


How to inspire good behaviour in your sessions

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Infographic



- **Indiscipline can wreak havoc with a coach's plans and be the source of frequent headaches.**
- **The transition period between activities is a prime time for breakdowns in behaviour.**
- **Set the ground rules before the start of training.**
- **Bear in mind your players are there to have fun so don't be too draconian in your approach, and remember that children are still developing emotionally and socially.**
- **Human behaviour is learned. Like developing a new skill, it can take time.**
- **Self-reflection after sessions is a good habit to get into.**

You cannot overestimate the importance of behaviour management in sports coaching.

Achieving positive behaviour in your sessions should be one of your primary goals. The calibre of coach you aspire to become will be dependent on you forming and retaining a convivial working relationship with your players.

If you were to ask the question '[What makes a good coach?](#)', ranking high on the list of answers would be: the ability to communicate effectively; understanding the importance of [planning and preparation](#); the ability to conduct engaging sessions; ensuring training is carried out in a safe environment.

Disruptive behaviour is the spanner in the works that can affect your ability to successfully meet these goals. It wrecks the stable environment that is conducive to learning.

Bored silly

Nicky Fuller is an expert in behaviour management who works freelance for a number of governing bodies, predominantly golf, equestrian and netball.

She has written guides for a number of sports organisations and is the co-author of sports coach UK's *Positive Behaviour Management in Sport* book.

She emphasises that creating the optimum environment for facilitating effective coaching requires a skilful approach. Unwanted behaviours – often the source of headaches for coaches who are struggling to master behaviour management – must be managed before they disrupt a session and have a negative impact on a coach's plans.

Forewarned is forearmed, and as any boy scout will tell you, it is important to 'be prepared' and adequate preparation can stave off the onset of

disruptive behaviour.

'If you analyse when unwanted behaviour happens, you will find that it most often occurs when there is a break or coaches are talking for too long, maybe explaining the new drill or set-up – those transitional periods,' explains Nicky.

'That is largely because planning isn't quite as slick as it might be. Sometimes, it's because coaches simply haven't explained how they want the young people to behave in those transitional periods.'

Planning and preparation, then, are keys to a successful session, while boredom should become the taboo word for every coach.

Children get agitated when their interest levels drop off and this encourages a breakdown in behaviour.

As an avoidance strategy, coaches should plan the make-up of their smooth-flowing sessions in detail and set the ground rules before the start of training, explaining what behaviour is unacceptable.

But avoid reeling off a long list of commandments – thou shalt not impose too many [dos and don'ts](#) on your players! After all, this is their social time and they are there to [have fun](#).

'Coaches should remember children have got a lot of adrenaline running around their bodies because they're physically active, they're excited, and they're with friends,' says Nicky. 'It's not school, and actually, one of the big reasons they come is because it's about friendship and enjoying themselves.'

So don't play the strict schoolteacher. It's good to talk, but not to shout; it's good to listen, not to ignore; and it's good to offer encouragement, not criticism. Draconian coaching methods might have their place at elite level – although even that philosophy is now being heavily challenged – but not in the grass-roots game.

Attention: important message

While in her professional career Nicky works with coaches and in coach development, in her voluntary life she runs a junior netball club.

She works predominantly with the under-19s and under-16s at Flames Netball Club – who she coaches at the Craven Arms Community Centre near Ludlow in Shropshire. And due to the under-11s coach being on maternity leave, she has recently taken on responsibility for a third age group.

From a hands-on point of view, she is able to put her behaviour management techniques into use on a daily basis.

And there is one overriding message Nicky is eager to convey to coaches struggling with indiscipline: human behaviour is learned, just like a skill is learned.

Write this down, in capitals, underline it, add a few exclamation marks – now, cut it out and stick it on your laptop as a constant reminder.

'Just because we tell a child once, for example, to hold the balls and not bounce them does not mean to say they have learned that lesson. That is so, so important. From a holistic perspective of coaching, unless you get that, you won't understand about integrating behaviour development alongside whatever sport development it is you are involved in coaching.'

What is normal?

Coaches' unwarranted expectations can often be at the root of their problems with misbehaviour.

Nicky explains that behaviour is subjective. What you may think is bad behaviour, others might think is normal.

'People who are not teachers – and even some teachers – assume that children understand behavioural expectations. And yet most adults will enter a coaching environment with different expectations of behaviour than perhaps their colleagues do,' she says.

'First of all, **why** should children understand behavioural expectations? And, secondly, and most importantly, if you are a coach you have to understand that children will take time to learn the behavioural expectations that you have.'

'If you coach players how to dribble once, you wouldn't expect them to instantly be able to do that in every scenario. Likewise, if you tell them once to be quiet when you are talking, you shouldn't expect them to be able to do it every time from that point on.'

Self-assessment time

Nicky admits that her in-depth knowledge of the subject has been a huge help with her netball coaching, enabling her to develop her own skills while providing valuable guidance to other coaches within the club in her role of mentor.

She tells me that, just days before our chat, a coach had approached her at a low ebb after enduring a particularly difficult session.

'She asked for my advice after some of the girls began to get a bit giddy and started making animal noises. They got loud, raucous and were falling about laughing. She was upset with herself for shouting at one of them and displaying behaviour she didn't want them to see, but didn't know how to handle the situation.'

'I asked her, if it happened again, what she would do differently? She said she would probably get them all to sit down, pull the ringleader out of the group and have a quiet chat with her on her own, and that would probably have been enough.'

'That is absolutely the right thing to do, and what she recognised is that sometimes when you are a new coach and you are trying to manage the group and manage the session, your brain hasn't got enough capacity to also think, "How do I manage behaviour?". You end up getting frustrated that it isn't going smoothly and inevitably shout at somebody.'

The importance of [self-reflection](#) and [self-awareness](#) shines out from this anecdote. The fact that the coach recognised yelling had an impact on the child, who ‘went really quiet for the rest of the session’, is important.

Some coaches might reflect on the incident and think, ‘Job done, that shut them up,’ whereas she was sensitive enough to recognise that the child’s quietness wasn’t good behaviour management. Her response was enough to bring about an impact, only not the sort of impact she wanted.

We have touched on the importance of preparation and planning, avoiding boredom and the need for self-reflection, but there are so many more techniques coaches should be adding to their armoury as weapons to tackle those individuals who have a negative impact on their sessions.

Here are a few you should add to your repertoire:

- Don’t set unrealistic challenges that could lead to frustration.
- Be fair and consistent with any forfeits imposed for bad behaviour.
- Familiarise yourself with your club’s own [code of conduct](#), if it has one.
- Ensure activities challenge and engage players.
- Get to know your players by name as quickly as possible.
- A friendly handshake at the start of a session or even a smile can make a big difference to the positivity of the group.
- Show respect to your players, and you will earn their respect in return.
- Mind your language: calling someone ‘A pain in the backside’, telling a player to ‘Wake up, lazy’ or sarcastic comments like ‘What’s that supposed to be?’ will likely have ramifications. They might argue back, and you will certainly lose their respect.
- When dividing the team into small-sided groups, separate the two best friends who enjoy chattering to each other or the pair who don’t get on to avoid potential disruption from occurring.
- Avoid shouting at players before they have done anything wrong.
- Provide [feedback](#) but also ask for feedback after every session.
- Instead of meting out an immediate punishment, explain why you are angry and how the player could have handled the situation differently. Helping people understand the consequences of their actions could help prevent a repeat occurrence.
- Resentment will fester if players think you are singling them out for punishment. Make the behaviour unacceptable, not the person.

You should aspire to be a good role model to your students. If you can achieve that, then the three Rs – resentment, rebellion and rudeness – should be kept safely in check.

Look at it this way

A lot of coaches fall into the trap of believing that the child is always to blame for the unwanted behaviour.

But when you ask the children, they tell a different story.

That failure to accept responsibility can prevent coaches from getting that all-important good rapport with their players.

Take off the blinkers and strive to become a more observant coach. Try looking at the problems you encounter from a child’s perspective.

‘For me, managing behaviour is a high-ordered skill because, as a coach, you absolutely need to be alert to everybody in your group,’ says Nicky. ‘I don’t mean alert in terms of a readiness to pounce on them if they even squeak, but alert to their mood and how they came into the session.’

‘It is important to be highly observant and aware because that gives you an idea of where young people are and how their behaviours might begin to evolve through a session, and how you might group a session.’

‘Working with under-11s is different to how I’d work with under-16s but the same principles run all the way through.’

And remember, it is normal for children to lark around as they learn social rules and develop emotionally.

The key is to understand at what point you need to intervene.

‘It is not a case of intervening as soon as you see someone step out of line. It’s not as simple as that,’ says Nicky. ‘People have to experiment with different methods and reflect back on it.’

Decent human beings

For sure, managing positive behaviour with all individuals across a variety of age groups and performance levels is not going to happen overnight. But paying more than just lip service to the techniques included in this article should at least set you on the right path.

As Nicky eloquently summarises below, the essential role of a coach isn’t just to improve an individual’s [talent](#) and skills and help in their pursuit of happiness through playing sport. A good coach will also develop their players’ emotional and social competence through years of nurturing to help sculpt them into decent citizens.

‘You wouldn’t necessarily say, particularly at a younger age, “Look at these superbly behaved children,” but I think what we turn out later on in life is kids who have got behaviours they can be proud of. They can take responsibility for themselves, they can work as a team, they have high standards of personal discipline,’ says Nicky.

‘Those are the sorts of behaviour that we say, collectively as a club, are really important and are what we work on.’

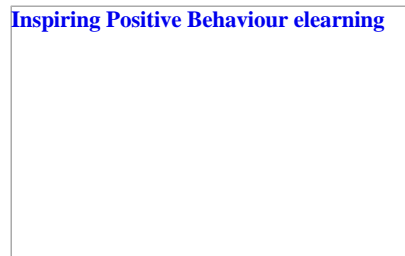
‘Some of our kids are going to be good recreational netball players. We hope they continue playing netball later in life but we can’t guarantee that as a junior club. But more than anything, it is about them being good human beings when they leave our club, possessing the behavioural skills they will need to represent themselves well.’

‘That is our underpinning philosophy as a club. It is important to us to know that our children will grow up understanding the need to knuckle

down and work hard when it is required, when to chat and when to listen, will get to places on time and will take the right kit. But you have to work hard as a coach to ensure you achieve that.'

Next Steps

UK Coaching (formerly Sports Coach UK) has produced an ['Inspiring Positive Behaviour in Sport'](#) eLearning module, which will equip you with the confidence and techniques to combat challenging situations.



Next Steps

Coaching in Primary Schools Portal

One setting in which coaches can be particularly challenged by behaviour management is the Primary School environment. Coaches are often faced with larger group sizes than they are accustomed to, some challenging spaces and facilities and children that may not have had positive previous experiences in PE and school sport. It is important that coaches are as prepared as they can be for this environment and understand the needs and experiences of the children they may be working with. The UK Coaching [Coaching in Primary Schools Portal](#) provides a wealth of free information on this topic.

1st4sport PE Confidence series

1st4sport have developed a new eLearning suite called [PE: Confidence](#). The courses are for teaching staff in primary schools, who would like to learn tactics to overcome the challenges of teaching PE. And for coaches who would benefit from learning strategies and techniques to deal with the challenges of coaching in a school environment. You 'learn by doing' by making decisions in real-life online scenarios and seeing the consequences of those decisions. One of the courses in this suite that might interest readers of this blog in particular is the [PE Confidence: Managing Behaviour in PE](#). All courses in the series are signposted to in the UK Coaching in Primary Schools Portal mentioned above.

This blog is also available as a podcast on a number of platforms including iTunes. [Listen here.](#)

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