

## **ABC's of Coaching and Raising Kids through Sports**

The big picture is not generally a concept that youngsters are ready to grasp. As tots, they can tell us what hurts. As students they can always tell us about their personal experiences such as the subjects and teachers they like or dislike. We mature adults can still do the same thing.

As parents, there are some big picture core values that we can try to instill in our children, or our students and players for that matter. They include: hygiene or cleanliness, manners, honesty, fairness, sharing, effort, learning, humor, responsibility and being on time. Yet others might show their children the value of becoming lifetime players. In some cases, self-control can be added to this parental obligation.

With our adult experiences and responsibilities, we can really help children begin to understand the big picture. This can be applied to school and what it means to their future lives.

In that regard, I believe that there are certain central life skills that students must acquire in school. Those central life skills are math, language (both reading and writing), and the computer. If students focus on nothing else in school, they must develop competencies in these three curriculum areas. No exceptions. This is the big picture and it sets the table for all future events. Furthermore, they need to develop an activity base that includes several sport and fitness activities. This adds balance to their lives.

The big picture that I promote for kids in sport in the non-school situation focuses on five concepts. In order of importance, they are participation, fun, learn skills, safety and balance. Program leaders can use this big picture concept as league and team policy guidelines. In instructional situations, learn skills moves to the top of the list. See BEYOND X's and O's by Jack Hutslar for a more complete presentation of these terms.

It is not nearly as simple to identify the central or core sport skills for individual players. We know the basic traits that distinguish sport from other activities. They are: strength, speed, power, endurance, flexibility, agility, balance, quickness, and kinesthetic feel. The latter is related to the ability to "feel" the movements and learn them. The top players excel in these traits compared to mere mortals.

This presents a number of predictable questions to be answered by coaches and parents. Which sports? Which positions? Individual or team sports? Aerobic or non-aerobic sports? Same sex or co-ed sports? Needless to say, height and weight come in to play in making these decisions as do the genetic predispositions that are passed along to our children.

Due to geography and the availability of knowledgeable coaching talent, the best that can be done in some communities is to find opportunities for our youngsters to participate in two team and two individual sports. This should be accomplished by the time they reach their teenage years . . . and it applies both to boys and girls.

There is no challenge more important than to help children learn, grow and develop into good adults. Sport is one of the more common ways to do this within and outside the family. Parents have years to accomplish this task through daily activities. Yet, some people say that these foundations are laid by the time children are two years of age.

In sport, these opportunities may consume only a precious few hours per week. This is next to nothing in comparison to the time parents have to influence their children to do all of the right things. Yet, coaches are among the more influential people in the lives of children.

These ABC's that follow identify some of the more important traits or principles that guide us in shaping children into proper adults through sport. Review these selections and help your children, your students, and your players develop a better understanding of the big picture.

**A** is for **Activity**. Activity time is where youngsters learn the skills of sports and physical activity. Talk less and get them practicing correct skills in drills and games.

*Other important A words:*

**Applaud**. Applaud good effort as well as the achievement.

**Attention**. Get the attention of everyone before you try to teach anything. Otherwise you are just wasting your time and fooling yourself. If they are not listening, they are not learning anything from you.

*And a few more A words worth considering: **Attitude. Analyze. Attack.***

**B** is for **Balance**. Youngsters should learn a variety of individual and team sports and a variety of skills and positions within each sport. As they become older, they will focus on their favorite activities. In addition, well balanced players should do well in school and family activities. Remember, most players will never make a penny from sports. Therefore, a balanced approach to child rearing through sports will allow them to get the most from the opportunities that arise as they grow and develop.

*Other important B words:*

**Basics**. Every sport has readily identifiable individual and team skills and strategies. Identify these basic skills and then make them the focal point of your teachings. This will give focus to the effort of beginners and foster a more rapid development of those who pick up the skills easily.

**Beginners**. Know your players. Know your students. Know your children. Beginners need to learn the basic skills upon which they can build. Going too slow will bore them. Going too fast will cause them to become lost and confused. Present material that is suitable for the level of your students.

*And a few more B words worth considering: **Believe. Boldness.***

**C** is for **Competition**. This separates sport from many other activities in our lives. Head to head matches, in both individual and team sports, provide the incentives, motivation or spirit to work hard in practice and games, and keep going until the game is over. There is nothing inherently bad about competition. However, we are aware that many unethical events take place in order to give one an edge over another. Still, competition in its purest form, is simply the will to give all you have and bare your soul, win or lose. It is the spice of life.

*Other important C words:*

**Character**. Someone said that character is what you have when you have nothing else. It is your signature, your stamp, your inner self. Sport provides opportunities in real life situations for youth to both display their character and learn new values. In many cases, sport may be the only venue where youngsters are routinely asked to master challenges that are physical, mental, attitudinal and social. They are all rolled into one package. The value is that the sport scene is real life, not artificial or make believe. Sport is then a way to present those values that were presented earlier in a meaningful way with consequences . . . honesty, responsibility, et cetera.

**Change. Conditioning. Concentration. Consistency. Control. Cooperation. Correct. Creativity. Cues.**

*And a few more C words worth considering: **Clean. Click (timing). Clothing. Communications. Cost.***

**D** is for **Demand**. Parents and coaches must demand that their children do well in school. No exceptions. It is reasonable and fair to use sport, as well as any other favorite activities, as levers (or punishment) to coerce youngsters into the appropriate and proper behavior. When standard of behavior are set and compliance is not forthcoming, youngsters learn that there are no consequences for their actions.

*Other important D words:*

**Determination.** In practice and in games, players achieve success when they are willing to work on skills and strategies until they have been mastered.

**Demonstration.** Demonstrate the sport skills properly so youngsters can learn by imitation. The same principle applies to your daily personal habits when seen by youngsters.

*And a few more D words worth considering:* **Defense. Dedication. Desire. Development. Discipline. Discrimination. Drive. Drug abuse.**

**E** is for **Effort.** Effort leads to learning and achievement. Players can learn how to practice and play with a sustained effort, yet under control. Lack of effort creates downward spirals in performance. This is the precursor to failure.

*Other important E words:*

**Education.** There is nothing in life, other than family, that is more important for boys and girls than to give proper attention to school, classes, school work, and homework. Most of what we are able to do comes from either our family or what we learn in school. The more you learn, the more you earn.

**Endurance. Enthusiasm.**

*And a few more E words worth considering:* **Eliminate errors. Effectiveness. Efficiency. Emotional control. Equal. Example. Expectations. Equality.**

**F** is for **Fun.** Fun has been identified over and over as the primary reason that children play sports. Adults frequently make the same claims. The sporting opportunities of our children should not be work, not to mention stressful or out and out mental torture. If sport is not fun, youngsters will find something else to do with their time. In some cases, youngsters find that the activity is fun but the behavior of adults is too intense, abusive or unfair. Lighten up. Have fun along with the children. It is the right thing to do.

**Focus.** Focus their effort on the game

*Other important F words:*

**Fitness.** Playing sports is a healthy fitness activity. Just 20 to 30 minutes of cardiovascular (aerobic) activity several times a week improves endurance. When a systematic conditioning (strength and endurance) and diet control programs are used by coaches, the level of fitness is improved even more dramatically. Participation in sports and fitness activities as youngsters establishes a pattern that youngsters can carry with them throughout their lives. When parents also participate, this pattern of activity is even more strongly ingrained for life. They will do it when they grow up and they will establish this healthy pattern with their children.

**Fairness.** Coaches should strive treat all players fairly without preconceived notions and bias. In some cases, this means not being more demanding or harsh with your own children in comparison to other children. Youngsters under the age of 10 or so are particularly in tune with fairness. Older players, when treated unfairly, can cause bad feelings and turmoil. Fairness is equal opportunity to practice, learn new skills, play other positions, receive helpful coaching feedback, and play in the games. Treat them all the same. It is a good approach to coaching, teaching and child rearing.

**Fake.** The fake or feint is a basic skills that contributes to good performance in a number of sports. For instance, we can fake right and go left. We can fake a shot and drive. We can fake a pass and run. Slow down and the speed up with stop and go moves. Good fakes open many doors. Add them to the skills your players practice.

**Feedback.** People respond well when you give them positive feedback about how they are doing. You can pat them on the back or say: Way to go. Nice job. Atta boy. Atta girl. Provide positive feedback for your children with a positive sandwich. It works like this. First, tell them how well they are doing at

something meaningful. Then make the necessary corrective statements about their skill, effort, attitude or behavior. Finally, give them encouraging comments so they will try it because it will help them.

*And a few more F words worth considering: **Fear. Feedback. Finish strong. Flexibility. Fundamentals.***

**G** is for **Goals**. Goals are targets for which we strive. Can you do this 10 times? Can you make six out of ten? Can you go faster by two seconds? Can you practice this move on your own for 10 minutes every day. Can you behave properly for 30 minutes. Can you raise all (three, four) of your grades one letter. We seem to learn faster when we have something specific for which to shoot. Goals can be set for the players and players can set their own goals. To be theoretically correct, youngsters might expect to receive some kind of reward upon achieving their goals. Unlike adults in sales for instance, these rewards should be of symbolic value.

*Other important G words:*

**Games**. The game is the thing. It is the fun stuff that sets sports apart from all of those other activities. The game is why we play.

**Gender**. In sports, we are beginning to understand that if it is good for boys and our sons, it is probably good for girls and our daughters. Given that concept, it seems that we should attach the same importance to sports for girls as for boys. We should provide opportunities for girls as we would for boys. We should spend for girls as we would spend for boys. We should expect the same from girls as we would expect from boys. A major difference, as far as I can see, is that most girls will never be able to spit with the same gusto as boys.

*And a few more G words worth considering: **Grit. Groove. Grow.***

**H** is for **Homework**. When considering the big picture, there are just a few things that trump all the others. School and homework are among those on the top of the list. Homework, whether for the classroom or sport, is where youngsters practice and use (activity time) the skills that have been presented in class (instructional time). There is insufficient time during class or practice sessions to develop and polish the new skills just learned. Teachers and coaches can spot the improved performance of those who do this extra work on their own. It is very apparent to the trained eye. For students, homework is not a option. It is a big picture, top of the list requirement.

**Honesty**. Help children understand how to play honestly and fairly within the rules. Our lives today are such that doing anything to win or excel is an easy path to follow. Cheating and playing outside the rules are common. It should not be so, but it may take special courage to follow the path less well traveled and encourage everyone to play by the rules. It may take ever greater courage by us individually to act in an honest and fair manner. After all, honesty is a bit like soul. It is what you have when you do not have anything else.

*Other important H words:*

**Hustle**. Jog or run. Do not walk. Hustle and effort are related in that both show enthusiasm for the sport or activity. The pace of an activity for everyone is set by those who show a high level of hustle. This in turn influences motivation and performance.

*And a few more H words worth considering: **Hard. Health.***

**I** is for **Instruction**. Instructional time is short periods of time where coaches and parents explain and demonstrate what the youngsters are to practice and learn. Keep this part of your practice time brief because players are primed for action, not listening. Lectures are boring on fields and courts. Minds wander easily. Try this approach. Gather the players together quickly (hustle). Then lecture and demonstrate. Focus on two or three key points in a minute or two. Then, get them moving. Practice with focus and intensity. Make corrections as they go through their paces. This pattern will help establish

activity time as where the real learning occurs. Learning to execute the proper skills at the right time is how players and teams outperform others.

*Other important I words:*

**Identify.** Talk with your kids or interview them. Ask questions periodically to identify their interests and attitudes as they play various sports. Ask them about their thoughts. Find out what they like and do not like. Help them understand where they are and where they are going.

**Initiative. Improvement. Intensity.**

*And a few more I words worth considering: Influence. Illegal. Ingenuity. Inherent. Injury. Innate. Inspection. Inspiration. Intelligence. Intensity. Interest.*

**J** is for **Joy**. Children like to move and play. Movement and physical activity are inherent in their being. As they grow older, some discover that the joy that comes from sport has few parallels. It is like eating and other things we find enjoyable, pleasurable and satisfying. That cherished state occurs with mediocre and outstanding performance. For some, that joy comes just from the opportunity to play or to be in the company of others. Whatever the level of play, the active life brings joy.

*Other important J words:*

**Jitters.** The jitters are common in sports as well as other activities where we go on stage and become the center of attention. Big events and big opportunities can make us get nervous, hesitate, think too much and then make mistakes. In sport, we can reduce this in two ways. First, parents and coaches need to approach big events calmly. Breathe deeply and slow down. We do not need to get players, particularly those short on experience, pumped up and excited. The event itself will do that. Pumping them up may cause them to play too fast or beyond their capabilities and ... make more mistakes. The second approach is to develop pre-game routines and pre-game drills. This will help players slow down and become comfortable in new situations. Routines help them see that this is really just another event or game at a different place and time against another opponent, who may be as jittery as you.

*And a few more J words worth considering: Jam. Jog. Juice.*

**K** is for **Knowledge**. There are many instances in life where one must know what is going on, if not to excel. In some cases, it is for self- preservation. The former applies both to sport and personal gain, as in wealth. In sport, doing well can depend on knowing how to get in shape, practicing the right skills, and executing the correct strategies. In life, knowledge is important in selecting a school, buying a house, getting your car repaired, buying insurance, and making investments. Deciding about an operation and fighting for child custody (Hire a barracuda.) are also based on what you know. Playing in the dark or playing another person's game gives them a huge edge over you. If you do not know what is going on, you may lose your shirt. Knowledge is power. Knowing gives one an advantage, whether it is skills of the game or strategies known by one and not another. There is no substitute for knowing what there is to know, even against those who have superior innate abilities. The students of our games will do well, and you can take that to the bank.

*Other important K words:*

**Kinesthesis.** This is not one of those common every day words. The concept should be more meaningful when referred to as a "feel" for the activity. We can get a sense for what this means by the feel we have when driving another car compared to the one we usually drive. It may feel strange at first. As in all physical activities, we know that some youngsters learn new sports and new skills more easily than others. In part, it has to do with our internal wiring. Those with this "feel" are able to perform the proper movements, sometimes with a minimum of instruction from their coaches. They learn it in just a few trials. This feel may also extend to their game and match strategies. Later, they can feel when the skill is done correctly or when they are a little off. Then they can make the appropriate corrections. Those who possess what might be termed an abundance of this can be called "a natural." Some have it in a number of

sports. Many of us must work harder and longer to get to the same place. Youngsters who try a number of different activities will find that they feel more comfortable in some than others. This may be attributed to innate ability and recognizing your abilities will help them down the road with the decisions they will make.

*And a few more K words worth considering:*

**Kick** (as in at the end of the race or game). One way to state this is with the phrase finish like a pro. Play the entire game. Run the entire race. Do not stop, quit or give in until the match is over.

**Key. Know.**

**L** is for **Learn**. Learning is a sign of life. Those who are able to grasp it as a life long activity, if not a passion, will gain many advantages over those who are just marching in place. If for nothing other than pure selfish economic reasons, youngsters should be well aware that . . . the more you learn, the more you earn. This is quite well documented. In sport, parents can help see that their children learn the basic skills and strategies of the game ... and that applies to many aspects of our lives.

**Leadership.** Leadership can be the difference between good teams and the other teams. Good teams and good groups generally have good leaders. Sport offers opportunities for youngsters to learn about and practice being leaders. Some players show it by their words and others by their actions. It may be based on knowledge, performance, charisma, social status or position as in squad leader or team captain. Youngsters are quite capable of learning this by being taught what is expected of leaders. Having opportunities to demonstrate their knowledge of the game, extra effort in conditioning activities and the matches, and coaching others on and off the field, even for a day, provides a base for future growth. Sport needs leaders who, one day, will become those who are willing to speak up and take charge.

*Other important L words: **Language. Laps. Laugh. Listen. Line up.***

*And a few more L words worth considering: **Legal. Liability. Lift. Limber. List. Lose. Loud.***

**M** is for **Management**. An important task of adults who are ushering children through their formative years is to not over-organize and over-manage their lives. Apart from school, family activities and chores, youngsters need time to play and be off on their own. It goes without saying that our sporting activities can consume a lot of time, particularly at the higher levels of play. Students who organize and manager their time will be able to maintain those crowded schedules (and school work) without falling behind.

In those sport leadership situations, coaches and parents should also get organized. It starts with the season and extends down to each practice session. At practice, stress high activity time and low instructional and management time. Write practice plans that move players from place to place with a minimum of wasted time. The more time they stand around, the more time they have to slide off task, cause problems, and get in trouble.

*Other important M words:*

**Mistakes.** The general rule in sport is to learn from your mistakes and do not repeat them. Physical errors are an unavoidable part of our games but mental mistakes can be eliminated or held to a minimum. The objective of our practice sessions is to keep them both to a minimum through repetition and concentration on the task at hand.

**Money.** Money is an enabler. On the other hand, some consider money the root of all evil that invites laziness and carelessness. I prefer to see it as a way to opens doors and create opportunities. In some respects, it is like winning. If you execute your assigned tasks properly, the end result will be victory more times than not. Do the right things and you will be rewarded.

**Models.** Be a good model for those around you to copy and imitate.

*And a few more M words worth considering: **Manners** (See sportsmanship). **Mastery. Maturity. Maximize. Measurable. Mind over matter. Motivation. Move.***

**N** is for **NO!** Say NO to DAT. This acronym is an easy way to remind youngsters that they really must avoid Drugs, Alcohol and Tobacco. Add an “S” (Say NO to DATS) and premature sexual relationships can be added to the taboo list. It is widely known, without a doubt, that there are far too many social problems that can be traced directly to substance abuse. Drugs and alcohol are linked to physical abuse, robbery, assault, crimes of passion, DUI’s, serious capital offenses and poor education. Tobacco, in contrast, has been known to have long term health risks for decades. Now, sexual activity before marriage and children having children carries the burden of unfulfilled dreams and oppressive self-limiting parental responsibilities far too soon in life. Peer pressure, social contacts, and the perception of a glamorous life seem to be the hook that grabs our youth. Good parental upbringing, watchful eyes, knowing your kids and their friends, knowledge of consequences, and self-control are the tools to fight these barriers to productive and satisfying lives.

*Other important N words:*

**Now.** Sport is now. A poor play in the past cannot be allowed to have a negative influence on the next play or what is happening now. Dreaming about what you want to happen in the future cannot be allowed to influence what needs to be done right now. We play sport in this moment in time, this play. Other thoughts must not enter our mind. Operate in the present with the negative influences from past events erased.

*And a few more N words worth considering: **Negative. Natural. Nerves. Never quit.***

**O** is for **Opportunity.** It is the task of parents to provide opportunities for their children to learn a variety of sports. Their skills will improve when they are provided with opportunities to learn. This does mean that you become their full-time and lifelong coach and mentor. It does, however, involve enrolling them in leagues and taking them to practice sessions, games, clinics, camps, and demonstrations. By doing this, they can experience a variety of activities and eventually decide on which ones they would most like to concentrate, possibly even excel. This heightened internal motivation could take off in the early teenage years. Should that happen, providing opportunities might become focused on finding coaches and programs that can help them ascend to higher levels of skill. It should be pointed out that these opportunities should not be limited to sport. It would be a huge mistake to assume that your children will like or even excel at the activities you enjoy. Introduce your kids to a variety of things beyond school like music, art, computers, drama, museums plus sport. This will increase the likelihood that they will actually discover many things that they will like and pursue on their own. Opportunities abound. Take advantage of them so that your children live long and prosper.

*Other important O words:*

**Overload.** It is necessary to overload the muscles in a systematic manner in order to build strength or endurance. Similarly, if we overload our mind with too many thoughts, too many directives, too many things to do, we tend make mistakes or just shut down. Young boys and girls learn best when they receive new instructions in short bouts composed of just a few thoughts or skills. Then, review it. Add new bits of information slowly. When too much information is presented too fast, they will not absorb it, and that is a waste of time.

**Objectives.** The purpose or goal of our activities can be brought in to focus with objective statements that specify exactly what needs to happen. Fitness or conditioning activities can be operationalized as:. I will complete three - 30 minute endurance workouts per week where my heart rate gets 50% to maximum. For players, we can specify that a certain number of free throws or practice swings or shots on goal will be taken each day outside of practice. For disruptive youngsters, a 5-10 item contract may specify exactly what will be done and what will not be done. Students might be required to earn all “C’s” or “B’s” in order to play sports. Put the goals in writing.

*And a few more O words worth considering: **Offense. Opponent. Opposition. Organize. Out. Overuse.***

**P** is for **Practice**. Practice makes perfect. To be precise, this well used phrase should read ... perfect practice makes perfect. It is of little benefit to repeat movements that are technically incorrect. It is not only unproductive but can lead to more errors. It usually takes a number of precise repetitions to learn new skills - - fewer to maintain the existing skill level. Good practice sessions, whether on the field, the court, at home, or in the classroom, are where those new skills and knowledge become the refined tools of success. Players can learn this from good models, by reading, by seeing expert videos, and by seeing videos of their own performance. In time, they will be able to feel whether or not their practice time is well spent.

**Praise**. We are all very familiar with tangible rewards like money, prizes and awards. Praise is also a prize that is linked to positive results. Praise or positive reinforcement takes the form pats on the back,atta boys or atta girls, thumbs up, and smiles. At the other extreme are parents and coaches who rely on dirty looks, reprimands, intimidation and threats to spur people into action. Yet, most people respond well to positive words and gestures. To make things happen, reduce or eliminate the abusive words and actions. Instead, offer words of praise for small accomplishments. You will like the kind of change it produces. See Feedback.

**Participation**. Sport is one of those activities in life where improvement is linked directly to the opportunity to perform the skill over and over in practice session and contests. Substitutes can read about a skill. Bench warmers can watch a skill. They can even study a skill. However, the single most important need for becoming competent in learning to play the game is doing it over and over -- participation. This is more critical for young players than older players. By this I mean that the younger players may drop out of the activity if they feel they are not receiving opportunities to practice and play. The same concept of action holds true for family activities like chores or building projects. We can talk about what they need to do but sometimes we just need to get in there with them so they can see how it needs to be done. Participation, not talk, is how our kids get better.

**Patience. Perseverance. Priorities.**

*Other important P words: **Pain** (stiff vs. sore). **Play. Prepare. Progression.***

*And a few more P words worth considering: **Patience. Persistence. Perspective. Perspiration. Punishment.***

**Q** is for **Questioning**. We are well beyond the point in our social lives where we can turn our kids loose in the world and hope for the best. It is vitally important to know what is going on in their lives. Find out what your players and your children want and do not want to do. Discover their hopes and aspirations. This is done by questioning them, but we are not referring to interrogation. Rather, it is done in the spirit of being involved and concerned parents and coaches. This questioning starts during those early years, not when they become active preadolescents or socially mobile teenagers. Conscientious parents must know their kids' friends, acquaintances, dates, school activities, school work, teachers, and jobs. Life can get rather messy and unsettled if you do not know the score.

Furthermore, this questioning attitude also needs to be extended to the sports your children's lives. There is ample concern today about parents who are accused of living for and living through the sporting activities of their children. Many parents are thought to be pushing their offspring toward higher levels of play, perfection, possibly collegiate and even professional careers. In doing this, it appears that the dominating parents have failed to take into consideration the wishes and desires of their children. While their kids may have the talent, they may not have a desire or need for achievement. They may not even like the sports in which their parents have made these investments. Parents who speak with their children regularly in open two-way conversations should be able to head off any problems stemming from overemphasis, stress and the disappointment connected with unfulfilled parental dreams and expectations. Speak with your kids and do it regularly.

*Other important Q words:* **Quickness. Quiet. Quit.**

**R** is for **Responsibility**. Knowing the rules and learning to relax are important concepts when it comes to helping children adopt the sporting life. However, a more important building block is responsibility. It is, upon determining a course of action, taking it on one's self to complete the task, even when it is not easy or convenient.

Commitment and excuse are two aspects of responsibility. Do what you say you are going to do. This slogan tells people that you are dependable. On the other hand, we can generally come up with reasons for not finishing a task or job. It might be termed rationalization but it is the same as excuses. In fact, some people are more than willing to provide us with reasons for not finishing what we started. It is rather widely known that some people never start because they have been convinced that failure is their destiny. The effect of this is to give others control over our lives. Any number of problems are created when we leave it to others to decide our fate. That makes us dependent on others. Our motivation, progress, achievements and success should rest on our shoulders. The preferred course is for us to be responsible for our own actions.

**Reading.** Reading is one of the more important life skills along with math, the computer and lifetime sports. The ability to use our language (i.e., reading, writing, speaking) gives youngsters access to many future activities and jobs. Read to them as tots. Provide them with age-related reading material as they grow up. Subscribe to newspapers and magazines. See that they become comfortable in the library and on the internet. As your children progress through school, it is vital to their long term success that they become good readers. Put reading at the top of your list of things you will not allow them to neglect.

*Other important R words:* **Recognize. Repetition. Relaxation. Review. Rules. Run.**

*And a few more R words worth considering:* **Relationships. Respect. Rookie. Readiness.**

**S** is for **Sportsmanship**. Sportsmanship can be regarded as the manners of sport. Do unto others ... and all of those ideas. Playing the game fairly is learned just as are the rules of play. In our era of televised sports, the actions of professional athletes bring many bad actions to center stage. In too many instances, their behavior includes yelling at coaches and officials, swearing openly, skirting or ignoring the rules, baiting opponents, using illegal or harmful techniques and tactics, taunting opponents and fighting. On top of this, there are the numerous instances of ethical abuse linked to fake school work, testing, and grades. This can be extended to losing to gain an advantage and gambling. It is easy for our kids to see this and copy it. All of these actions suggest that there are things more important than the game itself.

We would not like to see our sons and daughters imitate or be known for these unsavory actions. Our preference is that our youth try hard, support their friends and teammates, be a positive force, play hard until the end of the contest, and play fair. In other words, we want them to be good sports.

**Speed.** There are a number of important traits that distinguish the top performers from the others. Those traits are speed, strength and stamina or endurance. Of these three, we are able to produce significant gains in strength and endurance. Speed, however, is more of a stable inherent trait. That is, slow moving people are not able to become fast moving people for reasons due to physiology. Speed can overcome strength and can win out over endurance under certain circumstances. It is important to know this about speed. As the speed or pace of the activity increases, those who cannot keep up tend to make more and more mistakes. Therefore, it is important for youngsters to understand that they must move fast, play fast and be under control in order to do well. Speed wins.

*Other important S words:* **Score. Self-direction. Self-discipline. Signal (talk). Spirit. Spontaneous. Strength. Super. System.**

*And a few more S words worth considering:* **Safety. Sexuality. Sleep. Style. Sore. Stiff.**

**T** is for **Teach**. Coaches and parents can teach the fundamental skills and strategies of any sport to their offspring. In most cases, youngsters are able to learn what they are taught. This applies to sport,

homework, manners, chores and responsibility. Yelling and screaming at their mistakes contributes little to their acquisition of skills. Mistakes offer teachable opportunities. Determine what they need to know and teach it to them. Break it down into smaller bites, explain it or show them what to do. Then pat them on the back when they get it and when they show good effort.

**Time.** The best thing to spend on your child is time. This very simple concept is at the heart of teaching and learning, not to mention good relationships between parents, children and other significant adults. The time that coaches and teachers spend with your child is a reason why that these non-family members are so well thought of by young players. See Questioning.

*Other important T words:*

**Try.** It is important that parents provide their children with opportunities to try other sporting activities. In fact, I have consistently suggested that youngsters should try two team and two individual sports by the time they are teenagers. Nothing ventured, nothing gained.

**Target. Task. Temperament. Trials.**

*And a few more T words worth considering: **Think. Timing. Train. Trust.***

**U** is for **Unnecessary.** Beating a dead horse? How much time do we spend giving our children mixed or unclear signals, too much information or worse yet, bad information. A challenge for us mature adult type parents is to see that our advice and leadership is on target, sufficient and correct. In many cases, less is more. That is, a few salient words are more effective in getting our point across than long boring lectures that go unheard and unheeded. Make it short and get it right.

**Up.** Keep your head up and move on. Do not allow the nay-sayers to drag you down.

*Other important U words:*

**Uniforms.** Pre-teens are naturally interested in wearing uniforms. This is linked to their natural inclination to be affiliated with a group or team. Teenagers are not like this. They generally wish to be non-conformists by dressing in the same style as all of the other trendy teenagers. Notice, however, that many of us move back to the affiliation thing when we wear the colors of our favorite team, school, college or individual (e.g., golf, tennis, racing).

*And a few more U words worth considering: **Ugly. Ulcer. Ultimate.***

**V** is for **Variety.** We can do no greater disservice to our children and our players than to put them in a box. We do this by forcing them to play our sport or our position, go into our business, or take a certain path in school or college. In many cases, we just do not know what our kids will take an interest in when they grow up, much less what talents will emerge later in life. What we do know is that they will use what they have learned. With that in mind, I strongly recommend that we must introduce our children to a variety of sports as well as other activities like school, computers, art, music, and service to others. This gives them the tools to take advantage of the opportunities that are presented to them in the future.

**Values.** We behave based on what we have been taught in formal situations or what we have caught from others informally. Some of those positive values that we transfer to those around us, particularly youngsters, are an active life style, honesty, effort or trying hard, doing well in school, caring about others, friendships, and loyalty. Likewise, we may never know for sure when our missteps become more influential that we would like or expect. Hence, we always need to be on our good behavior in the presence of our children. This means that we must be sure that our attitudes match our actions.

*Other important V words: **Valiant** (make a play).*

*And a few more V words worth considering: **Vanquish. Vary. Violence. Vulgar.***

**W** is for **Win.** What's Important Now. There are some people who would have you believe that winning is the main reason to play sports. For those who settle on this point of view, they might be reminded that

one-half of those who play each day do not win. This is not to diminish the importance of winning as a central aspect in sports. However, it simply cannot be the main reason we play. Most of the 40+ million kids who play sports will never, never, never go on to play middle school, high school, college or professional sports ... and there is absolutely nothing wrong with this. In fact, there is not enough room in these advanced programs to accommodate a higher number of participants. A huge majority of the boys and girls who start playing sports in community programs will find that the joy of sport comes from informal pick up games and activities, recreation leagues of all types, fitness routines, dance, and non-competitive action. So, what's important now. Winning is certainly in the picture but getting to play NOW is far more important when we step back and look at the entire picture.

**Watch.** In our ball sports (i.e., baseball, basketball, football, hockey, soccer, tennis, volleyball, etc.) it cannot be repeated enough - - watch the ball. The object of our attention, whether it is a ball or some other target, must be intensely focused on that target. In other sports like gymnastics, swimming, track and field, and wrestling, the focal point changes but the objective remains unchanged. Keep your eyes on the target.

*Other important W words:*

**Weight.** Body weight is an obvious factor that can help or hurt performance in sport. For sporting activities in particular, too much weight hinders performance either by slowing movement, reducing the ability to sustain movement or thwarting the ability to learn new skills. In a few sports involving girls in particular, too little weight has become a severe issue related to bulimia, amenorrhea and osteoporosis. Weight charts and ordinary observation provide sufficient feedback to determine where weight problems exist. When youngsters are 20% over their expected chart weights, parents should consult a physician to determine the proper course of action. Fortunately, growing children who are slightly overweight will generally slim down without rigorous dieting. However, it is still necessary to monitor their eating pattern. Reduce their opportunities to munch on highly processed foods (e.g., white sugar, white bread, white rice, salt, fried foods, fats, etc.) while introducing more fruits, grains and vegetables to their diets. See the Food Pyramid for sensible proportions.

*And another W word worth considering: **Whole-part.***

**X is for X's and O's.** In sports talk, the X's and O's represent tactics and strategies. An example is basketball teams that play aggressive fast break offensive schemes. Another is tennis players who stay on the baseline or rush the net. In football and soccer, teams can push the ball toward the scoring zone or sit back and emphasize a tough defense. Even in the early age groups, youngsters are introduced to overall offensive and defensive strategies. They cover team sports as well as overall match strategies in the individual sports. Part of the growth process for all players involves understanding the team strategies that maximize their individual talents. Help you players and your children understand both the individual and team strategies of the games they play.

**X's and O's.** On the other hand, remember, when drawing diagrams, X's stand for the defensive team and O's for offense side, usually.

*Other important X words:*

**X-rated language.** Keep it clean. Dirty talk is not needed. And a few more X words worth considering: X-ray.

**Y is for Yes.** Say YES to Sport. Sport and physical activity are a collection of healthful pursuits that most youngsters enjoy without too much prodding. Sign them up and let them play.

*Other important Y words: **Youth. Yield.***

*And a few more Y words worth considering: **Yank. Yell.***

**Z** is for Zone. This is a somewhat relative concept that is seen in high levels of play. It is a blend or a coming together of the physical, mental, and attitudinal aspects of performance. When this occurs for an individual or a team, their play rises to a higher level. As they might say, nearly everything works. Opponents offer no significant obstacles. There are no errors, no misses, no gaps, no holes. There is no escape for the opponents. The game becomes very easy and the opponents suffer the consequences, unless both are in the zone. The basis for this is, of course, a well established foundation in the skills and strategies of the game in relation to the age and skill level of the other players.

*Other important Z words:*

**Zebras.** It should not seem like a novel concept but the referees and umpires in those striped shirts do enjoy the games that our kids play. If they did not, would they be out there day after day subjecting themselves to abuse from players, coaches and parents. It seems as though we expect our local officials to perform at the same level as professional referees and umpires. This is just not realistic. Officials at all levels make mistakes just like our players and coaches. Yet, officials can receive criticism even when they get it right. It is common for the casual observers (i.e., parents, untrained coaches) to get it wrong. Forget the player-coach-official badgering that you see on television. Give your local officials a break. Enjoy the game and let the officials enjoy what they do as they help your kids develop into better players.

*And a few more Z words worth considering:*

**Zigzag.** Learn to feint or fake with and without the ball in basketball. Learn to dodge others in football. Looking like you are going to do one thing with the intention of doing something else. It is a basic offensive and defensive strategy in most all sports.

**Zeal.** See Enthusiasm.

**ZZZZZ.**

### Summary

How do you want to raise your kids? Do you want others to raise your kids? Be assured that if you do not establish a foundation of beliefs and values, others will do it in your place. Therefore, take charge.

Finish like a pro is a term that I used to help our youngest daughter get through college. A number of her classmates had a tendency to bail out of their more demanding courses all too frequently. Some would simply quit going to class. It put them behind with terrible grade point averages. Finish like a pro became my slogan for her toward the last three or four weeks of each term. It worked like a charm.

Coaches, teachers and parents can use these ABC's in a number of ways. They are presented in such a way that you can pick and choose according to the situation -- what is important now and in the future. In fact, Lou Holtz, college football coach, used the acronym WIN to symbolize What's Important Now. Do you see the value of this little cue?

PRIDE offers another cue for establishing values. Persistence. Responsibility. Intelligence. Determination. Enthusiasm. PRIDE might become the cue for youngsters to demonstrate that they have learned certain expected patterns of actions.

In contrast to this, "C" words offer interesting opportunities around which to build your approach or philosophy. Try this set of values: Commitment. Conditioning. Consistency. Control. Concentration. "D," "R" and "S" words are pretty good in sport as well.

In short term sport camp situations, I focused on values that would direct their actions. They were: Try hard. Play fair. Have fun.

Play with these ABC's and develop your own cues. Then, present your values in a way that your youngsters can easily remember. It will make you and your charges much better people. You can take that to the bank ... which is yet another set of values.