

Addressing challenging behaviors and emotions is an inevitable part of coaching young people. While thoughtful program design can reduce challenging behaviors, coaches should have strategies in place to support athletes when expectations are not met. Responsive coaching, based in restorative practices, is a proven way to get the most out of athletes while teaching them valuable life skills.

## What is Responsive Coaching?

Responsive coaching means challenging athletes with high expectations and providing them with the support necessary to achieve those expectations. Coaches work with athletes to identify where expectations aren't being met and what can be done to build athletes' skills to regulate their own behaviors and emotions. This requires:

- ✔ **Relationships** - trusting relationships are fundamental to learning and development. Athletes need to trust that coaches have their best interests at heart.
- ✔ **Empathy** - an understanding of the athlete's perspective, without judgment, allows a coach to move beyond blame, remember there is context behind behavior, and collaborate on solutions.
- ✔ **A supportive team environment** - centering a team environment on connection and growth, athletes should feel they belong and that they are supported in learning from mistakes they

*"The fundamental hypothesis of restorative practices is that human beings are happier, more cooperative, more productive and more likely to make positive changes in their behavior when those in positions of authority do things with them rather than to them or for them."*

- *The Restorative Practices Handbook, pg. 47*

## Strategies for Responsive Coaching

### Use Self Regulation Techniques

Responsive coaching requires thought and intention. When responding in the moment, coaches may need to manage their own emotions to have a better response. Before responding, coaches can:

- Close their eyes. Turn their head to the right until they feel a stretch in their neck. Then turn their head to the left until they feel a stretch in their neck.
- Move their chewing gum from the right side of their mouth to the left side, then back again.
- Take a deep breath in through the nose for six seconds, then out through the mouth for eight seconds.

For a more detailed list, check out PCA's [Regulation Checklist for Coaches](#).



## View behavior challenges as opportunities for growth<sup>[1]</sup>

Many challenging behaviors stem not from willful defiance, but developmental gaps in skills like emotional regulation, frustration tolerance, executive functioning, and social skills.

- When witnessing a behavior challenge, coaches can ask themselves(2):
  - What need is this athlete expressing?
  - What could be overwhelming their ability to cope?
  - What support or skills will help them respond better?
  - Coaches can track patterns for individual athletes and reflect on the best ways to develop their skills in future practices.

## Ask responsive questions and engage athletes in solutions<sup>[3]</sup>

When expectations are not met, a coach should try to connect with the athlete as soon as possible. Responsive questions are intended to guide the athlete through taking responsibility for the impact their actions may have on others, while exploring potential solutions. Coaches can:

- Ask the athlete to chat during the next water break or split the team into groups of two for a skill activity, with the athlete as the coach's partner. Engage them in thinking through:
  - What happened?
  - What were they thinking/feeling at the time?
  - Who was affected by their actions?
  - What can they do to make things right?
- Involve athletes in determining how they can remedy a situation to give them ownership over solutions. Guide athletes through this thought process to help them learn from the experience and identify how to better respond in the future.

## Set and Maintain Clear Expectations

Set clear expectations and boundaries so athletes know what is expected of them. Setting high expectations shows athletes that you believe in them.

- Establish standards early on and revisit them consistently throughout the season.
- Allow athletes to contribute to and provide feedback about team values.

## Support Athletes' Strengths

Meet athletes where they are and acknowledge that some athletes may require different support than others based on their unique skills and development.

- Approach athletes through a [healing centered lens](#) - shift the focus from 'what is wrong with you' to 'what is right with you' and build upon their strengths while supporting development where needed.(4)

When athletes feel supported to achieve clearly defined, high expectations, they are more likely to learn, focus, improve, feel a sense of belonging, and perform.

1. Costello, B., Wachtel, J., & Wachtel, T. (2009). *The Restorative Practices Handbook: For teachers, disciplinarians, and administrators*. International Institute for Restorative Practices. Page 45.

2. Tami-Hill Washington, Kathleen Osta: [Connection and Co-Regulation Precede Self-Management: A Common Sense Approach to Learning, Development, and Discipline](#)

3. International Institute for Restorative Practices. (2024) *Final JCPS Implementation Guide*.  
[https://www.iirp.edu/images/2024/K12\\_Resources/Final\\_JCPS\\_Implementation\\_Guide2.pdf](https://www.iirp.edu/images/2024/K12_Resources/Final_JCPS_Implementation_Guide2.pdf)

4. Ginwright, Shawn. (2018) *The Future of Healing: Shifting From Trauma Informed Care to Healing Centered Engagement*. Medium.  
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