



Coach Resource:

Getting started with Meaningfulness in Youth Sport



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Project Partners



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University of Edinburgh,
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Norwegian School of Sport Sciences,
Norway



Brock University,
Canada

Associated Partners

Our partner coaches worked with children age 6-14 in a variety of team and individual sport settings to try out the strategies outlined in the resource. Examples from their experiences are included. Our partner clubs are:



Ireland

Oola Ladies Gaelic Football Club

www.oolagaa.com



Republic of North Macedonia

Volleyball Club Stip UGD – Stip

www.facebook.com/OkStipUGD?mibextid=ZbWKwL



Norway

Monolitten Sports Club (Floorball/Bandy)

m.facebook.com/profile.php?id=195725277109903



Scotland

Access Parkour

www.accessparkour.com/



Introduction

“If I were a coach, my #1 key performance indicator would be how many kids want to come back to be coached by me next year”

(Buck Anderson, NZRFU Development Officer).

If this quote from Buck Anderson resonates with you, you might begin by asking yourself the following questions:

How can you make children want to come back to be coached by you year after year?

What are your priorities as a coach?

How do you make your coaching inclusive, fun, interesting and engaging to all participants?

This resource will help you answer these questions.

Many of these questions can be addressed by considering the ways in which participants find their youth sport experience meaningful. Whether you find something meaningful is determined by its personal significance. Some of the features that children have identified as enhancing the meaningfulness of their sport experiences include being with friends, having fun, feeling competent, or feeling like the level of challenge is ‘just right’. This resource provides some ideas about how to facilitate these types of experiences for children.

Any coach who works with young children can use this resource regardless of their level of experience. Specifically, this resource is developed for coaches who are looking to develop their practice in ways that are inclusive of all children and allow everyone to participate in ways that work for them – in other words, by creating sporting experiences that keep them wanting to come back.

A brief background on meaningful experiences in sport

What is a meaningful experience?

Meaningful experiences are those that the participant identifies as personally significant. These experiences can be negative or positive. Children identify the meaningfulness of their sport participation by looking back on and evaluating their experiences. For example, it might be in the car on the way home from training that children reflect on how they got on. Some of the 'features' that are important to children are being with friends, having fun, feeling competent by learning skills and improving in their sport, feeling like the challenge is 'just right', or learning something they can apply to their lives outside of sport. The more experiences children have that match their participation preferences, the more likely they will stay involved.

Why a focus on meaningful experiences?

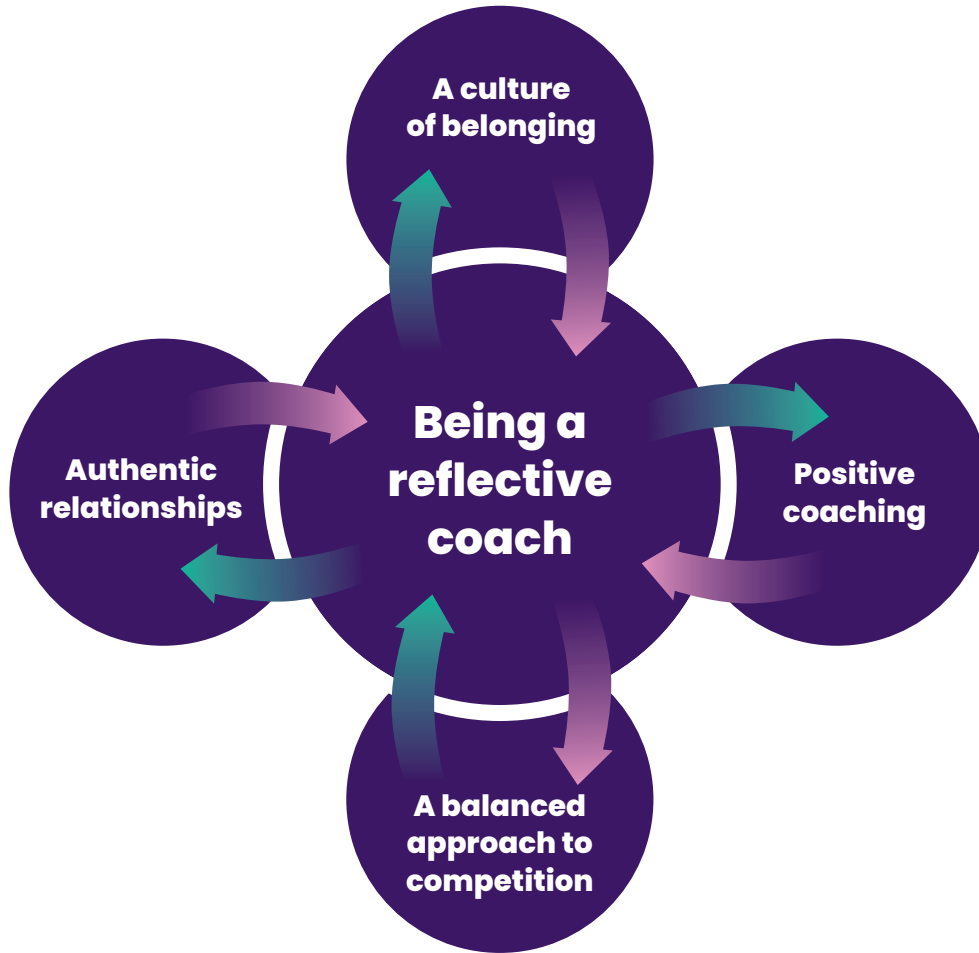
Sometimes, individuals may drop out of sport because their experiences are not a good match for the aspects of sport that they are personally drawn to. For example, if activities are overly competitive, children who are not motivated by competition may disengage or drop out. Paying attention to the quality of everyone's experience provides a more inclusive space for participation.

How can I coach in ways that facilitate meaningful experiences?

By paying special attention to the experience of individual children, knowing and prioritising what is important to them, and involving them in decision-making about their participation. This resource provides ideas on how to get started. Specifically, we identify five principles:

1. Authentic relationships
2. A culture of belonging
3. Positive coaching
4. A balanced approach to competition
5. Being a reflective coach

The relationship between these principles is represented in the following diagram.



You will notice in this visual that Principle 5 is included as both a stand-alone principle while also connecting to each of Principles 1-4. This is because we see reflection as a key coach action in exploring meaningful participation.

In the following sections of the resource, each principle is outlined in detail using some practical examples. While we have numbered the Principles 1-5, you can explore and experiment with the principles as suits your coaching context. There is no 'correct' order to follow. Instead, we suggest starting with a principle that catches your attention, maybe because it resonates with something that is important to your coaching approach or because it fits a specific need you have identified for the children you coach.



Foster AUTHENTIC RELATIONSHIPS with each child

“A good coach can change a game; a great coach can change lives”

(John Wooden)

Why?

Knowing each individual child helps to create positive and meaningful experiences. It is important to get to know the child as a person as well as a participant. View your relationship as ongoing; children's priorities can change rapidly and it is important to keep “getting to know” the children, their needs, and their interests throughout their youth sport experience.

How?

- Design **developmentally appropriate tasks** for the child's age and ability; children can get 'bored' or frustrated if something is too easy or difficult for them.
- Establish positive interactions with **parents/guardians** to gain a deeper understanding of the child's experiences.
- **Build trust** by being open, friendly and consistent: "walk the talk". Match your approaches and priorities to the children's needs and interests.
 - Get to know all the children's names.
 - Engage in regular and informal 1-1 conversations with every child to learn more about them.
- Show you **care** by actively listening and demonstrating that you value ideas the children share.
- **Observe** the children during the session:
 - What do they enjoy? What do they not enjoy?
 - How do they interact with each other?
- Connect your coaching to children's lives outside of the activity to make it **more relevant** for them.



Examples

Coach Kate tries to talk to every child during the session. Last week when she was talking to Mary, Mary said she was bored. Coach Kate realised the activity was too easy for Mary and gave her an extra challenge.

When Coach Mats was talking to Tom's mother, she said Tom likes to play video games. When Coach Mats notices Tom making a big effort or supporting others, Coach Mats congratulates Tom for 'levelling up' like he does in his favourite video game.

The children look forward to coming back each week and really enjoy Coach Nic's sessions, because they appreciate the personal relationship with their coach. Coach Nic makes them feel special when he asks them a question or remembers something they told him previously. They listen carefully and try their best because they really want to impress Coach Nic.

Reflective Prompts



At the end of the session ask the children about their experiences:

- What I liked most during the training session.
- What I didn't like...
- One thing I would change about today is...
- I am proud because of.../not feeling so good because of...

Develop a CULTURE OF BELONGING

“You won’t always remember what you were taught but you will remember how you were made to feel”

(Maya Angelou)

Why?

Just as it is important for the coach to establish a relationship with each player, it is equally important to have players establish positive relationships with each other. Building a sense of community helps children to feel like they belong. Seeing the activity as a part of their identity (e.g. as a ‘dancer’ rather than someone who dances¹), can help children find meaningfulness in their sporting experience. The activity becomes part of who they are and represents a valuable part of their lives. This helps with developing a sustained commitment and affiliation, at the level of the individual and the community (i.e. the sport).



¹Scott Kretchmar has written extensively about meaningfulness and identity related to sport and movement. Suggested starting points to explore his ideas are included in the Additional Reading section

How?

- Use **inclusive** language, where everyone feels welcome.
- Prioritise the development of **positive relationships** amongst players.
 - Help children get to know each other's names.
 - Encourage children to talk to each other during drink breaks and down times.
 - Have some ice breaker activities in your back pocket (e.g. 'Find out something you didn't know about two participants during our break').
 - Organise fun activities not connected directly to the regular sport activities e.g. a quiz or bingo afternoon in the club, celebrating birthdays or a monthly gathering with parents and supporters.
- Promote a **sense of belonging** to the team/club/activity by:
 - Everyone wearing the club shirt/same colour/a similar hat to training.
 - Starting each session with a friendly personal greeting. This could be anything from a simple smile to saying 'hello' using sign language.
 - Arranging to meet to watch an older team compete in the club.
 - Using a **buddy system** where younger participants can chat to older participants at the club.
- Copy some of the good parts of adult sport that help team belonging. For example, give children a 'role' such as refreshments manager/a warm-up coach/a referee...



Reflective Prompts

During the training session:

- Spend some time listening to children share why the club is important to them and what they like about the club.
- Observe the children interacting with each other. What do you see and hear? What indications are there that they feel a sense of belonging to each other and their team/club?

Examples

Oola Ladies Gaelic Football Club (Ireland): We decided to discuss with the children how to support friends/teammates when they need you most; how to be gracious in both victory and defeat; and, finally, to try your best no matter what. We worked with the children to develop a new motto for the season: "Turn up, Train and Try!". To support the teamwork dynamic, we have also been developing our own theme song. This will be created, chosen, and owned by the team to foster a spirit of togetherness. We love to see our players wearing their club colours at training sessions and games. It fosters a sense of camaraderie that is essential as we develop a culture of belonging. You can read more about the Oola story here: <https://meaningfulpe.wordpress.com/2022/10/31/miys-at-oola-ladies-gaelic-football-club-ireland/>

During the season the coaches and parents organise an evening of cooperative fun activities at the training venue. Siblings of team members are invited to participate. Parents attend and help with the organisation of the event. The event concludes with refreshments for everyone, and a chance to chat.

After each week's game the U7 soccer coach sends out a fun match report to all participants and parents. Much of it is based on actual events that happened in the game, including some goals and passes but much of the focus is placed on acts of good sportspersonship, team support, encouragement, responsibility, and acts that reflect the club culture. All participants are referred to at least once in the report, even those who could not make it that week. There is no score provided, nor are there claims of victory or loss in the report; instead there is a sense of fun and playfulness to the extent that it serves as a bedtime story that participants, siblings, and parents can engage with. It takes the coach about half an hour to do each week but is something that everyone on the team recalls fondly week to week and at the end of the season.

POSITIVE Coaching

“You get the best effort from others not by lighting a fire beneath them, but by building a fire within”

(Bob Nelson)

Why?

Developing a positive culture is important for motivation, engagement and participation. Creating experiences that children are consistently drawn to helps them see sport as a meaningful part of their everyday lives. A positive sporting culture is purposefully created; it does not happen by accident. When children see their coach making positive actions, they are likely to invest more effort and enjoy participation more. The quality of children's experiences matter.

How?

Make sure children feel like they matter and are important by involving them in decision-making about their experiences.

- Model positivity in the actions you take, the words you use, and in your body language.
- **Listen** to the children.
 - Be responsive.
 - Don't ignore the groans. Talk through them and figure out together how to make activities and experiences better.
- Give children small **responsibilities and roles**.



- Give the children **choices**.
 - Let the children choose some activities (e.g. warm-up and cool-down activities or free choice of activity). Provide a range of differentiated activities children can choose from, even if they want to do the same one every week.
 - Let the children decide when to switch between activities.
 - Let the children decide some elements of the task, for example, the distance to move, the size of the target, the number of opponents.
 - Provide some choice for who children work with in tasks. Be sure to mix this up.
- Encourage the children to **help each other and cooperate**.
 - Assign children to a specific group for an extended period.
 - Have the children work in groups of three where one child observes and gives feedback to the others.
 - Outline a problem and let the children figure out a solution.
- Help children to **value intrinsic** rather than extrinsic rewards.
 - Combine little occasional rewards with lots of encouragement – carrot over stick.
 - Encourage children to invest in their sport for feelings of achievement and perseverance related to effort, and the development of positive relationships.
- Be **consistent** in promoting a culture of fair play. The culture should simply be ‘the way we do things here’ (Sport Scotland).



Reflective Prompts

- **How do you create space for the children to reflect on the meaningfulness of what they are learning/ practicing?**
 - **Invite children to reflect at the end of the session to consider their learning and how they are progressing towards goals.**
 - **Encourage the children to ask questions about what they are doing and learning.**
- **Identify at least one life skill (e.g. compassion, empathy, resilience, respecting the rights of others, conflict resolution) that the children have developed through your coaching. Explore this idea through questioning and discussion.**

Examples

Every week Jim comes to training with a plan for activities. Each week towards the end of the session Jim gives the children a choice. He presents two activities; the children vote by raising hands to pick one. This is the children's favourite part of the session each week. The children get so excited about having a say in what they do.

Beth has a list of the actions she is looking for from her participants: Listening skills, effort, encouragement, helping others, personal improvement. She shares this list with the children at the beginning of each session. Each session she awards a child for excelling in one of these areas; children do not know what the award is for in a given week until the announcement of the winner at the end of training. Beth makes sure everyone wins from time to time. Most importantly, when the award is announced the other children celebrate the winner with '3 cheers' and a handshake.

A child on Hassan's Under-8 team enthusiastically challenged an opponent who had made a break down the field. It resulted in a hard but fair physical confrontation that was completely within the rules of the game. Unfortunately, the opponent fell awkwardly and was hurt. Play stopped. Because the opposing coach was helping the injured child, Hassan gathered children from both teams and talked them through ways to deal with this situation in a "sporting way". This resulted in everyone clapping the injured child off the field. Hassan also suggested to his player that she go and ask her opponent if she was ok and to shake her hand or give her a high 5. She was a little uncomfortable about this, so Hassan said that they would both go together, and Hassan would help her through the situation. He told her how proud he was of her actions and that meant more to him than her scoring a goal.

A balanced approach to COMPETITION

Keep competition in perspective:

“It’s not whether you win or lose but how you play the game”

Why?

Competition is a defining feature of sport, but it results in winners and losers. Sometimes, **more can be lost than gained for children when competition is over-emphasised**. For example, an over-emphasis on competition has been cited as a key reason for many children dropping out of sport. Competition is present in both matches/events and training sessions and needs to be managed closely in both contexts to make it meaningful. A balanced approach to competition is recommended as its negative effects for some children can outweigh its benefits for others. However, there are also some children who are highly motivated by competition and it is important that their perspectives are considered. It is important to note that many children do not derive the same enjoyment from competition that many adults seem to.



How?

- Instead of framing competition as an outcome (i.e. win-loss), try to emphasize it as a process, seeking teachable moments from the competitive experience. Ask children what it felt like to play under pressure, to try maintaining composure, to persevere through adverse circumstances, or to treat your opponents with dignity.
- Apply strategies to help manage a balanced approach to competition, such as:
 - helping children identify 'just right' challenges to support improvement.
 - try to include as many cooperative activities as competitive activities in a practice session
 - Create a system that rewards things other than scoring points (e.g. 'spirit points' used in Ultimate Frisbee), such as a positive attitude or displays of sporting behaviour.
 - As much as possible, try to ensure that teams are evenly balanced and emphasise collective effort over the outcome. Young children do not enjoy being thrashed by their opposition; nor do they enjoy thrashing their opposition.
 - Set up two activities, one competitive and one not: offer children a choice of which to play.
- Communicate to parents that participation and effort are prioritized over winning. The car ride home is cited as a particularly stressful place for many youth sport participants. See this article and video for some ways that parents can focus on the positive aspects of a child's game or practice: https://www.omha.net/news_article/show/1052407



Reflective Prompts

- **How important is competition to you? Now ask your players the same question. And then ask their parents. How do these opinions differ?**
- **In order to place an emphasis on participation and effort over outcome, consider how you support children set individual goals for improvement.**
- **How do you set your own goals in order to focus on participation and effort over outcome?**

Examples

Kristian (North Macedonia): When it comes to working with children and young adults, the main principles of work in our club are Fun, Friendship (socialization), and Enjoyment. In these terms, when it comes to competition, we prefer using a balanced approach, where the emphasis is not on competition and the match result but more on learning behaviors that will support team spirit, responsibility, belonging to the team, respect for the opponent, and learning how to lose and win. You can read more about Kristian's approach here:

<https://meaningfulpe.wordpress.com/2022/10/24/miys-at-stip-ugd-volleyball-club-north-macedonia/>

Carol coaches the U10s. She notices that sometimes children disengage during the session if they are losing during the small-sided games. Carol introduced 'Power Play' to increase engagement. If a team goes down by a clear 3 goals, e.g. 3-0, 4-1, etc., the losing team have an opportunity to bring another participant into the match. If the score returns to less than the 3-goal difference, the team takes off a participant. It doesn't have to be the last participant that came on. If a team goes a further 3 goals behind, they can add another participant, to create a greater numerical advantage. Example from

<https://www.thecoachinglab.org/post/youthhockeyformats>

At an Access Parkour session the children are learning to jump and land safely. As the children develop this skill emphasis is placed on supporting each other and challenge by choice. This means that children work in pairs to observe each other and offer advice. To offer challenge by choice children are provided with a range of options of where to start their jump with ranges in height and distance from start to end point. This approach supports children to identify 'just right' challenge and increase and decrease the level of challenge depending on how confident they feel. It also reflects a type of internal competition, where the aim is being the best you can be, rather than the best in the club.

Being a Reflective coach: REFLECTION changes everything

“Ten years of coaching without reflection is simply one year of coaching repeated ten times”

(Gilbert & Trudel, 2006)

Why?

Regularly reflecting on experiences supports coaches to be mindful of the influence they have on the young people they are working with. In reflecting on your coaching, you should consider the role you play in children’s physical, social, and emotional development. Reflecting on your coaching can help you gain confidence and deepen your understanding of coaching, learning and the young people you work with.

Reflection is a key activity for every coach: **“We do not learn from experience but from reflecting on experience”** (John Dewey)





This visual shows how reflection is both a standalone coach action, as well as a part of the other four principles. For example, how do you build relationships? How do you promote feelings of belonging to the group? Are you positive in your words and actions? Do all children get opportunities to achieve and feel successful? In each principle, reflective prompts help you to reflect on your coaching approach. Here we suggest some coach actions to include reflection as a part of your overall approach to coaching.

How?

Reflecting in-session

- Observe the children – what does their body language say?
- Listen to the children – what are they feeling?
- Ask the children – is this working?

Reflecting post-session

- Self-reflection – keep a coaching diary/scrapbook.
- Ask parents for feedback – formal and informal.
- Chat to a coaching buddy; what are we doing well?

Informal reflection can often be as valuable as ‘formal’ reflection – Remember to focus on the positives: in terms of your actions and those of the children.

Gathering Children's Perspectives

Involving children in reflection on their experiences can help them to make sense of what happened as well as help them identify features of participation that are important to them. One way of supporting children to reflect and gather feedback from them is through view templates (Wall and Higgins, 2006). In the image here, you can see speech bubbles and thought bubbles; the thought bubble enables children to reflect on what is happening for them, what they are learning and the speech bubble enables children to reflect on others, what they see happening around them. The view template can be created using photographs from a session or cartoon images with speech and thought bubbles added in. It can be printed and completed at the end of a session or shared via email and sent back to the coach.



Reflective Prompts

- **At the end of the season consider 'Are the children I coach having meaningful experiences in sport?' Make some plans for next season based on your responses.**
- **How has engagement with the reflective prompts in each of principles 1-4 helped me to understand how children experience meaningfulness in my coaching sessions?**
- **How else might I gather feedback to reflect on how I can promote meaningful experiences in my coaching?**
- **Who can you talk to in working to develop meaningfulness in your coaching? What supports are available from your organisation to help make your coaching more positive?**

Examples

John (Scotland): We set up a specific space for coaches to reflect on their practice. This was simply a Whatsapp group where coaches would record voice notes or post after their classes summing up their experience while trying to answer two questions:

- What went well?
- What could have been improved?

This strategy quickly gained more buy-in from the coaches as they were able to reflect at their own pace and in their own way with looser guidance. They also saw value in listening to each other's experiences and struggles. For busy professional coaches, this has been much easier to integrate. You can read more in John's blog post here: <https://meaningfulpe.wordpress.com/2022/10/17/miys-at-access-parkour-edinburgh/>

Petter (Norway): When starting to explore the principles, I interpreted each and one of them to be separated from one another...I currently recognize the principles as being connected and that 'Principle 5 Being a reflective coach' acts as a facilitator and provides the foundation for the other principles. For example, as a way to become a reflective coach, I have asked the players to provide feedback on my coaching while writing notes on each player based on chatting with and deliberately observing them. You can read more about Petter's blog here: <https://meaningfulpe.wordpress.com/2022/11/08/miys-at-monolitten-innebanady-club-in-norway/>

Mary and Peter are coaches with the Under-8 team when they are gathering equipment at the end of each coaching session, they have a quick conversation about what they can remember, using these prompts: “What went well today?” and “What will we change in the next session?”. As they travel home, they each make voice notes on their phones about their conversation. These notes then help them to plan the next session.

At a Parkour session, having been working intently with the children to practice travelling over objects, Andrew decides to take a step back from directly interacting to observe the children. He scans the space observing each child to see how they interact with the objects and with each other. He then transfers his gaze to how they are travelling over the objects; where their hands, arms, legs and feet are positioned. Finally, he looks at body language to identify who is engaged or disengaged. From this observation Andrew can then return to direct interaction with specific children to engage in further conversation, offer support or encouragement.

Read more:

Free open access

- www.MeaningfulPE.wordpress.com
- www.icoachkids.eu
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- Wall, K., & Higgins, S. (2006). Facilitating and supporting talk with pupils about metacognition: A research and learning tool. *International Journal of Research and Methods in Education*, 29(1), 39–53.

Additional Reading

Fletcher, T., Ní Chróinín, D., Gleddie, D. and Beni, S. (2021) *Meaningful Physical Education*, London: Routledge.

Gilbert, W. (2016). *Coaching better every season: A year-round system for athlete development and program success*. New York: Human Kinetics.

Kretchmar, R. S. (2000). Movement subcultures: Sites for meaning. *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation & Dance*, 71(5), 19–25.

Kretchmar, R. S. (2000). Moving and being moved: Implications for practice. *Quest*, 52(3), 260–272.





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- Monolitten Innebandy Club: Petter Storaas
- Stip UGD Volleyball Club: Kristian Risteski

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