

Teaching Athletes Life Skills through Sport:
A Practical Plan for Coaches based on Evidence-Informed Strategies

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Sport has been and continues to be a significant context in which athletes can acquire many of the skills necessary to become productive and thriving members of society. Indeed, the importance of developing life skills through sport has been highlighted on numerous occasions by the Singapore Ministry of Education (Koh, Camiré, Bloom, & Wang, 2017). Research has shown that although coaches generally recognise the importance of teaching life skills through sport, they often lack the confidence, and the toolset, to effectively teach this type of material (Koh et al., 2017). The purpose of the present article is twofold. First, we situate, through a brief overview, the concepts of “positive youth development”, “life skills development”, and “life skills transfer”, which are useful in theoretically anchoring the importance of deliberately teaching life skills through sport. Second, we offer evidence-informed strategies designed to help coaches become intentional in their approach to facilitating life skills development and transfer.

Defining Key Concepts

Positive youth development is a strength-based approach to research and practice that seeks to help youth acquire the skills necessary to grow into happy, healthy, productive, and contributory members of society. The defining feature of the positive youth development approach lies in its focus on cultivating the potential of youth through involvement in skill-building activities. This focus is in stark contrast to the traditional, medical-inspired approach where emphasis is placed on reducing undesirable behaviours and treating youth as problems to be managed (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2004). As such, the positive youth development approach, and those who use it, go beyond reactive interventions; rather, they actively promote positive experiences by having youth engage in activities that nurture the acquisition of a wide range of developmental assets, commonly referred to as *life skills* (Catalano et al., 2004). Examples of life skills include communicating effectively, taking initiative,

exhibiting leadership, and setting goals. Given the global popularity of sport and that it acts, in many ways, as a microcosm of wider society, sport represents a key context in which youth can be provided with valuable opportunities to develop life skills. Importantly, as emphasised by Pierce, Gould, and Camiré (2017), for a skill developed in sport to be considered a life skill, it must be successfully transferred and applied beyond sport (i.e., in everyday life situations). Otherwise, if a skill learned in sport is solely applied in the confines of sport, it can only be referred to as a sport skill. Therefore, a fundamental aspect of the life skills acquisition process lies in athletes' ability to transfer/apply in their everyday lives the skills they have learned/refined in sport. Although skill transfer is commonly assumed to be a process that occurs automatically (Camiré, Forneris, Trudel, & Bernard, 2011), it is, in fact, quite complex, with many psychological (i.e., awareness, confidence, support) and contextual (i.e., opportunities for transfer, similarity of contexts) factors known to influence transfer (Pierce et al., 2017). In order to help coaches promote life skills development and transfer, and not leave these two processes up to chance, researchers (Bean, Kramers, Forneris, & Camiré, 2018) have proposed a six level continuum of intentionality (see Figure 1). The six levels represent building blocks for coaches to facilitate life skills development and transfer through sport. Consistent with the continuum's six levels, we propose six evidence-informed strategies to optimise coaching practice.

Evidence-Informed Strategies

To ensure athletes develop life skills, it is imperative that the sporting environment be appropriately planned and structured (Petitpas, Cornelius, Van Raalte, & Jones, 2005). Coaches are unequivocally key agents in the life skills learning process and below are strategies they can use to tailor their own bespoke approach to optimal athlete development through sport.

Strategy 1: Develop a Sound and Coherent Coaching Philosophy

- Invest the time necessary to properly define/refine your coaching philosophy
- Ensure life skills have their rightful place in your coaching philosophy
- Communicate your coaching philosophy to the key agents in your sport environment

As Bean and colleagues (2018) have stated, the “proactive targeting of life skills is fundamentally driven by the philosophy coaches bring to the sport context, which ultimately underpins the types of experiences and opportunities they want to/can create for athletes” (p. 4).

Therefore, as a starting point, coaches must take time to self-reflect as it pertains to their coaching philosophy. For example, coaches can introspect by asking themselves fundamental questions such as: (a) Why do I coach?, (b) What are my coaching objectives?, and (c) What do I want my athletes to learn through sport? (Gould, Medbery, & Collins, 2003). Once defined, to be effective, a coaching philosophy must act as the main compass for behaviour. Simply put, intentions must be consistently linked to actions for a coaching philosophy to be useful. Coaches should invest time in sharing their coaching philosophy with key agents within their sport environment (i.e., athletes, teachers, administrators, and parents) to increase buy-in and invite collaboration. The effective communication of one’s coaching philosophy will help engage stakeholders in the life skills development and transfer process.

Strategy 2: Establish and Maintain Positive Relationships with your Athletes

- Make efforts to foster meaningful relationships with your athletes
- Demonstrate an interest in your athletes’ lives, in and out of sport
- Use bonding activities to nurture strong coach-athlete relationships that build trust

The desire to learn, have fun, and make friends encompass the main reasons why young people are motivated to engage in sport (Rhind & Jowett, 2010). Recently, research has shown

that for the benefits of sport to be optimised, it is vital that all involved feel they can establish and maintain positive relationships (Camiré et al., 2011). Given the important role played by coaches in structuring the youth sport context, it is imperative that they get to know their athletes, in the spirit of being able to adapt their behaviours based on athletes' needs (Pierce et al., 2017; Rhind & Jowett, 2010). Thus, quality coach-athlete relationships require that coaches be positive, demonstrate empathy, and genuinely inquire about what is going on in their athletes' lives. To nurture coach-athlete relationships, coaches should consider, when possible, organising bonding activities, not just at the beginning of the season but throughout the season. As research as repeatedly shown, quality coach-athlete relationships build trust, which indisputably acts as a necessary precursor in enabling athletes to be receptive to their coaches' life skills messages (Camiré et al., 2011).

Strategy 3: Discuss Life Skills with your Athletes

- Define life skills
- Explain the importance of life skills
- Include life skills messages when you teach sport skills.

Coaches play a vital role in helping young athletes understand what life skills are and recognise their importance. To get athletes to buy into life skills messages, coaches must deliberately use a strategic combination of impromptu as well as planned moments to discuss life skills. The logical starting point consists of coaches eliciting discussions aimed at properly defining life skills. For example, Bean and colleagues (2018) recommended that coaches ask their athletes open-ended questions that stimulate reflection: "So today's life skill is leadership. Can anyone tell me what leadership means?" Such discussions should be complemented by introspections that enable athletes to appreciate the importance of life skills in enhancing

performance in and beyond sport. For example, coaches can ask their athletes questions such as: “Now that we’ve defined leadership, can anyone tell me why leadership is important in sport and why it is important in life?” Once life skills have been properly defined and their importance shown, coaches should seek to include life skills messages when they teach sport skills. For example, when teaching a complex drill, coaches can detail the technical aspects of the drill, while also reinforcing the perseverance and work ethic (i.e., life skills) needed to attain mastery.

Strategy 4: Practice Life Skills with your Athletes

- Plan opportunities for your athletes to practice life skills in sport
- Get your athletes to reflect on their experiences practicing life skills

Although discussing life skills is crucial, providing concrete opportunities for experiential learning remains the most effective means by which athletes can internalise life skills (Pierce, Kendellen, Camiré, & Gould, 2018). Coaches have a responsibility to create opportunities for athletes to practice life skills on the playing field (Camiré et al., 2011). Just like sport skills, life skills must be practiced to be effectively internalised in one’s sense of self (Pierce et al., 2018). In concrete terms, coaches should seek to develop practice plans in which a synergy is created between the teaching of sport-specific skills and life skills (Weiss, Bolter, & Kipp, 2016). For example, a water polo coach can teach the importance of teamwork during a passing drill, by having his/her athletes complete five passes before attempting a shot on goal. Within this same passing drill, the coach can also offer athletes opportunities to learn leadership and honesty, by assigning leaders in charge of ensuring the five passes are indeed completed prior to a shot attempt. Once life skills have been practiced, coaches should foster debriefs, during which athletes are encouraged to share their successes and failures in practicing life skills in sport. Such

debriefs have been shown to be highly valuable in athletes' learning process, helping them appreciate, from the perspective of others, how life skills can be successfully applied.

Strategy 5: Discuss Life Skills Transfer with your Athletes

- Talk to your athletes about life skills transfer
- Increase your athletes' awareness of life skills transfer opportunities
- Foster your athletes' confidence for life skills transfer

Life skills transfer inherently refers to the expansion of assets in more than one context. Once internalised, life skills can indeed be generalised for use in contexts extending beyond where they were originally learned. For example, once an athlete has become proficient at working effectively within a team environment in sport (i.e., the life skill of teamwork), he/she should technically be able to transfer his/her teamwork skills for application in contexts extending beyond sport (e.g., at school). Research has shown how coaches can act as powerful catalysts in the transfer process by talking to their athletes about life skills transfer. The key is to get athletes to recognise their own skillset and gain the confidence necessary to apply their skills learned in sport in a variety of situations at school, at work, at home, and/or in the community (Pierce et al., 2017). In concrete terms, awareness can be increased by, for example, describing how focusing skills can be used during matches, but that they are also valuable during school exams. Similarly, coaches can explain to their athletes the similarities that exist between being a leader in sport and being a leader in group projects at school. The key is to increase athletes' confidence for transfer, whereby they make autonomous and conscious decisions to apply in their lives the skills they have learned in sport. Confidence can and should be buffered by a dose of reality, meaning that coaches should help their athletes understand how multiple attempts may be required before a skill learned in sport is efficaciously transferred and applied outside of sport.

In considering both successes and failures, the main point to remember is that coaches must ensure that failures do not lead to athletes losing in confidence, but rather that they cognitively process such experiences as learning opportunities.

Strategy 6: Practice Life Skills Transfer with your Athletes

- Forge links with other important adults in your athletes' lives
- Provide opportunities for your athletes to transfer their life skills beyond sport
- Get your athletes to reflect on their life skills transfer experiences

Practicing the transfer of life skills entails that coaches must work to provide their athletes with concrete opportunities to apply and refine their life skills in contexts extending beyond sport. An important starting point consists of connecting with parents, teachers, and community members with whom athletes interact with on a regular basis. In doing so, coaches can ensure a level of consistency between the life skills taught in sport and the opportunities presented to athletes to apply these life skills outside of sport. There are numerous ways through which coaches can facilitate life skills transfer, such as (a) involving athletes in community service activities or leadership roles (e.g., peer-mentoring) and (b) coordinating team volunteerism efforts (e.g., serving meals at a soup kitchen) within the community (Bean et al., 2018). To help athletes cognitively appraise their life skills transfer experience, coaches can create opportunities for reflection. Such opportunities can be effected through self-evaluation initiatives (e.g., getting athletes to keep a life skills journal throughout the season) or group problem-solving activities (e.g., team debriefs on transfer at the end of practice). Through reflection, athletes can consolidate their learning by evaluating the extent to which they are successful in transferring their life skills and if the outcomes of this transfer are adaptive or maladaptive from a developmental point of view (Pierce et al., 2018).

Conclusion

The six strategies presented are designed to help coaches deliberately target life skills development and transfer. By being deliberate and integrating life skill-building activities in their coaching plan, coaches can put into practice the positive youth development approach and maximise their athletes' developmental potential. It is important to recognise that coaches cannot do it all themselves; that is why they need to link with other adult leaders and together offer athletes an integrated ecosystem in which they can engage in activities that nurture the acquisition of a wide range of developmental assets. Sport has much potential for development but it must be acknowledged as merely one of many contexts (e.g., school, work, home, peer group) in which youth engage in their daily lives. As such, coaches should seek to create a unified front, working with others to optimise positive developmental outcomes, recognising that *it takes a village to raise a child*.

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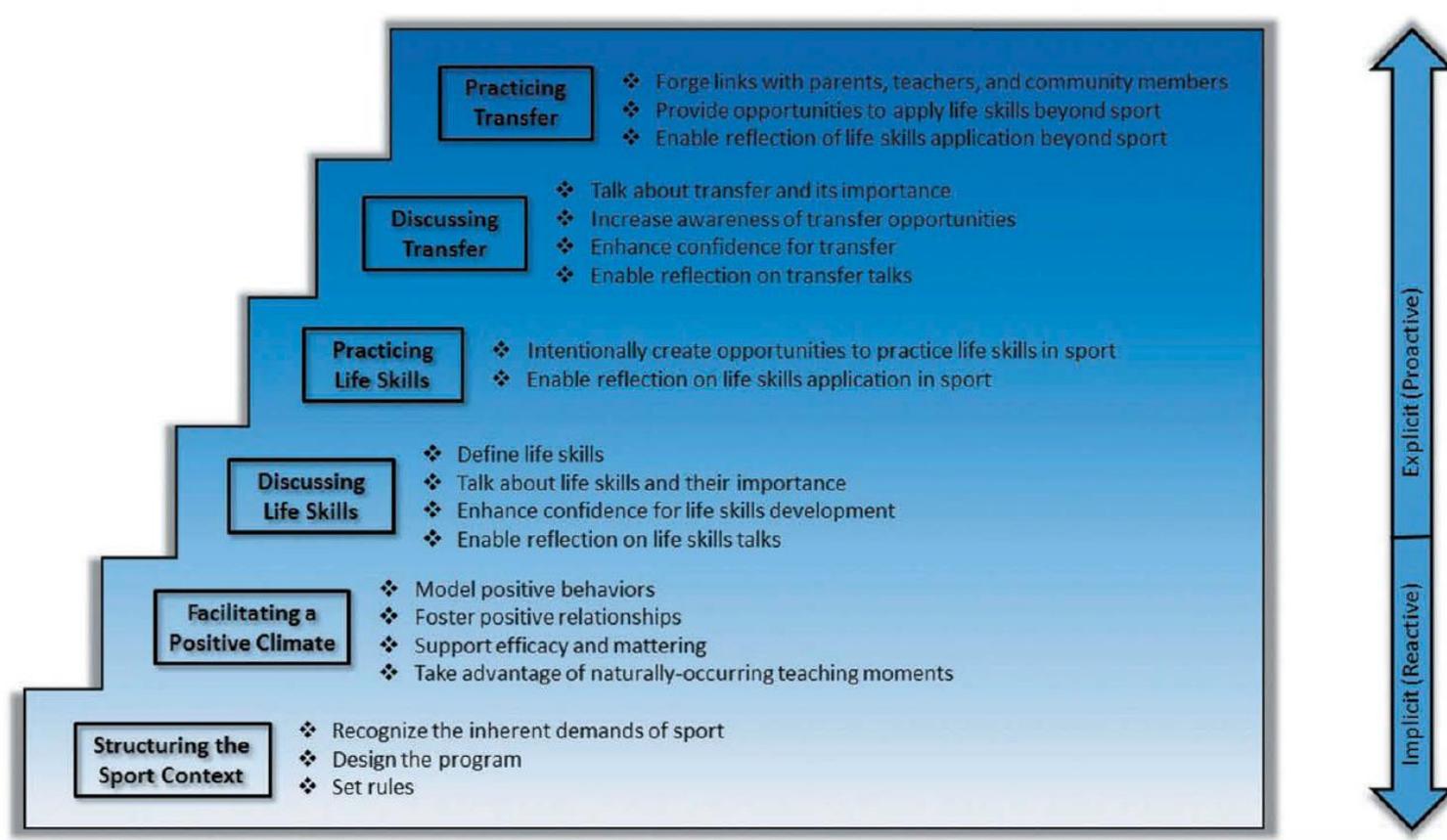


Figure 1. The implicit/explicit continuum of life skills development and transfer.

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