— preferably intelligent, positive choices.

That said, coaches make choices, too. They can choose to be the kind of coach that cares only about "winning", or a coach that has a deeper—and longer-lasting—impact on the young people they coach and the families whose lives they touch.

Here are some tips to help make the coaching experience better for you—and the young people you interact with:

1) **Build confidence in your players**

Too often young athletes have their confidence shattered by their coach. Ask anyone in sports, including top professional athletes: when you lose your confidence, performance suffers and it becomes a vicious cycle. As a coach, regardless of whether you are soft-spoken, a yeller or somewhere in between, you must show confidence in your athletes – and constantly build their self-confidence. Wouldn't you rather be the one coach the player looks back on and says – "That person really believed in me and made a difference in my life…" than the coach who is a negative caricature in the minds of your former players?

2) **Identify the real team players on your squad**

Coaches so often want to build a team with stars that they neglect to identify the young athletes who will be the glue that keeps a team together, and keeps them successful. There are obviously many attributes of a "team player", but for starters, look for young people who are good teammates, who support other players, who are unselfish, and treat other players and people with respect. A really good coach would rather 'lose' with a bunch of fine young people than 'win' with a group of talented prima donnas who care only about themselves and not the team.

3) **Communicate regularly -- and honestly**

Young players need regular feedback. You should never go weeks or months without providing constructive feedback on their performance. If they are not meeting your expectations, either in terms of performance or attitude, speak with them—privately. That said, the first thing you should do is set mutually understood expectations at the *beginning* of each season. Meet with the player alone to do this (and with their parents, when age appropriate), away from everyone else.

4) **Explain clearly what you want and then demonstrate what you want**

I often see coaches demand, yell, threaten. Most coaches are not Tony Dungee (coach of the NFL Super Bowl Champion Indianapolis Colts) who rarely, if ever, speaks above his "normal" voice. Parents and players expect --and accept-- some loudness from a coach. A little loudness may even help sometimes! But be sure to explain clearly what you want to see, then *show what you want*. Young soccer players need to see what you're talking about, so if you can't show/demonstrate what you want, bring in a guest instructor who can.

5) **Recognize that every young person/athlete is motivated differently**

Not every athlete— or person — responds to the same stimuli. Some athletes are self-driven, some may need a shove in the behind, others need encouragement. Whatever, the key is to find out what is behind every player's mental door. Speak to the player. Get to know them. Find out what motivates them. Find out what they really love about the sport they play — this will give you a look behind the door. Again if age appropriate, speak with their parents. They may have insight that will help you inspire your young player.

6) **Recognize that you have a potentially huge affect on the young people you coach**

Parents clearly have a seminal influence on the lives of their children. Particular teachers can have a major impact. But there's no question youth coaches have a huge affect on many of the young players on their team. What you say, how you say it, how you act and how you treat people does matter -- a lot. Ask yourself: How will I want to be remembered by this group of players, by each individual player, in 20 years?

Be the kind of coach that will make people remember you fondly, as a positive inspiration in their life, as someone who made a real difference, whether they go on in the sporting field or not. Your players will remember you for a long, long time. What do you want their memory of you to be?

7) **Don't hide your head in the sand. Make yourself aware of personality conflicts on your team, and work to resolve them**

Many youth coaches don't want to know if there are conflicts on their young team. Worse, if they do know there are issues, they don't know how to deal with the situation effectively. Just like adults, we can't expect young people, particularly young people competing against one another for playing time and recognition, etc. to always like each other, or to get along. But you can make it a point to hear, watch and see what's going on. And you, as the team leader, can engender a sense of camaraderie, togetherness, and foster the notion of respect for each other on and off the field of play. Insist on it.

8) **Keep your players' egos in check**

Some coaches may not think that this is an issue in youth sports, but in this day and age, it is. Young people see "the pros" showboating, trash-talking and generally acting in a manner that most parents would not approve of.

While we all want our kids to have healthy self-esteem and a good sense of self-worth, too much "attitude" can lead to an over-developed sense of self-importance. As coach, you have the opportunity—and the responsibility—to see that your players don't fall into this pattern. If you don't deal with it, you will generally see a negative impact on the players, your team, and your efforts to build a tight-knit group.

9) **Listen to your players. Don't assume you have all the answers**

We adults often think we have the answers, because we have "life experience". This life experience can lead to wisdom. It can also lead to rigid thinking that hasn't changed in decades. This certainly applies to coaching. Coaches who say, "this is the way it was in my day", or think because they played the game at a high level that they know everything there is to know, may be doing their players a disservice. The way things were done in "your day" may not have been the best way. Much like parenting, why would we want to repeat the mistakes made by our own parents? I work professionally with many young athletes and I often hear of their frustration with coaches who just won't listen, won't take input from those who are actually on the field, playing the game NOW. Hearing is a sense. Listening is a skill. Develop that skill— especially when it comes to relating to your players.

One other thing on this subject: As I mentioned earlier, take the time to find out what each player really loves about hockey. Sometimes a coach will be with a young person for an entire season and will never bother to find out that the player loves a certain aspect of the sport. Find out. Then build on that to help them become an even better all-around player.

10) **Model real leadership. Don't talk "we" and act "me". If you talk about leadership but don't live it, your players will tune you out.**

Leadership is easy to talk – and write about— and much harder to show. But as a youth sports coach, you have a wonderful opportunity to model positive leadership. How you speak with your players, the way you instruct, how you handle situations when players make mistakes and how you communicate with players on a daily basis are all vitally important examples of your leadership style. You are showing by your own actual behavioral example what you believe is the "right" way for an adult in a position of authority to handle themselves. You should always have handy a mental checklist, a self-monitoring system that makes you ask yourself, "will I feel badly tomorrow about what I am about to say or do right now?"

We all make mistakes, and if you make one, be strong enough to acknowledge that you let a player down and then apologize to them. The willingness to do that will set a tremendous example as well.

11) **Be consistent in your discipline and expectations, regardless of whether it's your "stars" or those who play less often**

Young people generally recognize pretty quickly when a coach says one thing, then does something different. While you should aim to get to know all of your players as individuals, and know what motivates them and react accordingly, you should establish firm team expectations – and stick with them. Suppose "star" players miss practice regularly, or don't work hard in drills, or put down their teammates (or act out in games against opponents or referees). Do you ignore this behavior because you "need" that player to "win"? The players should know what your rules, guidelines and expectations are, and realize there will be consequences— regardless of who breaks the rules.

12) **The Golden Rule: Monitor how your players treat one another**

For some coaches, this notion is somehow totally unimportant. It should be important to you. If you have certain players putting down others on a young team, it's toxic and spreads. Don't be lulled into thinking it doesn't matter. It does. The world is still full of "Eddie Haskell" (a famous teenage character from the classic 'Leave It To Beaver' television program) types— kids who are nice to the coach or certain adults, but are jerks to teammates or others they don't like.

If you see inappropriate behavior of any kind, deal with it firmly. The old adage "boys will be boys" doesn't cut it—in male or female youth sports. Talk to the instigator/s privately and make it clear you will not tolerate that behavior on your team, full stop.

13) **Be respectful of parents**

Youth coaches (sometimes understandably) tend to look at parents as necessary evils. We parents can be a pain, no question. Coaches don't want to "deal" with parents, and delegate an assistant coach or team manager to handle all interpersonal situations. You may be saying to yourself, "Hey, I'm a volunteer, I already give up lots of my time…" which is a fair point if you don't have a son or daughter on your team. But parents do deserve to know how their son or daughter is doing, why they are playing a lot or a little, and if there are things they could be doing to make the overall soccer experience for their child a better one. Ideally, set aside a night every few weeks to have telephone appointments to discuss progress, privately, calmly and away from the field.

14) **Always be open to new players, but be loyal to dedicated returning players**

Just because a player made an "all-star" or "rep" team at the age of 10 shouldn't give them an automatic renewal license for all long as they want to stay on a team. This can lead to a sense of entitlement that is not healthy. A young athlete should have to constantly enhance their skills, work diligently, attend practices, volunteer time, and maintain a positive attitude. If you have a real team player on your hands, keep them. If a new player comes by who may have a little more talent—be open but also keep your eyes open. Too often coaches are willing to sacrifice a solid but unspectacular player for an incoming "star", but remember—the star may bring some baggage, so do your homework.

15) **Ask yourself: Are you being the adult in the relationship with your player/players?**

In my advisory work with young athletes, I regularly see situations (albeit from the perspective of the young athlete) where it strikes me that the player has to assume the role of the adult in the coach-player relationship. The coach doesn't have a true open door policy, may be a 'talker' but not an effective communicator, may be a de-motivator, etc. When issues arise, there is silence, not an effort to resolve things and so feelings fester and simmer. This forces the young person to plan a strategy to deal effectively with the situation. I often will recommend that the young person initiate a private tete-a-tete, since the coach seems uninterested or unwilling to address an obvious problem. The meeting doesn't always solve the issue, but at least there is an attempt at open communication.

As the coach, you be the adult. You are the adult, so accept the responsibility. Set a high standard in terms of your performance and behavior expectations of the young athletes (but understand they are young and will make mistakes), and in return do the same to and for yourself.

16) **Recognize that every player on your team must not only feel they are an important part of your team/success, they must know it. That comes from you.**

I quite often will hear a professional coach say things such as, "As a coach, I try to make everyone on the team feel important". Well, that's all very nice. All your players should *feel* important. But your job is not to make them feel important, it is to make them know and fully understand that they really ***are*** important. In any team sport, not even the greatest players of their generation— Bobby Orr, Wayne Gretzky, Jim Brown, Michael Jordan. Pele —could win a game, much less a championship, on their own. Every player on their squad likely contributed something significant at some point that changed the outcome of a particular game or season. Your players, especially the ones who perhaps play less than the others, need to know clearly they are an invaluable part of any success your team has. And you need to make this understood to all your players, especially those who think they are the straw that stirs the drink.

17) **Are there consequences to your expectations or are they just idle threats?**

In short, we don't need to be a psychologist to understand that if your leadership, rules and expectations are to have any impact, you must be consistent not only in outlining but also in acting upon your expectations. It is imperative that you demonstrate that there are clear consequences. Anything short of real consequences and these smart young people will call your bluff and tune you out—to your face, or behind your back.

18) **If you cannot provide certain expertise find it for your team.**

In this day and age, coaches should be humble enough to recognize they don't know everything. Fitness and nutrition are important, so if this is not an area you have knowledge about, bring in people who do to share information with your athletes. As a coach, if you have no legitimate expertise as a goalie coach, for example, seek out someone who can provide it. Misinformation or poor instruction are probably worse in these instances than no information or instruction at all. Many a young goalie has been harmed mentally and emotionally by a coach who simply does not know what they are talking about.

Michael Langlois, founder of Prospect Communications Inc., is a frequent guest speaker to youth sports organizations. He is the father of four sons and has been involved in youth sports for well over 20 years. He is a recognized expert in the field of communications and issues management. Michael also acts as a private advisor to a wide range of clients in the sports field, including various Associations, elite athletes and National Hockey League coaches. He has written articles and books on youth sports for many years, including, "A Guide to Better Communication for Youth Hockey Coaches". Prospect's web site is located at http://www.prospectcommunications.com