

Moral and Character Development

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Do sports build character?

It is often assumed that sport participation facilitates character development (Coakley, 2011). That is, we believe that simply by participating in sport, young athletes naturally learn values such as teamwork, hard work, dedication, and perseverance. The truth is that **sport is a great vehicle to teach these virtues**, but it doesn't happen automatically. Values must be taught.



In order to develop character and behave morally in and outside of sport, athletes need information and instruction. They need coaches and parents to be active educators in the process of fostering character development (Vella, Oades, & Crowe, 2011). Within sport there are many opportunities to develop the values, behaviors, and elements of sport character. *The road to moral and character development in sport is paved by coaches, parents, and adult mentors.*

What is character?

Character is a collection of virtues that can be developed. According to researchers, sport character is made up of the following components:

- **Compassion:** the ability to understand and appreciate other people's feelings (Weinberg & Gould, 2011). A compassionate athlete can put themselves in their opponent's shoes. A major part of compassion is perspective-taking.
- **Fair play:** giving athletes an equitable chance to succeed in competition. Athletes and coaches must understand and adhere to the formal and unwritten rules of sport and observe a spirit of cooperation (Shields & Bredemeier, 1995).
- **Good sporting behavior:** striving to do your best while maintaining a commitment to uphold sport ethics. Good sporting behavior holds that an athlete will try their best to win, but refuses to break rules in order to take advantage of an opponent. Essentially, good sporting behavior consists of: 1) being committed (give a full effort to improve everyday), 2) respecting the game, opponents, and themselves, and 3) having a positive attitude (Vallerand et al., 1997).
- **Integrity:** "the ability to maintain one's morality and fairness coupled with the belief that one can (and will) fulfill one's moral intentions" (Weinberg & Gould, 2011). Basically, an athlete (or coach) believes they have the ability to do the right thing when they encounter a moral grey area.



The Road Map to Facilitating Character Development



Define good sporting behavior in your program

During a team meeting where parents are in attendance, explain important behavioral expectations for athletes and parents.



Create an athlete-centered focus

Focus on the athlete first and winning only as a secondary goal. Make goals to develop the whole individual, rather than simply focusing on skill development.



Model appropriate behaviors & explain why they are appropriate

Be a good role model and act in accordance with the expectations you have outlined. Make time to discuss with athletes why these behaviors are the best option.



Build moral dilemmas and choices into practices and discuss them

Create situations in practices that will challenge athletes to think about the best course of action and discuss it afterwards. For example, "On a routine double play you (the shortstop) throw the ball to the second baseman. During your transition throw to first you miss the base. The umpire calls the runner out. What should you do? What if it was the championship game?"



Teach cooperative learning strategies

Promote a team focus by recognizing the contributions of each team member. For example, acknowledge a good pass that led to an open shot in basketball. Team building activities may also be beneficial.



Create a task oriented and caring environment

Emphasize effort, skill mastery and improvement, support and respect for teammates, and genuine concern for the welfare of others. Reduce focus on external rewards and comparisons to others.



Empower participants

Promote responsibility, accountability, and a sense of belonging. Allow team members to organize sections of practices. Provide leadership opportunities for all. Give athletes developmentally appropriate responsibilities.

Transfer

A word of caution! Just because athletes learn values and virtues in a sport environment, does not mean they will be able to make a connection with a non-sport situation. It is a myth that character automatically transfers to non-sport activities (Shields & Bredemeier, 2008). These connections must be made explicit by coaches—they must be drawn out, discussed, and extended.



Where can I learn more about moral and character development?

Coakley, J. (2011). Youth sports: What counts as "positive development?" *Journal of sport & social issues*, 35(3), 306-324.

Shields, D., & Bredemeier, B. (2008). Sport and the development of character. In L. Nucci, T. Krettenauer, & D. Narvaez (Eds.), *Handbook of moral and character education* (pp.500-519). New York, NY: Routledge.

Vella, S., Oades, L., & Crowe, T. (2011). The role of the coach in facilitating positive youth development: Moving from theory to practice. *Journal of applied sport psychology*, 23(1), 33-48.

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