



13 WAYS TO DEVELOP LEADERSHIP SKILLS IN YOUTH ATHLETES

By Dr. Timothy Baghurst, Associate Professor of Health and Human Performance, Oklahoma State University

Is leadership taught or is it something we're born with?

It's a tough question, but it's a little of both. There is no set "leadership" personality type, and leaders come in all shapes and sizes. Some children seem to be natural leaders whereas other children seem to be natural followers.

Often these traits are linked with whether they tend to be introverts or extroverts. The extrovert is often the leader and vice versa especially among young children. But this doesn't mean that if your child is naturally shy he or she can't be a leader. It also doesn't mean that if your child is a "natural" leader that they are going to be an effective leader. As most adults know, there are many people in leadership positions who are terrible leaders.

The good news is that leadership skills can be developed. Here are 13 ways to grow your child's leadership skills.

1) Remember that your child's personality will change.

Many psychologists suggest that we all have a core personality, but that our experiences also change who we are over time.

Your child may not be a leader right now, but that doesn't mean you shouldn't keep trying to build their leadership skills. They just may not be ready yet, or haven't had an opportunity to show their leadership skills.

2) Don't ask your child to be a leader in an unfamiliar environment.

Leadership is linked with self-confidence, and your child will be far more likely to lead in a familiar situation than a novel one. Giving your child added responsibilities in a new situation is just going to make them feel pressured and nervous.

Imagine asking your child to be captain in a sport they have never played before. Compare that with giving them a leadership position in an environment where they are considered knowledgeable or experienced.

3) Encourage them to lead even when not the best player.

A common mistake made by coaches and many others is assuming that the best players or performers should be the leaders. This isn't true. Sometimes the best players are the worst leaders!



4) Let them make decisions for themselves.

We're all familiar with the helicopter parent who "hovers" over their child. Don't be that parent! To become a leader, they need to be empowered to make their own choices.

5) Provide decision-making opportunities.

Allow your child the opportunity to make decisions, even simple ones. For more complex decisions, work with them to decide what options are available and the pros and cons of each option.

6) Teach them to be ethical and moral.

Research suggests that people are more willing to be led if the leader is conscientious, agreeable, humble, and shows integrity and gratitude. These are traits that can be taught or encouraged. What follower wouldn't want to be encouraged, praised, and be treated fairly?

As a parent, set the example at home but also show them examples, ideally in sports, where a leader has demonstrated leadership traits. How can you expect your child to demonstrate leadership skills without seeing them from you as a parent?

7) Give them leadership opportunities at home.

Find ways to build leadership at home by placing your child in positions for leadership and also success (see point 2). It can be things such as cooking a meal or being the leader while playing a board game, for example.

The key is to provide them opportunities to gain experience overseeing or leading others.

8) Encourage academics and reading.

Reading to your child and having your child read to you fosters imagination and creativity. A good leader sometimes needs to find the answer themselves, and if you have not developed that skill in your child, it's not going to magically happen.

Reading encourages imagination and allows your child to place themselves in the story. It can also help teach values and empathy (see point 6).

9) Let your child fail.

Too often, parents want to jump in and solve a problem for their child when the best thing for them is to let the situation unfold so they can experience failure. Think about it like this: if a child is continually praised, coddled, and protected, what happens when the parent is not there and they have to face reality?

Be supportive during failure, but let your child fail when appropriate, and use it as a teaching moment. Ask your child "What can you learn from this experience so that you don't make the same mistakes?"



10) Teach perseverance.

A good leader knows that you have to work hard to accomplish your goals and that you just have to keep at it until success is achieved.

11) Teach positivity.

Similar to perseverance, positive thinking can be taught. It requires you to set the example, but also try to reverse negative thinking. “We were horrible compared to that team. They’re far more experienced, older, and bigger.”

It might be true, and your child’s team might have just experienced a thrashing, but help them find something positive from the situation. It may be the encouragement the team gave each other, their team’s scores, or that your child had improved a particular aspect of their game from practice.

12) Choose coaches and teams wisely in youth sports.

Winning isn’t everything, and it’s important to find coaches that support the development of your child over their win-loss record.

Find a coach willing to let all members play, who lets players try different roles, and allows players to grow through their successes and failures.

13) Don’t force it.

Not everyone is or should be a leader. Some prefer to be followers and that’s perfectly okay. It’s important to remember that while you use these points to build leaderships skills in your child, leave it up to them to determine whether they want to lead.

If they don’t, accept that and don’t push the matter. Later in life they may choose to lead and will then need the skills you’ve helped them develop now.

About TrueSport

TrueSport® is a grassroots movement born and powered by the experience and values of USADA—the U.S. Anti-Doping Agency. The TrueSport® mission is simple and bold: to change the culture of youth sport by providing powerful educational tools to equip young athletes with the resources to build the life skills and core values for lasting success on and off the field.

Interested in learning more? Head over to [TrueSport.org](https://www.truesport.org) for more information and free educational resources on how you can join the TrueSport movement.