



Made  
to Play



# COACHING FOR BELONGING PLAYBOOK



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# ABOUT THE COACHING FOR BELONGING PLAYBOOK

This playbook was created by Nike and informed by dozens of partner coaches, athletes and organizations around the world in order to help adults see the power and importance of coaching for belonging. We thank the following people and organizations for sharing their stories, expertise and advice on how to create a future of sport where every kid belongs.

This content is also informed by Nike Made To Play resources, which are available to coaches everywhere at [nike.com/made-to-play/coach](https://nike.com/made-to-play/coach). Look for these guides and resources to learn more.



[Coaching Girls Guide](#)



[Sports Bra Playbook](#)



[Hijab Playbook](#)



[ICOACHKIDS](#)



[How to Coach Kids](#)

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# THERE'S A COACH IN ALL OF US

Coaching is about so much more than teaching sport.  
It's about helping kids belong.

**Think about the moments in your childhood where you felt like you truly belonged. The times when you not only felt at home in your own mind and body, but in your environment and the relationships with those around you.**

You felt safe and free from judgment, stigma or shame. You could test your limits and challenge yourself to try something new. And you felt empowered to express yourself and set your own course in life.

Chances are that in each of these moments, a caring adult — a teacher, parent, coach, family or community member — acknowledged you, empowered you and supported you to realize your full potential. And now that you're an adult, you have an opportunity to create a future of sport where every kid gets to experience that feeling of belonging — even if you've never coached a day in your life.

Every kid has a unique set of experiences, backgrounds, identities and interests — which is one of the most exciting and sometimes challenging parts of being a coach. From physical ability to religious and cultural beliefs to gender identity, every

kid who comes into practice is bringing their whole selves. We believe one of our most important responsibilities as coaches is to make sure every kid finds belonging in sport, and ensure they don't need to deny, hide or be ashamed of any part of themselves.

“These ages are a key part of development. Kids feel the need to gain independence from their parents and often spend more time with their teammates. It's important that coaches create scenarios where kids feel comfortable. I see soccer as a laboratory-esque experience where kids can prove themselves out of their comfort zones.”

**ROBERTO DE PAZ**

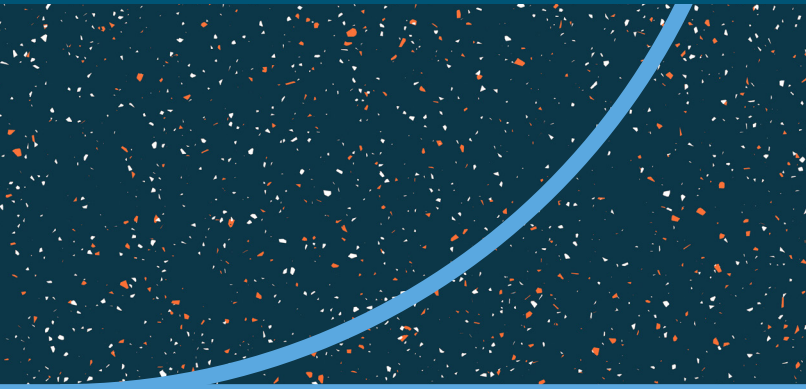
Coach, Proyecto Cantera Juntos por México A.C.

“Belonging for me is just having a place where you feel safe, accepted and where you can be yourself. There's no judgment about who you are, what you do and where you come from. Inclusion is where people feel comfortable and can acknowledge differences, but belonging is that next level.”

**JEAN HANSEN**

Vice President, School Partnerships and Youth Outreach at Special Olympics Oregon





When kids belong, they can be their full selves in practice and in everyday life, which sets them up to thrive in childhood and beyond. The result is a generation of empathetic and welcoming kids who not only feel comfortable in their own bodies, but have a positive association with play, movement and sport.

For kids, ages 7–12 are a uniquely powerful time to feel belonging. “They are becoming more independent, and relationships with their peers start to be more prominent,” says Diana Cutaia, founder of Coaching Peace. “They are more aware of how others treat them and include them. They begin to understand the world not just through their parents or caregivers, but their peers.”

For kids to unlock their full potential during this exciting time in their lives, adults have to be invested in giving kids agency and safety so they can lead their own exploration and discovery in a fun, positive environment. Building belonging is more than being part of a team; it’s about changing a kid’s world by fostering growth and emotional safety.

Play, movement and sport are ideal spaces for belonging to flourish, and coaching is a rewarding way to make it happen. The world will always need caring coaches — adults who are passionate about helping kids grow, can provide a stable and nurturing relationship, and take the responsibility of

mentorship seriously — to help every kid move and play freely and safely. Coaches are the number one reason kids stay in sports, and a positive experience with a coach can set them on a path of lifelong play.

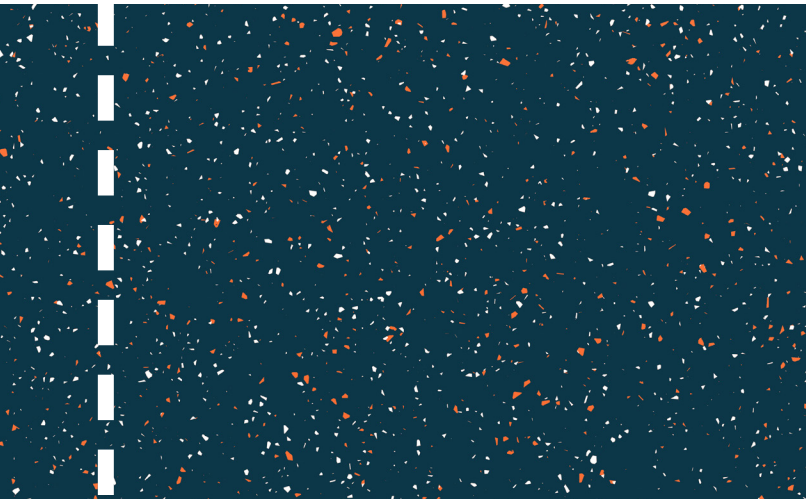
Coaching isn’t simply training skills and running drills. Coaching is an intentional act of connection and care that supports skill-building, resilience, social-emotional growth and joy. That means every single interaction is an opportunity to positively impact kids’ lives. You can help drive this change, whether you’re a formally trained coach, a parent, or even if you’ve never played a sport in your life. This playbook is designed to help any caring adult learn how they can make a difference in kids’ lives through play, movement and sport.

**There’s a coach in all of us.**



# EVERY KID BELONGS

A great coach fuels a sense of belonging for all kids.



Every kid deserves to belong, whether at home, in school or with their friends. It's no different when it comes to play, movement and sport.

Emotional safety (or psychological safety) is a critical ingredient to build belonging. Emotional safety in a team setting means that each kid feels confident being their full self, and can share thoughts and feelings without repercussions. They feel accepted and encouraged across every facet of themselves. And the coach has built a predictable environment where kids know what to expect. The relationship you develop with each kid is your best tool to build emotional safety.

Kids feel safe and supported when four traits power your relationship:

- 1 TRUST**  
Building a supportive team culture and connecting with every kid
- 2 STABILITY**  
Being consistent and clear over time
- 3 AGENCY**  
Giving each kid a sense of control and confidence
- 4 AFFIRMATION**  
Inviting every kid to contribute and celebrating their involvement

## IT'S ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS

A great relationship with a coach can unlock so much for kids. Over time, the freedom to play, move, express themselves and achieve success creates a positive feedback loop that has ripple effects in every part of their lives. And building a strong relationship isn't about winning games or knowing the most about sports — it happens in big and small, happy and sad moments in a kid's life. You just have to show curiosity, connection and care.



“A great relationship is one that centers the child: their experience, their context, their growth.”

**DIANA CUTAIA**

Founder, Coaching Peace





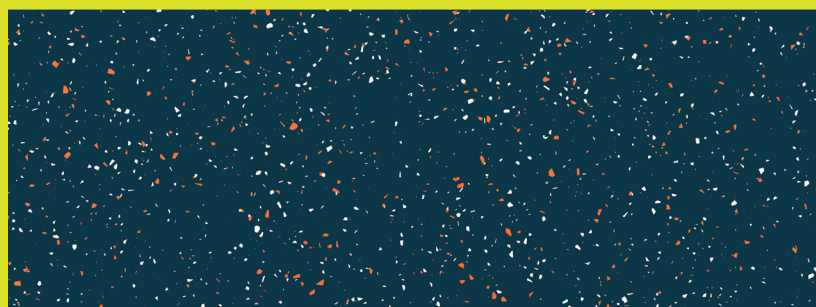
“The best thing that can happen [for trans athletes] is for a coach to get close to the trans person and talk to them, and see that it’s not just about being trans. They have a lot of different interests — there are trans kids who are very knowledgeable on the topic of dinosaurs! You learn to see complete humans, who are interested in things, have plans for the future and dreams, and all of those things create empathy. You can get past the thought that ‘I have a preconceived idea of a trans person, and usually it’s not playing sports.’ When you’re able to have these conversations, you realize it’s just another person who can share their abilities with you and the team.”

**LUIS TIRADO MORALES**

Co-founder, Asociación por las Infancias Transgénero

**EVERY KID IS DIFFERENT**

Learning to welcome and support every kid is a rewarding, lifelong journey. A good coach understands that every kid has unique circumstances and lived experiences, and that every kid wants and deserves to enjoy play, movement and sport. Going into a coaching scenario with this mindset is crucial to unlocking those important relationships and a sense of belonging for every kid you meet. The total impact? A culture of true belonging, where all kids find a place where they can thrive.



# WHAT DOES BELONGING FEEL LIKE?

We asked coaches, athletes, parents and experts around the world to describe what belonging looks and feels like for kids in sport.



“Humans are tribal by nature. We want to find people who are similar to us, and spaces where we feel like what we bring matters. Sports creates an environment where what each person brings can contribute to a bigger picture and can be celebrated. If you’re a great shooter, that’s what you bring to your team. Some people bring energy that inspires and rubs off. For others it could be thoughtfulness, the ability to lead in different situations or even showing us what different leadership styles look like.”

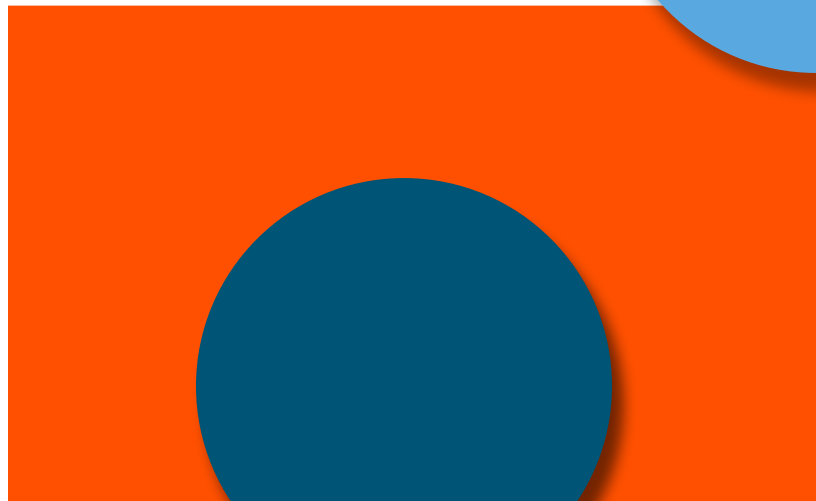
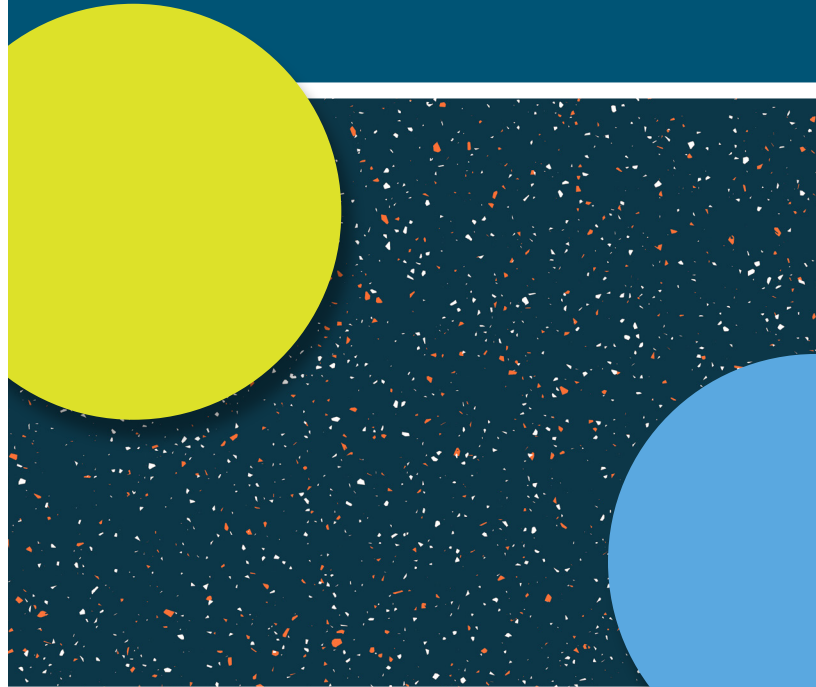
**SALLY NNAMANI**

Coach, community builder and U.S. Director of Programs and Partnerships, PeacePlayers

“Belonging gives kids the opportunity to be a part of a team and build new friendships, and increases the physical, mental and emotional pieces of themselves.”

**JEAN HANSEN**

Vice President, School Partnerships and Youth Outreach at Special Olympics Oregon

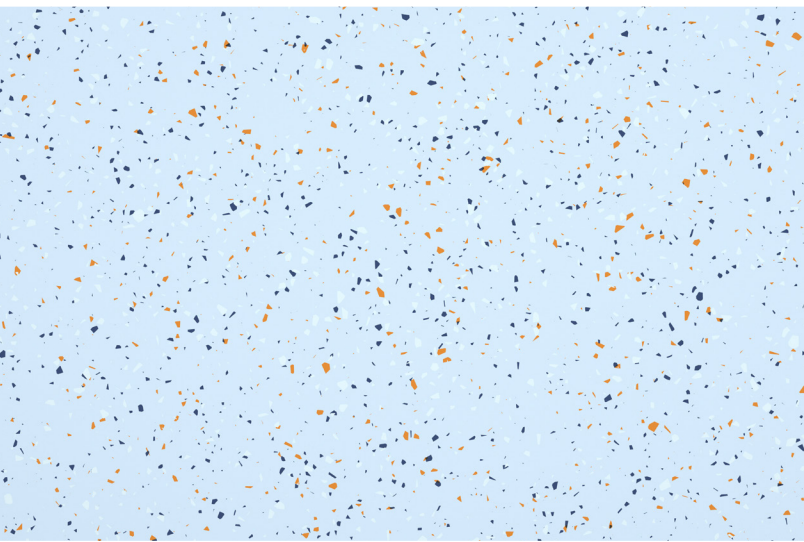




“Feeling included is hard for everyone, but it’s particularly hard when something like a disability differentiates you from your peers, so having an opportunity to join a team can be a huge difference-maker. I think sometimes we focus so much on inclusion that we get kids there and pat ourselves on the back and say we did a great job. But that’s just the very beginning of the journey.”

**WILSON DIPPO**

Associate Programs Manager,  
Challenged Athletes Foundation



“Belonging is not having to think about the things that might exclude me in everyday life. When I belong, I’m able to free up all that energy I spend thinking about how I show up in the world.”

**MAYA MAY**

GenderCool parent

# PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE

Make a game plan for belonging with four kid-centric approaches you can implement through everyday moments.

1

**FOCUS ON CONNECTIONS**

2

**CREATE THE CULTURE**

3

**EMPOWER EVERY KID**

4

**LEAD WITH CONSISTENCY**

By now, you know how important play, movement and sport are to kids' development and well-being. The fact that you're putting time and energy into filling the role of coach (or are considering doing so) proves that you're invested in their development.

There are countless opportunities to put belonging into action through everyday coaching moments. Even seemingly small actions can go a long way in creating an environment that feels welcoming, fun and motivating for everyone involved — and the process will become more intuitive the longer you do it. No matter what sport you're coaching or who is on your roster, these four approaches will help you make a game plan to put it all into practice.

1

# FOCUS ON CONNECTIONS

Coaching is all about relationships, so fostering trust and connection is an important first step in ensuring kids belong.

**TRY THIS:**

## BE A WELCOMING PRESENCE

Build real connections by actively listening and showing genuine interest in kids’ lives — on and off the field. When you model good listening and curiosity, you help them build empathy, both for themselves and others. Be sure to respect their privacy and boundaries, and ensure that kids know they can come to you if they’d like to share something.

**TRY THIS:**

## RESPECT THEIR IDENTITY

Every kid expresses their personality, gender identity, cultural beliefs and experiences differently. Listen to the things they share, be curious and ask questions, and listen without judgment. Most importantly, respect the boundaries they set. Respecting their pronouns, clothing, hairstyles and more will help kids feel connected to you and to each other, while reducing stigma and stress for kids who are still exploring how to find confidence in their personal identity.



**TRY THIS:**

## ENCOURAGE NEW CONNECTIONS

Create opportunities for all kids to connect with each other through different activities or games. When doing activities that require pairs or small groups, try putting players of different skill levels, abilities and backgrounds together so they can work on building relationships with people who may not look or act exactly like them. Make sure you have a plan when you create mixed-ability groupings — the specific activity you give them should be something the group can achieve together.

“Try to create environments where you’re getting a variety of people together. Mixed-ability activities have such great value to everybody. I think it’s too often seen through the lens of having value for those who are being included. I’m convinced that the greater value is that the dominant group is being given an opportunity to connect with a group that they otherwise would not. I think it forces them to exercise their empathy muscles, which are way more valuable to exercise than any other muscle.”

**G CODY OJ GOLDBERG**

Co-founder, Harper’s Playground

**TRY THIS:**

**SEE THEM AS WHOLE PEOPLE**

Even though you're the coach, every kid has something to teach you, too. Remember that each kid is a whole person — someone with interests, challenges, experiences and passions. Avoid "talking down" to them or seeing them as "just kids." You'll create a more cohesive team culture and show them that sport and play have room for them.

**Instead of thinking of yourself as "just a coach," consider your impact.**

As a coach, you're also a mentor and role model. When you show empathy, kindness and openness, kids will see that you practice what you preach. In turn, they'll pass it on to their teammates, friends and families.

"Even if you're not a parent, how cool is it to be able to positively impact the environment for a child? If you can create protective environments at home, at school, on the field, suddenly there are less places where the child has to deal with external negativity. That's such a key part of the equation of being able to develop one's self-esteem as a child."

**MAYA MAY**

GenderCool parent

"I think when kids feel they're having a relationship with someone who is on the same level as them, and not someone who is talking from above and telling them what's right or wrong, trust is established. Rather than adults imposing things on kids, it's more of taking their hand and walking with them on the path of learning new things."

**LUIS TIRADO MORALES**

Co-founder, Asociación por las Infancias Transgénero



2

# CREATE THE CULTURE

A culture of positivity among the team isn't about maintaining a rosy outlook no matter what. It's about open, honest dialogue and an environment of encouragement, trust and respect for all.

**TRY THIS:**

## SET EXPECTATIONS UP FRONT

Contribute to a positive environment by setting age-appropriate behavioral agreements from the first meeting or practice. Even better, ask kids to give input into those guidelines. Make it clear that behaviors such as teasing, shaming, bullying and harassment are not tolerated. Give examples and be consistent with consequences.

**TRY THIS:**

## KNOW WHEN (AND WHEN NOT) TO ACKNOWLEDGE DIFFERENCES

There are ways to recognize the uniqueness of every kid without othering or singling anyone out. In fact, the diversity of experiences, backgrounds and abilities among your athletes is probably the greatest potential source of team-building and strength. As you get to know kids, recognize the gifts they each bring.

**TRY THIS:**

## USE INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE

Gender-neutral terms like “kids” (or simply using their team name) are more inclusive than gendered words like “guys” when addressing a mixed-gender group. Using neutral language in these situations shows and models respect.

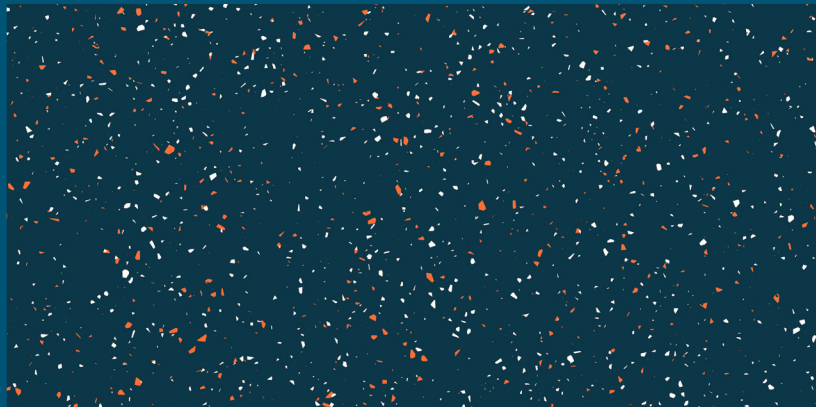
“New volunteer coaches are sometimes a little nervous. They try to become what they think is a ‘good coach,’ so they focus on correcting a kid’s movements. ‘You should do this, let me show you how to do that.’

For example, some coaches forget to give kids applause or high-five them. They just say ‘Ready? Go!’ and then they become quiet and just watch. The kids will finish the game, but their energy could have been higher. I always teach coaches that during the whole process they need to be excited — not just give direction and disappear.

I always tell new coaches to let the kids have fun. Give them choices. You’re not coaching an Olympic athlete. Let them enjoy playing!”

### NEIL HUANG

Founder and coach, UrGames





**TRY THIS:**

**REDEFINE SUCCESS**

Most people who are new to sport (at any age) tend to focus on winning and losing. And when coaches show they care more about performance than having fun, kids internalize those lessons and become discouraged. Use every tool — your activities and structures, what you praise, even your emotional energy on the sideline — to show each kid that it’s possible for them to have some kind of success in every single practice or game.

*Kazuhiko Udagawa, who coaches girls’ lacrosse at SPOCOM in Tokyo, notes that in Japanese culture, kids can experience high academic and athletic pressure. Over time he’s shifted his methods to focus less on physical skill-building and more on making the atmosphere enjoyable and praising kids’ processes or how they overcome challenges. He says he was amazed to learn that athletic skills improved organically as kids felt more confident and comfortable on the field.*

“Kids know that ‘fair’ means creating the kind of environment where everyone can be successful, not regardless of who they are but because of who they are. Sometimes a kid needs a different accommodation; sometimes we need that accommodation. If that’s just how our team approaches problem-solving, as opposed to believing that ‘fair means equal,’ it tends to be pretty successful.”

**MEGAN BARTLETT**

Founder, Center for Healing and Justice Through Sport

“Why not have a code of conduct instead of rules? You can break rules; we all break rules. A code of conduct is about *how are you prepared to behave?* And you have ownership and responsibility for that. It’s a joint responsibility. If you ask, ‘How are we going to behave?’ it makes a difference, because even young kids can reflect on simple things and take ownership of them.”

**VIV HOLT**

Head of Operations, Youth Sport Trust International

**TRY THIS:**

**NOTICE HOW EACH KID COMMUNICATES**

Play, movement and sport help kids develop their communication skills and confidence in expressing themselves. Keep encouraging, and actively seeking out, kids’ feedback. Reach out in different ways to younger kids or those who may be less vocal.

**Instead of shying away from big topics, consider using them as teachable moments.**

Talk as a team, in age-appropriate ways, about misconceptions and stereotypes and how they can be harmful even when not intended to be. Take time to recognize and challenge your own assumptions about kids as well.

*Diana Cutaia of Coaching Peace says, “We have to understand that when we walk into a space, we [do so] with our whole lived experience, and before I say a word to a kid I’m taking that lived experience and making assumptions — unless I do the work to mitigate and understand that and to catch myself in those moments.”*

3

# EMPOWER EVERY KID

Teamwork makes the dream work, but it doesn't happen overnight. Coaches must intentionally invite contributions from all, and create an atmosphere where everyone is celebrated for non-physical efforts as much as performance. Valuing differences is also part of creating this atmosphere.

With encouragement and support, kids can do anything. Building up their sense of empowerment will help them feel confident in everything they do.

## TRY THIS:

### AMPLIFY THE GOOD VIBES

Call out praise when you see kids communicating well, supporting each other and including everyone. A positive, reinforcing vibe helps kids learn concepts and feel connected to sport. Kids can achieve anything — and you have the ability to help them believe it.



## TRY THIS:

### SET EVERYONE UP FOR SUCCESS

Integrate the diversity of your team members' needs into program planning so every kid can contribute and succeed. This may mean modifying activities so that every kid has a way to engage their mind and body.

“It really takes a coach who’s looking at the team holistically and is identifying those opportunities where [disabled and non-disabled athletes] can work together and be on the same court. For a track and field team, you might be doing intervals at the same time — and it might be that the person in the racing chair is doing different intervals than those that are running.”

### WILSON DIPPO

Associate Programs Manager,  
Challenged Athletes Foundation





**TRY THIS:**

**PRAISE THINGS KIDS CAN CONTROL**

Did a team member challenge themselves, support a teammate, show bravery or exhibit patience? Make sure to celebrate these types of wins in addition to physical performance and achievements. And be specific. Let them know what they did well so they can continue to do it!

**TRY THIS:**

**GIVE THEM CHOICES**

Build activities and exercises that give kids options and individual freedom to experiment within the team environment. Give them a moment to set their goals for the practice. You might walk through a couple ways to approach an activity or complete an exercise, or even let them decide the agenda for a portion of the practice.

“Recognize that outcomes vary beyond the scoreboard. If you’re winning a game but the young people in your program don’t like being there, then you’re not winning.

Being intentional about each young person leaving with a ‘win’ from programming each week allows you to build a program where you’re pouring energy into young people in the long term.”

**SALLY NNAMANI**

Coach, community builder and U.S. Director of Programs and Partnerships, PeacePlayers



**TRY THIS:**

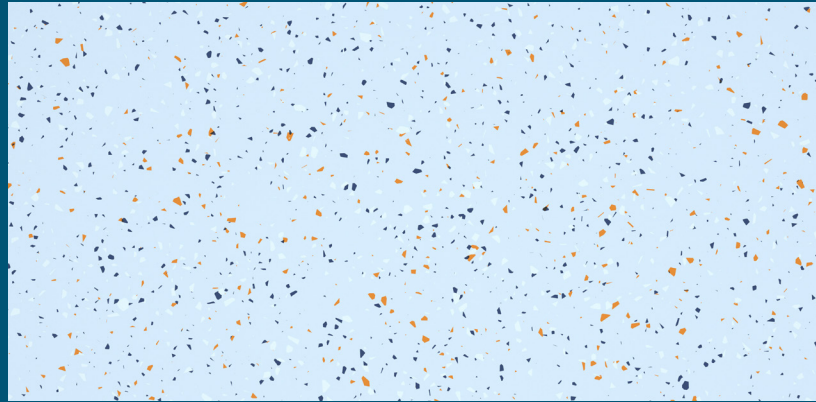
**PROVIDE EVERY KID WITH THE THINGS THEY NEED TO FEEL CONFIDENT IN THEIR BODY**

Make sure that each kid has the gear, apparel, equipment or modifications they need to play comfortably and confidently. Check in early in the relationship and on a rolling basis afterward. One way of asking this is, “Is there anything you need to feel ready to play today?”

“If we can teach kids how to think about their actions, not focused on results but on the process, they can easily change actions and maintain their balance mentally. If you praise results, [kids] tend to focus on the results. They don’t try to improve or they don’t challenge themselves, because if they get a good score, they will keep that position. If they get a bad score, they think they don’t get the praise. The coach can instead ask the kid, ‘Why do you play the way you do?’ And then say, ‘I am glad you are thinking of it that way.’”

**KAZUHIKO UDAGAWA, M.D., Ph.D.**

Coach, SPOCOM



“As soon as you see them, ask things like, ‘How was your weekend?’ It shows them you’re building a connection, but also tells you if they went snowboarding this past weekend and they’re going to be tired at practice today.

Make sure you’re checking in with the athletes before, during and after practice. When you see an athlete limping, it’s too late.”

**MARWA SALEEM**

Coach and volunteer, Hijabi Ballers

**Instead of reserving praise for those who are more outgoing or skilled, consider committing to no kid being left out — or left behind.**

Each kid is part of the team and should be treated that way. What are ways your whole team can receive the gifts they bring? How can they add to the culture of your team, rather than just “fitting in”?

*Paula Sandoval at Proyecto Cantera shares that when a hard-of-hearing athlete joined the program, the whole team started learning sign language in order to help them belong.*

4

# LEAD WITH CONSISTENCY

Whether or not you think of yourself as a leader, a coach sets the tone for the team. By creating a consistent and trustworthy practice, you'll help kids know what to expect and feel comfortable being themselves.

**TRY THIS:**

## USE YOUR OWN CREATIVITY

Kids are naturally creative and have wild imaginations. You can mirror them and get them interested by being creative in the way you play and design activities. After all, play is meant to be fun!

**TRY THIS:**

## GIVE THEM ROOM TO TRY — WHETHER THEY SUCCEED OR FAIL

A key part of coaching is letting kids test their limits and discover new possibilities on their own. When you see a kid struggling, it's natural to want to step in and offer advice or correct a movement. But an overzealous adult can take away a kid's chance to find the solution for themselves. Be mindful of how much you're steering them during a practice, and make sure you're not hovering.

**TRY THIS:**

## LET THEM KNOW WHAT'S COMING

Strive for balance between programming for a variety of skills and activities and building a sense of consistency. Some degree of predictability helps kids feel more comfortable coming to a practice or game. Communicate what they can expect by giving them a preview of today's goals and activities. Whenever possible, use consistent structures from practice to practice.

*In PeacePlayers' basketball programs, athletes know that practice is at the same time every week, and that every practice is going to start with a circle-up. Each athlete is asked what they'll be giving of themselves in practice that night, and given time to reflect and share.*

**TRY THIS:**

## PLAY MORE, TALK LESS

Have kids spend as much time as possible playing, practicing and moving. Fewer interruptions will help them spend more time immersed in the activity.

“Sport should be an opportunity to learn, connect and to feel the variation of emotions that we experience in life in a safe, controlled space. I may feel joy, sadness, defeat, or frustration, and each of those emotions is super-important. They build connection, resilience and empathy.”

### DIANA CUTAIA

Founder, Coaching Peace

**TRY THIS:**

**GIVE CLEAR AND CONCISE INSTRUCTIONS**

Kids are more likely to retain information, body movements and strategies when they understand the “why” behind something. Make sure your activities and instructions are simple, driven by a clear purpose, geared toward the age group of your team and communicated in a way that they can understand.

**TRY THIS:**

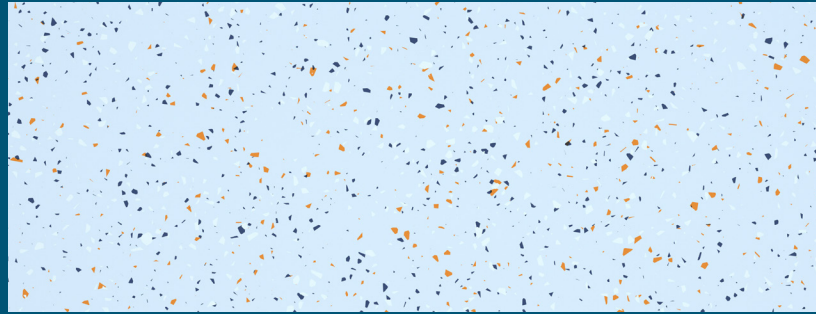
**WORK ON PATIENCE**

Kids all have different realities impacting their daily lives. For some, it may take some time to be comfortable and feel they belong. Be a supportive force. They should leave feeling challenged, validated and excited to come back for the next practice or game.

**TRY THIS:**

**BE SUPPORTIVE WHEN THEY FEEL DISAPPOINTED**

There will be times when kids are frustrated, sad, angry or dejected. Maybe they didn’t win the day’s game, aren’t progressing the way they think other kids are, or are a little homesick. You can show them even disappointing and emotional moments can be a chance to learn resilience. Be supportive and respectful when helping them get back into play.



“A young person I coached on a team had to be removed from his home. He obviously had significant adversity going on in his life, during a particularly chaotic time. He would explode at coaches, other players, teachers, everybody. We tried to help him come up with strategies for calming himself down, but it wasn’t until one of his teammates started walking and breathing with him that it became more effective. He became so proud he would come over and do it near me – ‘Look, Coach Megan, I’m breathing!’ He got to the place where he was able to keep his cool on the field first, to being able to keep his cool in the classroom more. I think practice was the only place that said, ‘It’s okay that that’s where you are. We know if we work on it, it will get better,’ particularly because one of his teammates said, ‘We’ll do it together.’”

**MEGAN BARTLETT**

Founder, Center for Healing and Justice Through Sport

**Instead of ignoring your biases, consider challenging them head-on.**

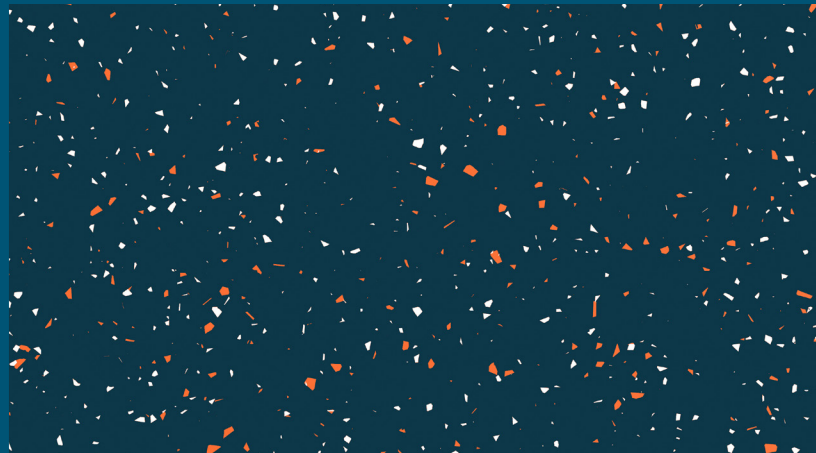
When adults seem to make decisions or comments randomly, or on a whim, kids can’t help but feel singled out — especially when critique is involved. Check in from time to time: Are you correcting or praising certain kids more than others? Challenge yourself to think about places where you may be expressing biases.



“Every kid knows soccer, and the soccer field has a line where they know what is out, and what is in. We have to create mental lines for them, too. In tae kwon do, it could be: ‘If you hit me like that, I’m hurt and sad.’ That’s a line. But some coaches don’t show them the lines. They’ll overreact and say, ‘Why did you do that? You’re over the line.’ But if the coach doesn’t communicate ahead of time, the kids don’t know. Every sport has a line. Every coach has their line. Of course, we listen to what kids say, but it doesn’t mean the line will change.”

**JAEHEE KIM**

Coach, We Meet Up Sports



“For volunteer coaches who don’t have the luxury of an ongoing relationship with young people, it’s important you don’t underestimate the power of every positive interaction, every high-five. Every time you have a meaningful interaction with a young person is resilience-building, as is every time you get a young person to move their body.”

**MEGAN BARTLETT**

Founder, Center for Healing and Justice Through Sport



As part of the Made to Play commitment to get all kids moving, Nike is working to break down barriers, build community and help kids find their strength and potential through the power of play and sport.

Learn more at [nike.com/madetoplay](https://nike.com/madetoplay)

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to Play**  
