

Identifying Instructional Practices Employed by Massachusetts Special Olympics Hall of Fame Coaches:

Recommendations for coach education programs

Recommendation #1: Include encouragement in coach education materials as a critical, independent instructional behavior and state the following reasons to frequently encourage athletes with intellectual disabilities:

- a. To ignite athletes' interest in a task or skill.
- b. To encouraging athletes' effort.
- c. To encourage athletes' desire to learn.
- d. To maintain athlete retention.

Recommendation #2: Provide coaches with suggestions of how to encourage athletes by discussing instructional practices observed by participants of the current study:

- a. Create competitive scenarios for athletes during drills and other activities.
- b. Reference local sports teams and athletes.
- c. Use encouraging phrases like "well done" and "I know you can do it. Praise effort when athletes are practicing and refining skills.
- d. Use gestures like high-fives and fist-bumps to encourage and praise effort when athletes are practicing and refining skills.

Recommendation #3: Explain that positive corrections are informative, supportive forms of feedback that motivate and educate athletes. The hallmark of delivering positive corrections is answering “why” in order to encourage athletes’ learning (*why* the initial action was incorrect; *why* the correction may help improve the athlete’s performance). Provide coaches with the following feedback model to facilitate their delivery of corrections:

Step 1. Obtain proximity control (reduce the distance between coach and athlete) by approaching the athlete.

Step 2. Solicit the athletes’ attention by saying the athlete’s first name or nickname.

Step 3. Give a quick explanation of the incorrect action.

Step 4. Give a quick correction accented with cue words.

Step 5. Explain why the correction would help performance.

Step 6. Check for understanding by asking open-ended questions or requesting skill demonstration.

Step 7. End feedback with an encouraging phrase or gesture.

Recommendation #4: To facilitate athletes’ understanding of feedback, suggest coaches work visual references into positive corrections by:

- a. Asking athletes to think of a peer who is notably talented at the skill being corrected.
- b. Asking athletes to watch a peer demonstrate a skill while the coach calls out important skill cues as they are performed.

Recommendation #5: Suggest that coaches differentiate instruction if they work in sport environments where communication is challenging (i.e. aquatics environments). To differentiate instruction, coaches can employ a mixture of visual, verbal, and kinesthetic instructional methods to communicate information to athletes. For example, when teaching an aquatics athlete the crawl stroke, a coach can move her arms (visual) in the crawl stroke pattern while saying the steps and/or skill cues (verbal). Additionally, the coach can move her athletes' arms through the motions of the stroke (kinesthetic). Differentiated instruction can increase coaches' chances of effectively communicating with athletes by crossing numerous learning style "bridges" at one time, versus depending solely on catering to one learning style bridge (which may be blocked due to the sport environment, such as the auditory bridge in a loud gym or the visual bridge in a pool).

Recommendation #6: Following initial instruction of a sport skill or concept, coaches can use the following types of tactical and technical cues to simplify feedback and make communication more efficient:

- a. Verbal cues: simple, short phrases that include sport-specific terminology.
- b. Gesture cues: coach-demonstrated physical movements that remind athletes of the correct way to perform a skill (often paired with verbal cues).
- c. Touch cues: taps on the athletes' body to elicit movement.

Recommendation #7: Recommend coaches maximize time on task during practices in order to provide athletes with ample opportunity to practice their sport skills.

Recommendation #8: Recommend coaches minimize athletes' activity wait time in order to maximize time on task and decrease the risks of athlete boredom and demotivation. The following suggestions can be provided to coaches as ways to decrease activity wait time:

- a. Provide more athletes with equipment.
- b. Split the practice space into smaller sections to run station activities.
- c. Increase the number of lines available to athletes during drills.
- d. Keep athletes on the same scrimmage teams throughout the season to minimize transition time going into scrimmages.
- e. Maintain a high coach/volunteer to athlete ratio in sports involving dangerous skills or interactions with potentially dangerous equipment.
- f. Use all of the allocated practice space.

Recommendation #9: Recommend coaches periodically allow athletes time to rest their bodies and minds by providing settling time. Settling time can be given in the form of water breaks; suggestions that athletes remove themselves from practice for a few minutes; or by allowing athletes to independently decide to remove themselves from practice for a few minutes.

Recommendation #10: Recommend coaches practice the KISC principle when delivering instruction to athletes: Keep It Simple, Coach! To do this, instructional content must be pared down to include only essential skill components. Details that are not critical to skill performance, such as personal anecdotes about using the skill, should not be included in instruction delivery.

Recommendation #11: Suggest coaches practice autonomy-supportive coaching by:

- a. Giving athletes choices.
- b. Giving athletes opportunities to demonstrate initiative.
- c. Explaining why corrections are being made when delivering positive corrections.
- d. Showing concern for athletes in and out of the sport environment.
- e. Promoting a task-oriented sport environment.

Recommendation #12: Suggest coaches promote athletes' roles as critical contributors by:

- a. Listening to and accepting athletes' suggestions.
- b. Assigning athletes responsibilities.
- c. Asking athletes to evaluate the condition of practice equipment.

Recommendation #13: Suggest coaches promote excellence among athletes by:

- a. Setting high performance goals.
- b. Communicating high and reasonable performance standards.
- c. Only giving praise when it is deserved.

Recommendation #14: Suggest coaches promote feelings of relatedness by:

- a. Emphasizing use of first names among coaches, athletes, and volunteers.
- b. Encouraging athletes to cheer for teammates during practices, scrimmages, and formal competitions.
- c. Inquiring about athletes' feelings (e.g. "Are you thirsty?" or "Are you scared?").

Recommendation #15: Instructional practices play critical roles in sports coaching; however, it is important to note they are contextually dependent. What works for a Little League coach may not work for a collegiate coach. Likewise, what works for a school-sponsored middle-school coach may not work for a Special Olympics coach. While coaches of Little League, collegiate, school-based and Special Olympics teams may be aware of a similar “tool kit” of instructional practices, they must prioritize the use of these practices according to the needs of their athletes, as well as the priorities and objectives of their organization. Just as a carpenter must decide which tools to hold in his or her hand, which tools to provision in his or her tool belt, and which tools to keep in his or her toolbox, a coach must determine which instructional tools to keep close at hand, which tools to keep on reserve (or, tools kept in the tool belt), and which tools to save for seldom use (or, tools kept in the toolbox). Based on results from this study, the following recommendations for the prioritization of NCACE-grounded instructional practices can be made for Special Olympics coaches. These recommendations can also be applied to community- or school-based coaches working with athletes who have intellectual disabilities.

Tools in hand, tools in the belt, tools in the box: a Special Olympics coach's toolkit

Research-based recommendations for prioritization of NCACE-grounded instructional practices

Tools in hand (frequent use)

Encouragement: Verbal and nonverbal methods used to motivate athletes, praise effort, and praise achievement

Positive corrections: Verbal and nonverbal communications to athletes requesting corrections to behaviors or technical and tactical skills that are delivered in supportive, motivating ways

Technical and tactical cues: Short verbal and nonverbal phrases or actions that remind the athlete of important elements of a technical or tactical skill

Differentiated instruction (aquatics): Use of multiple teaching strategies in order to support a range of learning styles (i.e. kinesthetic, verbal, visual, and auditory)

Tools in the tool belt (occasional use)

Differentiated instruction (non-aquatics): Use of multiple teaching strategies in order to support a range of learning styles (i.e. kinesthetic, verbal, visual, and auditory)

Attention: Verbal and nonverbal methods used to elicit athletes' attention prior to delivering instruction or feedback

Checking for understanding: Assessment measures employed to gauge athletes' comprehension of information

Peer demonstration: Requests for athletes to perform skills or drills in front of their teammates

Games-based learning: Use of a games approach to reinforcing sport-specific technical and tactical knowledge

Tools in the toolbox (rare use)

Negative corrections: Verbal and nonverbal communications to athletes requesting corrections to behaviors or technical and tactical skills that are delivered as punishment or result in athletes' demotivation

Rewards: Intrinsic or extrinsic rewards used to promote motivation, performance, and learning