

12 Coaching Strategies to Support Positive Youth Development

A PRACTICE GUIDE FOR YOUTH COACHES



Introduction

Extensive research and practical wisdom indicate that coaches have an incredible opportunity to shape the lives of young athletes. The role of coaches goes beyond teaching the technical and tactical aspects of sport.

Coaches have the power to foster positive youth development and make a lasting impact on young people's lives.

A history of research demonstrates the power of youth sport in promoting many different positive youth development outcomes, both within sport **and** in life beyond sport.^{1,2,3} Participation in youth sport can lead to the development of positive social relationships, motivation, leadership skills, improved mental health, and better academic performance.^{1,3,4,5,6} However, there is also evidence that sport can have negative effects, such as increased anxiety and problem behaviors, on young people.²



The key is that positive youth development doesn't just happen by accident.

It's not **only** about playing a sport. It's about the sport environment, how young athletes are engaged (or not) during practice, and what young people experience during games and competition.^{3,7,8} **Coaches play a crucial role in making young people's experiences positive and a catalyst for the development of different sport and life skills.**^{8,9,10}



What do we mean when we say “positive youth development?”

We use this term to refer to an approach designed to help young people grow into confident, responsible, and healthy individuals by creating safe and supportive environments, building their skills, and fostering strong relationships so that they can thrive. “Positive youth development” practices often span different fields, approaches, strategies, and frameworks, including but not limited to positive youth development, social and emotional learning, life skills, positive climate, mental health and well-being, trauma-informed or trauma-responsive care, healing-centered sport, and more.

Here's the thing: **Coaches need support, too.** That is why 18 different youth sport organizations, leagues, state councils and high school associations, funders, researchers, and coach developers have all come together to form the **Million Coaches Challenge** (MCC), built around the shared belief that coaches trained in evidence-based youth development and skill-building practices are essential for creating quality sport experiences that meet young people's physical, mental, and emotional needs.

The MCC partner organizations have developed more than 40 different trainings and are on their way to training one million coaches in practices that support positive youth development.

Findings from an ongoing, multiyear implementation study of the Million Coaches Challenge have elevated 12 core coaching practices that are shared across most of the MCC partners' trainings. Prior research has shown that these core coaching practices enable positive outcomes for youth athletes and coaches.

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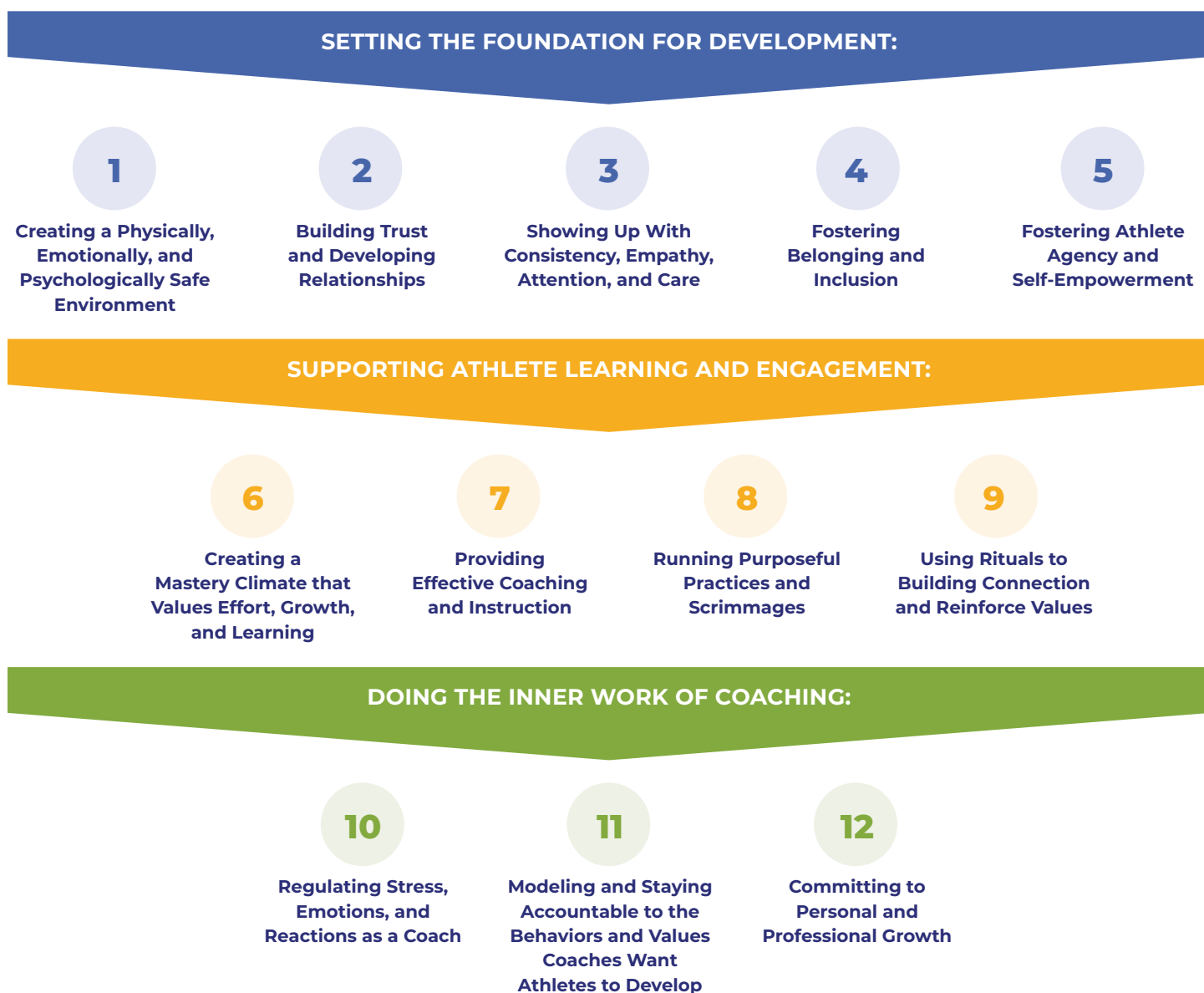


Introducing the 12 Core Practice Areas

This guide is organized around **12 core practice areas** that emerged from the [MCC implementation study](#). These practice areas reflect what coaches are being asked to do in their day-to-day work with youth athletes. They showed up across most partner trainings and were described in ways that made them usable across sports, ages, and coaching contexts.

The order in which these practices are presented is intentional. It reflects widely accepted theories in positive youth development and a conceptual arc for coaching. Many of these ideas are also interconnected. In practice and in training content, they overlap or reinforce one another.

Although we don't present these 12 practice areas as a formal framework or set of categories, there are natural groupings:



About The Guide

This guide was created by the American Institutes for Research® (AIR®) in collaboration with the Million Coaches Challenge partner organizations, based on findings from an ongoing implementation study of the MCC.

We created this guide as a resource for coaches and their organizations to provide practical and actionable strategies for supporting positive youth development through sport. Our goal is to take what we are learning from the MCC and share our collective vision for integrating practices that foster positive youth development into coaching.

This guide may be a starting point or a stop along a coach's coaching journey.

These ideas may be new, or they may be used to expand practice. Wherever coaches are coming from, let's meet them there!

Each section lays out one of the 12 core coaching practice areas that **all** good coaches—no matter your sport, the age of your athletes, level of competition, or access to resources—should know about and be able to implement. For each practice, we share the following:

What it is

Why it matters

What it looks like in practice



Learn more about the [MCC Implementation Study](#) and how AIR® developed this practice guide.

How to Use the Guide



This guide offers practical, easy-to-implement coaching practices that support positive youth development in sports and can complement and enhance existing training efforts.

While it's primarily geared toward coaches, it's also a valuable resource for sport leaders, athletes, and families. Each group plays a role in creating safe, inclusive, and growth-oriented environments.

This guide is not meant to replace formal training programs for coaches. Instead, it offers helpful insights into positive youth development practices and strategies that can complement and enhance existing training efforts.

It's important to note that **coaches are not and should not be expected to do everything in this guide all at once.** Some practices—like creating a physically and emotionally safe environment and building strong relationships—are foundational and nonnegotiable. They are well-established in the research on positive youth development and are covered in all the trainings offered by the Million Coaches Challenge partner organizations. These practices must be in place if coaches are to implement other practices effectively. Then, coaches may prioritize additional practices based on local context, the team's needs, and each coach's own areas for growth. Use this guide as a roadmap. Start where coaches are, choose one or two areas to focus on, and build over time. The goal is progress, not perfection.

Sport Leaders

Sports leaders (e.g., athletic directors, league presidents) are responsible for shaping the policies and systems influencing the athletic experience. Sports leaders can use this guide to do the following:

- **Align Policies and Practices:**

Reflect on how well your existing policies support the coaching practices described in this guide. Identify areas of strength and opportunities for better alignment.

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Example:

If athlete safety is a priority and coaches are expected to maintain proper equipment, is there a clear system for distributing supplies or requesting replacements? If so, how are coaches informed? If not, what process could be put in place?

- **Set Clear Expectations for Coaches:**

Share the guide with coaches and communicate clearly about the practices you expect them to implement. Let them know what support is available—such as training sessions or feedback opportunities.

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Example:

Host a season kickoff with coaches to introduce the guide and facilitate discussion about expectations and strategies for using the practices.

- **Support Ongoing Coach Education and Development:**

Offer training and development opportunities that deepen coaches' understanding of the practices. Each section includes links to coach trainings and resources to learn more.

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Example:

Organize a community of practice where coaches use the guide to reflect and share experiences. To further support a practice—like creating a mastery climate—offer targeted training or partner with an external organization.

- **Observe and Provide Feedback:**

Implement systems to observe coaches at practices and games. Use those observations to guide feedback and reflection.

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Example:

Develop a simple rubric aligned to the practices. Invite peer observations and follow-up conversations to support continuous improvement.

Coaches and Staff

Coaches and staff work directly with athletes and shape their everyday experiences. Coaches and staff can use this guide to do the following:

- **Reflect on Your Coaching Practice:**

Read through the 12 practices. For each one, coaches can ask the following:

- Where and how does this align with my coaching philosophy?
- What am I doing well?
- What could I improve?
- What do I need to learn more about?

Coaches can then identify one or two practices to focus on, make a plan, and revisit it over time.

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Example:

A coach wants to better support athlete agency. They decide to integrate two athlete-led elements into each practice and carve out time in closing circle for athlete reflection. The coach reviews this plan with their coaching partner, and they identify how to support athletes to step into leadership roles.

- **Pursue Professional Growth:**

Coaches can use the guide to pinpoint areas of growth and learning. This could include reading a book, attending a workshop, observing another coach, or taking an online course. We have linked to aligned MCC partner resources in each section of this practice guide.

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Example:

A high school girls' lacrosse coach wants to increase their athletes' sense of belonging on the team. The coach attends a training on creating team culture and relationship-building and reads up on best practices to adapt their training sessions accordingly.

- **Find an Accountability Partner:**

Growth takes intention and consistency. Coaches should share identified goals with someone—like a co-coach or athlete—and ask them for help to stay accountable to the goals.

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Example:

A youth soccer coach is working on emotional regulation. They ask their coaching partner to signal to them when emotions are running high and debrief weekly on what their coaching partner noticed and how they responded.

Athletes and Families

Athletes and families play an essential role in creating supportive, growth-oriented environments. Athletes and families can use this guide in the following ways:

- **Reflect on Roles:**

Review the practices and consider how athlete and family actions can support the practices. Identify one or two areas to focus on.

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Example:

A high school baseball athlete wants to build belonging on their team. During partner activities, they seek out teammates they don't know well and make an effort to connect.

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Example:

A parent wants to support a mastery climate—an environment where the focus is on effort, learning, and personal growth rather than on outcomes like winning. After games, they shift conversations with their athlete to highlight how they worked hard, improved a skill, or supported teammates.

- **Engage in Conversations for Collective Improvement:**

Athletes deserve environments that nurture their development. The practices can be used to initiate conversations about how things are going and how they can improve.

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Example:

An athlete and caregiver review the guide and notice inconsistency across the league. They make a plan to:

- Talk with teammates and families about showing up consistently and why it matters;
- Talk with coaches about reinforcing the expectations the team set together; and
- Meet with the league president to advocate for clearer communication, consistent safety procedures, and reliable equipment at all locations.





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