



NOTHING HEALS LIKE SPORT

A NEW PLAYBOOK FOR COACHES

AFTER MORE THAN THREE YEARS OF LIVING THROUGH A GLOBAL HEALTH EMERGENCY - WHICH CAUSED BOTH AN UNIMAGINABLE AMOUNT OF DIRECT LOSS AND LAID BARE THE INEQUITY OF SOCIAL STRUCTURES THAT HAVE SYSTEMATICALLY AND INTENTIONALLY TRAUMATIZED AND MARGINALIZED MINORITY GROUPS FOR CENTURIES - YOUNG PEOPLE ARE STRUGGLING. STRUGGLING TO CARRY THE WEIGHT OF THE CHAOS, OF THE DISRUPTION, OF THE TRAUMA.

THE MOMENT IS NOW. THE NEED IS URGENT. THE TIME HAS COME FOR SWEEPING CHANGES THAT ALLOW EVERY YOUNG PERSON TO ACCESS THE SUPPORT THEY NEED, WHETHER IT'S ON A FIELD, IN A GYM OR IN THE POOL. THAT'S RIGHT - IT'S TIME FOR ALL OF US WHO KNOW THE POTENTIAL OF A POSITIVE COACH AND SUPPORTING TEAM TO REPEAT THIS PHRASE WE KNOW TO BE TRUE.

NOTHING ~~HEALS~~ LIKE SPORT.



ABOUT THIS PLAYBOOK

When you spend as much time around coaches as we do, you learn one thing quickly - all coaches want what is best for their athletes. And most prioritize this success above all else.

Unfortunately, coaches are fighting a system that defines success in only one way - WINS. Coaches exist in a structure that doesn't invest in them, their development, or aid them in maximizing their impact. The predominant examples they have to learn from are coaches on tv, who are only shown in the most stressful and intense moments, moments that get generalized into all aspects of coaching.

In today's climate, we're asking more of coaches than ever before. Modern coaching has proven to all that the quality of the coach-athlete relationship is the primary predictor for an athlete's performance. And without an expanded tool set, coaches can feel frustrated as they work to meet the diverse needs of their athletes.

THIS PLAYBOOK GIVES COACHES THESE TOOLS.

These are the tools that help them center their athletes and understand what happens as athletes develop. These are the tools to support athletes through adversity - whether that adversity comes only on the court or is part of their athlete's lived experience. These are the tools that help **coaches**, so coaches can then help athletes.

Our partnership with Dr. Bruce D. Perry M.D., Ph.D., and the Neurosequential Network has fueled the development of this playbook. These skills and strategies are an intentional merging of Dr. Perry's core, groundbreaking concepts and the coaching expertise and connected community of the Center for Healing and Justice through Sport.

We believe these tools will help YOU so that you can then support your athletes in all the ways a modern athlete requires. We also know that when your athletes feel supported and take ownership of their team, you win more games (a lot more games). The spaces where athletes perform their best athletically are exactly those spaces where they feel safe, seen and encouraged to be their whole selves. They are the spaces of healing-centered, brain-based coaching.



HOW IT WORKS

This toolkit is divided into three major parts - a crash course on the brain, an exploration of the three ways sport can contribute to healing, and a look at how to integrate brain-based, healing-centered strategies into sport experiences.

There's a lot of information here. And some of it might feel new or overwhelming. The brain is incredibly complex (hello 86 billion neurons!) and all images and descriptions are strictly used to share concepts in an accessible way.

So, we've done two things to help you make your way through this playbook.

First, we've incorporated breaks. In the spirit of being biologically respectful, we know that the brain doesn't learn best when we sit and read. Or when we try to jam too much information into our brains at once. So, we encourage you to take breaks - put the toolkit down and move your body. Re-engage your brain, and find the right dose of information.

Second, check out the key terms. Because this work is rooted in neuroscience, you might run into a few words or concepts that feel unfamiliar and maybe, even, a little overly clinical. Don't be intimidated. If you stick with them, we think you'll find that they aren't just applicable to your coaching but to all aspects of your life.

The path from "What the heck is regulation?" to "Dang, my boss sure is dysregulated" is actually very short.

Ready? Here We Go!

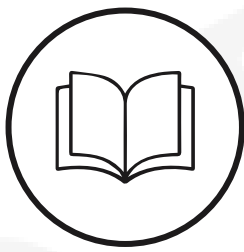


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TRAUMA

Dr. Perry defines trauma as "a traumatic event is any pattern of activation of your stress response system that leads to an alteration in how the system is functioning and that leads to over-activity and an over reactivity." Everyone experiences traumatic events differently. And the way we experience traumatic events is influenced by our history of relational health.

REGULATION/DYSREGULATION

Regulation is the ability (dysregulation is the inability) to effectively manage and respond to an emotional experience. Dysregulation happens when the stress response is activated and causes us to engage the lower, less smart, parts of the brain. Conversely, when we are regulated, we are able to access our cortex and make more rational decisions.

HEALING-CENTERED SPORT*

A sport environment in which the conditions for healing, like safety, relationships, and agency, are present. Inspired by Shawn Ginwright's reframing of "trauma-informed" to be more asset-based and culturally responsive.

BRAIN-BASED COACHING*

An approach to coaching in which coach behaviors and decisions are influenced by an understanding of how the brain works, including the ways in which brain responds to trauma or adversity.

ATHLETES/PLAYER/YOUNG PERSON

A person or person(s) who is/are being coached.

***Healing-Centered Sport and Brain-Based Coaching approaches work for everyone and are essential for athletes impacted by trauma.**



**YOUR
BRAIN
ON
SPORTS**

AN INTRODUCTION



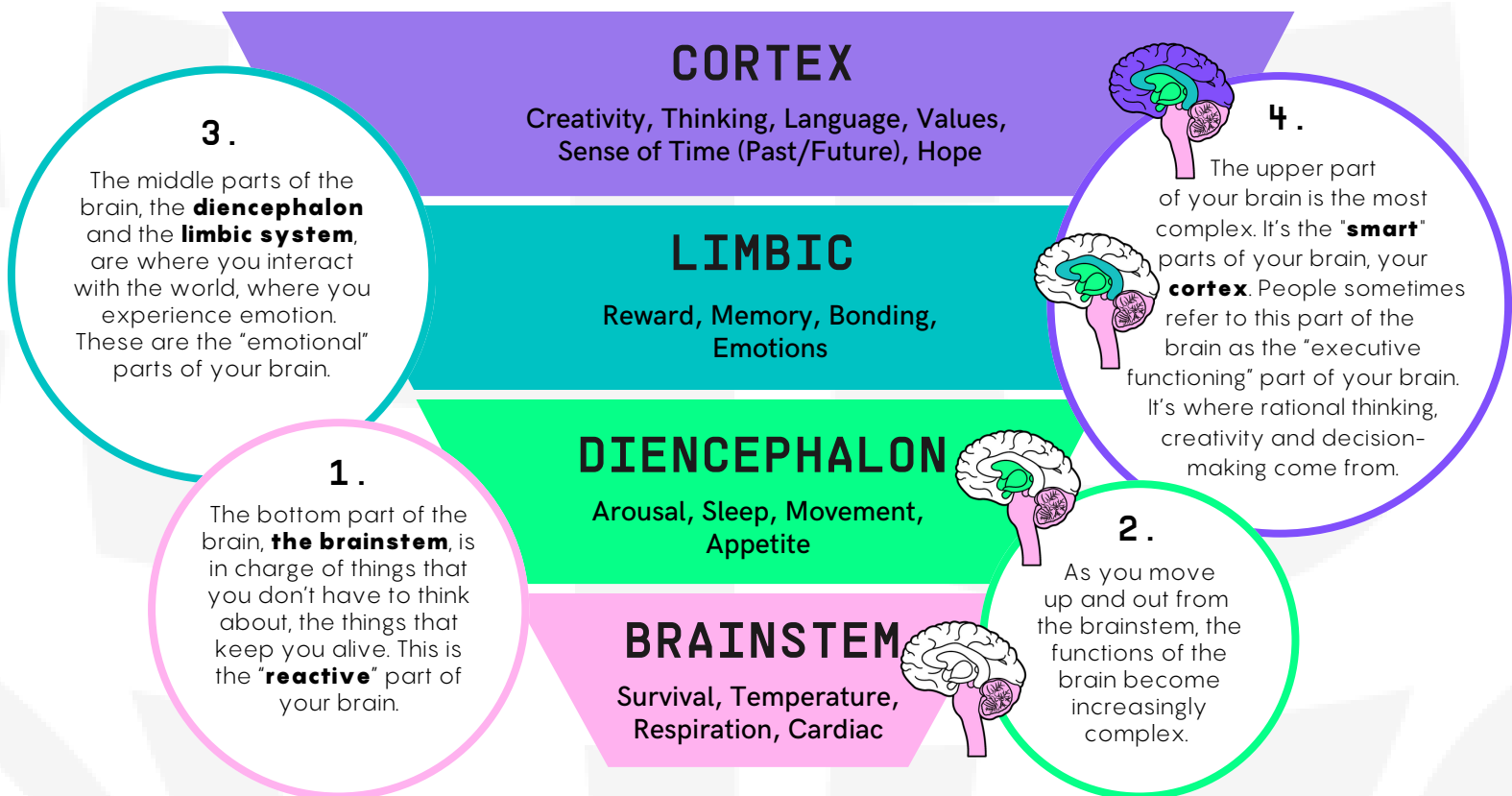
INTRODUCTION: YOUR BRAIN ON SPORTS

Coaches who want to create inclusive sport environments in which all young people, no matter their circumstances, can thrive, must have a general understanding of the following three things:

- How the brain develops and processes information
- How the experience of adversity impacts the brain, body and behavior
- The unique ways that sport can be used to support healing and positive development.

Let's talk first about the brain.

Everything about your brain - the way it was developed, the way it takes in and processes information - happens from the **bottom** to the **top**.



Infographics are based on the Neurosequential Model's "Upside Down Triangle" teaching heuristic. Modified with permission. All rights reserved © 2006-2023 Bruce D. Perry

Why does it matter that the brain develops and processes information from the **bottom** to the **top**?

Because it tells us a lot about the **behavior** of young people.

This is the **NEW** way of coaching - where we understand what's behind behavior and focus on helping kids heal and grow - so they can be the best people and best athletes they can be.

These overreactions can get young people in trouble because they don't fit the circumstance. This can look like a young person who explodes, quits, or checks out even when it seems to everyone else like nothing is wrong. They feel unsafe, even when it doesn't seem that way to others.

Young people who have these disproportionate reactions are often punished. Their behaviors (and far too often, their whole selves) are labeled as challenging. But the experience of trauma has wired their brains this way. And...

However, when young people have a lot **of adversity or trauma** in their lives, their brains start to expect the world to be unsafe. They start to have these fight, flight, freeze and flock reactions to even small amounts of stress. They start "overreacting" to stress. Their reactions come from the lower reactive parts of the brain and they lose access to their smart brain (the cortex).

Sometimes kids just aren't biologically or developmentally able to control their reactions or emotions. These behaviors aren't intentional and aren't directed "at" us.

Challenging behavior is almost always indicative of a lack of skill, not will. Because as **Stuart Ablon** teaches us, "Kids do well if they can." *

If the brain detects safety, it sends the information up to the cortex, where they can reflect and make a rational decision about what to do.

If the brain detects threat, it activates the "stress response" system in the lower parts of the brain. This restricts access to the cortex and causes a reaction-fight, flight, freeze or flock. These reactions are usually good because they help keep us safe.

Our athletes don't have fully formed brains. The cortex (the smart, decision-making part of the brain) develops last. The younger the child, the more likely they are to be influenced by their reactive and emotional brains.

Our athletes (all humans, really) "react" and "feel" before they think (remember- our brains develop from the bottom up). The first thing their brain does with any information is determine if they are safe or in danger. It does this based on the experiences each athlete has as they develop..

PATH 1

PATH 2

PATH 3

START HERE:

FOLLOW THESE THREE PATHS TO SEE WHAT WE MEAN

*From Stuart Ablon's work on collaborative problem solving. ThinkKids.org

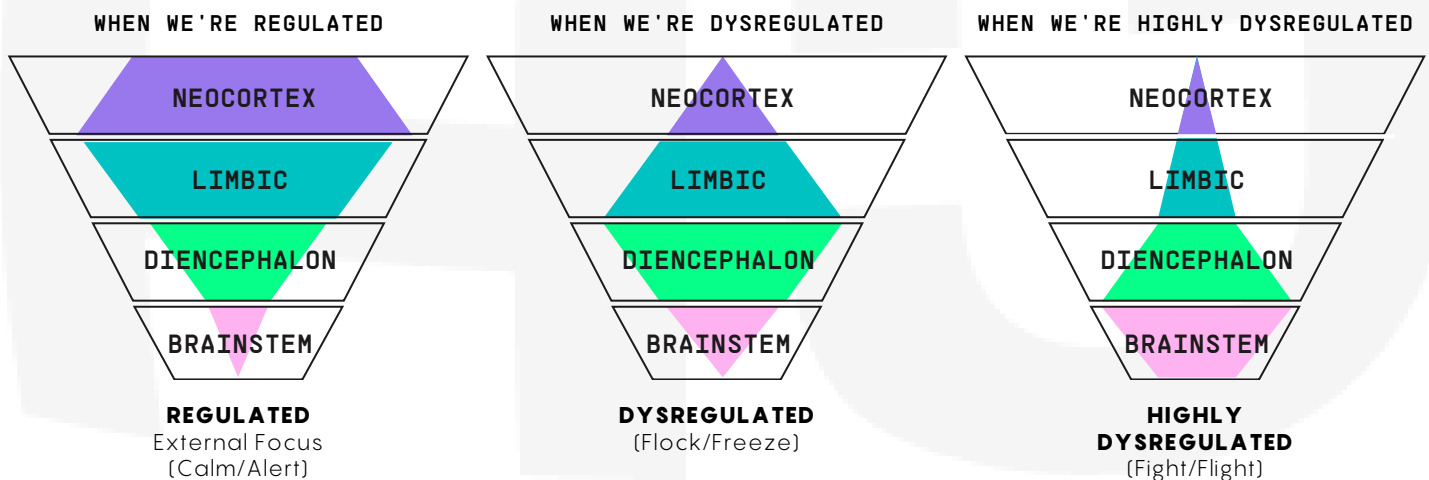


THE DYSREGULATED BRAIN

One way to think about what happens to the brain when it's been exposed to significant adversity is this:

"You can't do calculus if you're standing in the middle of the freeway."

Your brain is trying to keep you safe. And, because your brain is good at keeping you safe, it directs all of your energy to avoiding being hit by a car. It shuts down access to the parts of the brain that you don't need, in this case your cortex. You have no use for the quadratic equation when your life is in danger.



But here's what happens when you end up dodging cars over and over again. Your brain starts to see the world as unsafe. So it begins to stay on alert all the time. It will be easier to just stay on alert than to keep turning the alarm systems on and off. Now, what was a temporary situation becomes the norm - the lower parts of the brain are in charge all the time and accessing the smart brain gets harder and harder.



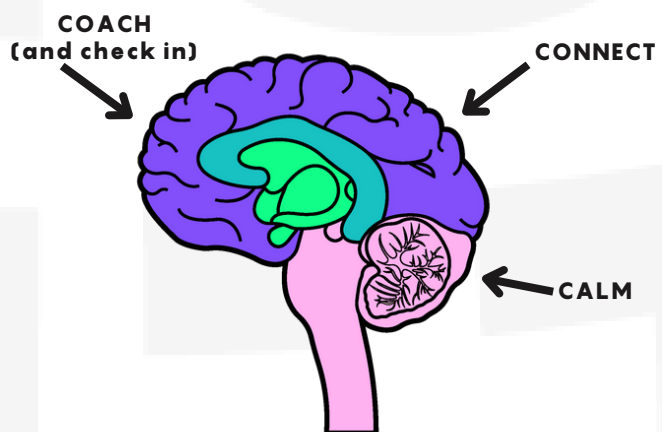
CALM, CONNECT & COACH

So, what do we do? This is where sport comes in. Sport is a powerful environment where we can do things to let the lower parts of our brain know that we're safe so that we can turn off the alarm systems. To do this, we have to **start from the bottom, and work our way up:**

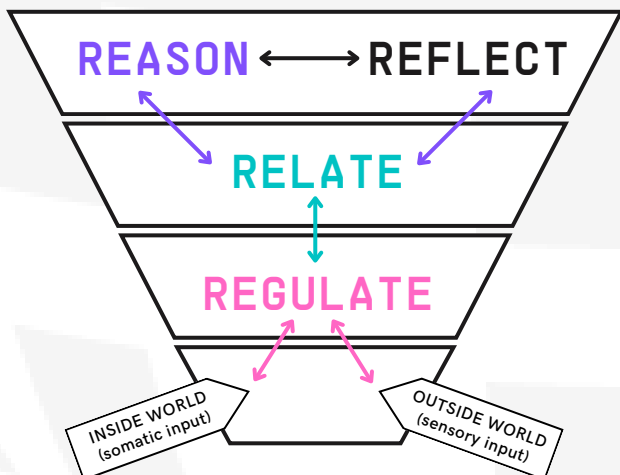
1. Regulate - bring our stress response levels down to baseline, then

2. Relate - feel safe and connected, so that we can

3. Reason (and Reflect) - access our cortex and make rational decisions.



SEQUENTIAL ENGAGEMENT & PROCESSING



A NOTE ABOUT LANGUAGE:

Making the language of the brain accessible is important. So is speaking to coaches and other sport personnel in a way that helps them see themselves in the work. At **CHJS**, we use "**calm, connect, and coach**" as a way to make sure coaches see that this model directly applies to them.

TAKE A BREAK

PUT THE TOOLKIT DOWN. CLOSE YOUR SCREEN.

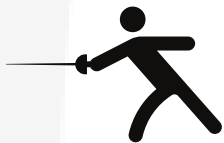
FOLLOW A SHORT YOGA FLOW.

YOU CAN DO A FEW OF YOUR FAVORITE POSES, OR YOU CAN USE OUR "ATHLETE" POSES BELOW.



"Serving" Pose

Reach back behind your head with your racquet arm. Hold the other arm out like you're about to throw the ball in the air. Feel the pull between the tips of your ball throwing arm to the elbow of your racquet arm.



"Fencing" Pose

Similar to the warrior two pose, hold the epee in one hand, reaching it out as far forward as you can. Lunge with the same side of your body and hold.



"Swimming" Pose

Like a tree pose, stand with your feet about shoulder-width apart. Hold your two hands together and reach them high above your head as though you just dove into the water and are trying to get as far into the pool as you can.



"Ground Ball" Pose

Similar to the triangle pose, lean your "glove hand" across your body toward the opposite foot as though you are reaching for a ground ball going past your non-glove side.

THE **POWER** OF SPORT



RELATIONSHIPS MOVEMENT, AND
MANAGEABLE STRESS

THE POWER OF SPORT

Sport is uniquely suited to help reverse the impact of adversity on the brain because it combines three things that help athletes feel safe, get regulated and build resilience. They are:



RELATIONSHIPS

Trust is the antidote to stress. When a young person feels connected to their coach and team, they feel safe. Knowing that their coach and team will be there for them, no matter what, helps remove the threat of taking risks and trying new things. Every positive relationship in a young person's life matters. In fact, "relational health" is more predictive of outcomes than experiences of adversity (Perry & Winfrey, 2021).



MOVEMENT

Physical activity helps our brains manage stress. When we move our bodies, we engage in patterned, repetitive, rhythmic activity (PRRA). PRRA helps us get regulated because of the foundational association our brain made during our earliest fetal development between our mother's heartbeat and having all of our needs met. Now, every time we move in that patterned, repetitive, rhythmic way, it reminds our brain of having all our needs met, which helps regulate us.



MANAGEABLE STRESS

The opposite of overwhelming stress is not NO stress; it's "dosed" stress - like adding five pounds (not fifty) to the bench press at a time. Stress that is controlled, moderate and predictable helps us build resilience. Stress that is severe, prolonged and chaotic is dysregulating or makes it more likely that we will become "over sensitive" to stress.

"Sport is naturally structured to provide relational dosing that is much more therapeutically sensitive than traditional therapy. If we make coaches 5% more trauma-informed, or developmentally sensitive, we will have more therapeutic impact on children than if we trained an entire new cohort of trauma therapists."

– Bruce D.Perry, MD, PhD

IN SPORT, THERE ARE SO MANY OPPORTUNITIES TO ENGAGE IN THE RIGHT PATTERNS OF STRESS, ALL WHILE MOVING AND BEING SUPPORTED BY CARING COACHES AND TEAMMATES.



RELATIONSHIPS

For some coaches, building relationships seems “soft” compared to high level drills and tactics. To others, positive relationships are assumed to happen naturally, simply by virtue of being on a team together. What we know about how the brain works shuts both of these assumptions down. It tells us that relationships are foundational to success in sport. They are not a “nice to have” but a **“need to have”** - an essential component of any successful learning environment.

Unfortunately, there’s no “one size fits all” to relationships. We can’t draw up a play and use it every time we coach a new team or recruit a new player. But there are some things that, if we keep them in mind, will help put us on the right path to connecting with our athletes, including those athletes who can appear to be harder to engage - those who have experienced adversity or trauma.

CONNECTION, NOT ATTENTION

When a young person exhibits challenging behavior, it is often labelled “attention-seeking” behavior when what the young person is really asking for is connection - the thing we need most in order to feel safe. It’s common for coaches to ignore or punish what they think is attention-seeking behavior so as not to reinforce the way the athlete attempted to get the attention, instead of understanding what’s underneath the behavior - a genuine need for connection. Reframing behavior as “connection-seeking” helps us address what an athlete really needs.

CURIOUS, NOT JUDGMENTAL

We get ourselves into trouble when we make assumptions. Too often our assumptions about young people are rooted in realities that are not biologically respectful - they don’t match what’s **developmentally** appropriate for a young person or take into account what could be happening as a result of the experience of adversity. If, instead, we’re **curious** about each young person as an individual, we can better understand their unique needs and create an experience that supports their growth.

SKILL, NOT WILL

As coaches, one of the quickest ways to find yourself at odds with a young person is to **interpret** their behavior as intentional and directed at us. We approach that person in a completely different way if, instead of assigning a negative willful intent to a young person’s behavior, we **ask** ourselves what kind of skill (or skills) this young person is missing. Coaches are great at building skills - they just need to be willing to **teach** the “soft” skills that young people need to be successful in addition to sport skills.

LOVE, NOT TOUGH LOVE

Sport is one of the only environments in which we tolerate the verbal and emotional abuse of young people. Often, it’s chalked up to “tough love” - a way of holding young people accountable. The problems with this are many, but the most damaging impact of this practice is the widely adopted norm that it’s the “tough” that helps young people succeed when everything we know about the **brain** tells us it’s actually the **“love.”** Coaches get away with the tough because of the love and not the other way around. Love is the driver of engagement and **performance** in sport - because neither is possible when a young person feels unsafe. Removing the tough does not mean that we stop holding young people accountable. In fact, it allows us to create a better container around young people in which they can **learn** skills that will help them be successful at whatever a coach asks of them.

HIGH-FIVES & FIST BUMPS

THE POWER OF THERAPEUTIC MOMENTS



When we think of healing our brains, we're much more likely to think of a therapist's office than a basketball court. But when we understand the way the brain works, we learn that small moments of intense connection can be as powerful, if not more powerful, than traditional therapeutic models.

The brain responds to novelty. Changes in the environment elicit a reaction. New things make our stress response kick in and put us on alert. However, when something familiar and good is introduced, it's like a burst of positive chemicals for your brain. These positive interactions are powerful in and of themselves, but they are also cumulative. To get the benefit of these positive bursts, you don't need extended interactions - you need meaningful ones. And the more you have, the better.

This means that every high-five, fist-bump and collaborative conversations with your players matters.

It also means that you don't have to be a therapist to be therapeutic. A coach who invests in these small moments multiple times a practice, across the whole season - who slows down and uses twenty seconds of the timeout to call out something positive, to look every player in the eye and tell them something they did right - creates a relationally healthy environment. This kind of environment has more relational potential, and therefore more healing potential, than most methods.

STRATEGY SPOTLIGHT: HIGH-FIVES



In "**Tactile Communication, Cooperation and Performance: An Ethological study of the NBA**" researchers found that good teams tend to be much more hands-on than bad ones. Teams whose players touched most often were more cooperative, played better and won more games.

While not a causal relationship, the study concluded that: "High fives and fist bumps, seemingly small dramatic demonstrations during group interactions, have a lot to say about the cooperative workings of a team and whether that team wins or loses."

(Kraus, Huang & Keltner, 2010)

STRATEGY SPOTLIGHT :

ENERGY GENERATING BEHAVIORS (EGBs)

Men's March Madness 2023. Many of us hear about "**energy generating behaviors**" (EGBs) for the first time from Furman coach **Bob Richey**. Furman, a 13-seed, upset heavily favored 4-seed Virginia in the first round of the tournament. Against San Diego State, Coach Richey talked at halftime about having only 65 EGBs (several hundred is the goal) and how this low number was impacting their performance.

Shaka Smart, Head Coach at Marquette University, has also brought attention to the practice of tracking EGBs, which they do every day at practice. Defined as "anything you do that gives energy," Coach Smart also lists the following as EGBs:

- Slapping the floor
- Smacking a teammate on the back
- A high five
- Daps
- Deflections
- Power claps
- Encouraging your teammates
- Chest bumps
- Acknowledging something good a teammate does
- Calling a teammate out when they need to be better



RELATIONSHIP-BUILDING STRATEGIES

STRATEGY 1: WELCOME YOUNG PEOPLE ONTO THE TEAM AS THEIR WHOLE SELVES - NOT REGARDLESS OF WHO THEY ARE BUT BECAUSE OF WHO THEY ARE.

LEARN NAMES

Even if “you’re not good with names” it’s essential to show young people they are important to you by investing in learning their names.

GREET YOUNG PEOPLE INDIVIDUALLY

Signal that you’re paying attention and that each player matters by greeting everyone individually.

CHECK-IN

Make it a habit to check-in (formally & informally) with players. A non-verbal check-in (like 1-5 fingers or a thumb-o-meter) lets you check in quickly and regularly, across a distance, or with the whole team at once.

GIVE THEM THE MIC

Make time during your practice for players to connect and talk about what they want to talk about - it could be as practice starts or at the end, but it should be a set time so they know what to expect.

ASK QUESTIONS

Young people spend a lot of time being told what to do. Engage players in their learning and make them feel valued by asking more questions and giving fewer orders or instructions.

PRONOUNS, PRONUNCIATION AND NICKNAMES

Coaches refer to players in ways the players choose. They honor pronouns, work hard to correctly pronounce names and make sure that any nickname feels comfortable to the young person.

INCLUDE FAMILIES

Encourage families to be involved in team activities whenever possible. This can remove barriers for young people to participate (i.e. let siblings come to practice) and build a web of support for young people.

ACKNOWLEDGE CONTEXT

When something happens that impacts your players - a community event, a loss, or an act of prejudice (racism, sexism, ableism) - name it. You may not have the perfect thing to say, but saying something is better than saying nothing.

REVISIT CONVERSATIONS

When you learn about something going on in a young person’s life, be sure to check back in about it later. They’ll notice you were thinking about them.

STRATEGY 2: HELP YOUNG PEOPLE CONNECT WITH THEIR PEERS

CONSIDER GROUPINGS

Be intentional about how you mix up teams and activity groups so that players have a chance to connect with different teammates. Divide players of similar skill levels for some activities, similar interests for others. Be sure to think about who doesn’t have a chance to work together often and pair them up for a new challenge.

TEAM SHOUT-OUTS

Encouraging players to shout out teammates is a great tradition. These shout-outs can be totally player-led or you can prompt them to shout-out a particular skill, strategy or attribute you’ve focused on at practice.

TAKE ON CHALLENGES TOGETHER

One of the best ways to learn about a teammate is to work together to solve a problem. Present pairs or small groups with a challenge and see what happens.

SPACE TO SHARE

Create opportunities for players to share something about themselves - like their favorite movie or subject in school. You never know what players will have in common.



RELATIONSHIP-BUILDING STRATEGIES

STRATEGY 3: MAKE SURE YOUNG PEOPLE KNOW THEIR WORTH IS DETERMINED BY THEIR HUMANITY, NOT THEIR PERFORMANCE.

UNCONDITIONAL POSITIVE REGARD

Start from a place of: I care about you, you have value, you don't have to do anything to prove to me, and nothing is going to change my mind. This doesn't mean players can never do anything wrong - it simply means that it's clear that you may question a player's choices or behavior, but you will never question their worth.

CATCH THEM DOING SOMETHING GOOD

Actively call out players when they do something well. Giving airtime to positive things unrelated to performance will make them feel valued for who they are, not what they do.

NORMALIZE MISTAKES

When an athlete fears mistakes, they may be afraid their coach or teammates will no longer value them. Building a culture that moves on from mistakes (or, even, values them as evidence of courage) are safer places for athletes to be themselves and grow as players and people.

HIGH FIVE WITH ABANDON

Celebrate all the ways that kids show up - not just when they are at their best or perform their best.

STRATEGY 4: GIVE YOUNG PEOPLE CONTROL OVER THEIR EXPERIENCE AND THE CHANCE TO CONTRIBUTE IN MEANINGFUL WAYS.

OPT IN / OPT OUT

Make it very clear that players always have the option to opt out of something. This does not mean that we never want to let them feel uncomfortable, because being uncomfortable is part of learning. But it does establish a norm that we will listen to what feels overwhelming to an athlete and work with them to figure out how to take on a new challenge.

LET THEM LEAD

Find opportunities for young people to practice being in leadership roles and make decisions for the team. Assign team captains and game day roles (being the bus DJ, leading warm-ups, calling the team cheer), or let players plan practice. When they feel ownership, they will be more engaged.

SHIFT THE BALANCE OF POWER

There is an uneven power dynamic between coaches and players, which can make the space less safe. Do things to close the power differential, i.e.: get on their level; be parallel when giving instructions, solicit feedback (and act on it), let young people teach you, and take responsibility for errors and apologize when appropriate.

STRATEGY 5: BE PREDICTABLE - MAKE SURE YOUNG PEOPLE KNOW WHAT TO EXPECT FROM YOU

FOLLOW THE PLAN

Follow a practice and game plan - keep spaces, times and schedules as consistent as possible (and let players know when something will change). Incorporate rituals and traditions, warm-ups and cool downs, team cheers and celebrations, and consistent ways to settle conflict. Removing uncertainty makes spaces safer.

SHARE THE WHY

Coaches are great at sharing the "what" and the "how," but are less adept at explaining the "why." Sharing your reasoning can help players see the sport through your eyes (which can help their understanding and decision-making process). It can also make things more predictable (and thus safe).

REGULATE YOURSELF

A dysregulated adult can't regulate a dysregulated young person. If we want young people to be better at managing stress, we need to model it and set the tone. The more dysregulated we are, the less predictable we become. When a player doesn't know what to expect, they go "on alert" which means they are also at risk for dysregulation. When they become dysregulated, they need to be reminded of what keeps them safe, like an adult who they trust.

TAKE A BREAK

PUT THE TOOLKIT DOWN. CLOSE YOUR SCREEN.

CHOOSE ONE OF THE BREAKS BELOW:



Walk

Take a 5 to 10 minute walk around the block.

- OR -



Play Catch

Find someone who you can play catch with for five to ten minutes. If you have gloves and a softball, great. But if you don't, that's great, too. Use a tennis ball, a playground ball or a beach ball. Anything where you go back and forth with your partner. You and your partner get to decide the distance, the velocity and the kind of toss.



MOVEMENT

Despite knowing the positive impact physical activity can have on the brain, we still don't use movement as much as we should. The more physical activity a young person gets, the better able they are to be **"regulated."** When they are regulated, they can access their smart brains. So let's get them moving:

- Start practice with a routine of regulating activities (during **transitions, warm-ups, team huddle**, etc.)
- Walk and talk - if you're planning to have a conversation with one of your athletes, consider walking and talking so you are both more regulated. You'll also be parallel to one another, which may help the player be comfortable
- Instead of forcing young people to sit quietly when they become dysregulated, let a young person go for a walk or engage in a patterned, repetitive, rhythmic sport-related, skill-building activity (**see below**).

STRATEGY SPOTLIGHT

"VITAMINS"

The Tufts University Women's Soccer team starts practice the same way every day by engaging in an activity called **"vitamins."** Vitamins is an activity that builds core skills that you do every day, just like you take your vitamins every day. The Jumbos' vitamins work on core footwork or "touch" - the ability to control the ball when it comes to you in the air.

It looks like:

With a partner (the same partner all season), stand a few yards apart, facing one another. One partner tosses the ball to the other partner to control and pass back, then the partners switch.

It follows this pattern:

- 5 -10 reps on each foot, volley back
- 5-10 reps on each thigh, volley back
- 5-10 reps on chest, volley back
- 5-10 reps on head, volley back

So many of the core movements of sport are patterned, repetitive, rhythmic movements - **walking, skipping, jogging, swimming, skating, riding a bicycle, rowing a boat, etc.** In many sports, the things we do to build core skills are also regulating - **dribbling a basketball, passing a soccer ball, playing catch, volleying in tennis, etc.** Use these movements not only for sport skill building but intentionally as a way to promote regulation.

When thinking about regulation, also consider the movements that you do to prevent or rehabilitate an injury, like **jumping rope, rolling on a foam roller, or riding a stationary bike.** These movements are almost always patterned, repetitive, and rhythmic. Patterned, repetitive, rhythmic activities help build and rebuild muscles, including the regulation "muscle."

Note: the brain is not a muscle but functions like one. It is plastic (it can always change) and use-dependent (the parts you use the most become the strongest).





REGULATION STRATEGIES

ACTIVITIES TO INTENTIONALLY INTEGRATE INTO YOUR SPORT EXPERIENCE



PLAY CATCH

Catch is a patterned, repetitive, rhythmic activity (PPRA) that athletes do with a teammate. Players control the tempo, velocity and type of "throw." Catch doesn't have to be in baseball - throwing and catching any kind of ball or passing back and forth in some way (with a foot, a stick or a racquet) - counts.



WALL BALL

Wall ball is a skill-building activity with a lot of "touches" - throwing and catching (baseball/ softball) passing and receiving with hands (basketball, volleyball), feet (soccer), a racquet (tennis, squash) or a stick (lacrosse) - all against a wall. It's patterned, repetitive & rhythmic and gives the player complete control over the activity.



SKILL STATIONS

Incorporate skill stations to work on critical skills and help players regulate. Players should choose their path through the stations so they control when they take on challenges that stretch them. Set stations up so that the skill is done repeatedly - ball handling (hands or feet), serving, wall ball, taking a specific shot, aiming at a target, etc. are great activities.



DYNAMIC STRETCHING

Dynamic stretching (moving through space by engaging in different repetitive motions) - high knees, butt kicks, sliding, lunges, power skips, changing direction, grapevines, etc. - is typically used as a warm-up or cool-down, but can also be used to transition from one activity to the next or when the team or player needs to regulate. Let players take turns "calling" the moves for the team.



JUGGLING

Not the kind you do alone, but with a group - where you try to keep the ball up in the air. It's regularly used in soccer, but could be used for volleyball. It can be sport-agnostic if you bring a beach ball to practice (to work on hand-eye coordination, team communication and spacing). It's relationally rich and has patterned, repetitive, rhythmic activity.



WARM-UPS & COOL DOWNS

It's not an accident that warm-ups and cool-downs are full of PPRA activities that teams often engage in together. They are predictable and relationally rich. Add opportunities for players to individually get themselves ready (have some control) and these parts of practice become just as useful for the brain as they are for the body.



TALK WHEN THEY ARE READY

Give space to young people to choose when they receive feedback from you. Build structures that allow players to tell you when they are ready to talk. It could be as simple as a code word that means not ready to talk (like pineapples) or it can be a physical space they can go when they need to regulate before engaging.



RITUALS

Sport is loaded with rituals - for teams and individuals. Look for opportunities to incorporate more of both that bring more predictability, PPRA and positive interactions to the team. Things like: taking the field the same way for every inning, huddling up after important moments, and having team mistake or focus rituals.



BREATHING PRACTICE: RHYTHMIC BREATHING

Warrior Breathing: Pull your arms apart on the inhale (so your hands are out by your ears and your fingers are pointing up). On the exhale, bring your hands together in front of your face, as closely as you can, without touching.

Finger Breathing: Hold your hand out in front of you. Breathe in deeply through your nose and hold it while tapping your thumb and fingers together, one by one. Start with your pointer finger and move to your pinky. Move back to your pointer if you can hold the breath longer. Then exhale through your mouth.

Back-to-Back Breathing: With a partner, sit on the floor back-to-back. Sit tall and close your eyes (if you want to). One partner will start - inhale deeply and then exhale slowly. The other partner should try and sync their breath to their partner's. (Make sure players are comfortable touching/ having their back to their partner).

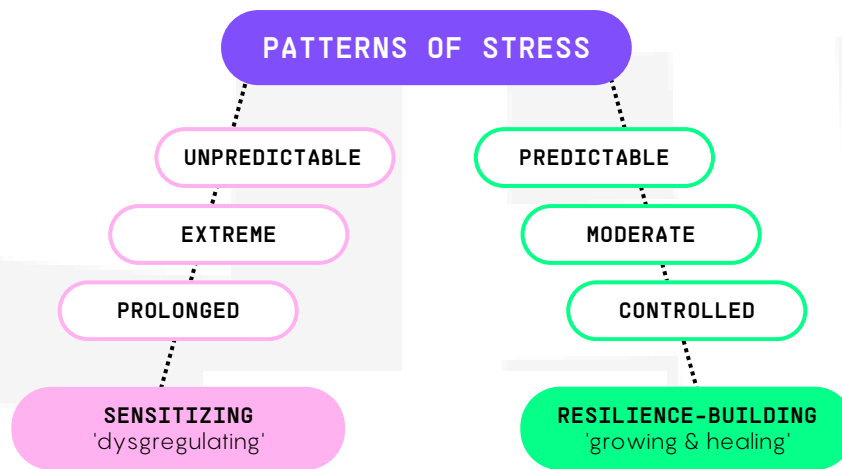


MANAGEABLE STRESS

Creating the right doses of stress allows young people to be stretched just enough to learn and grow but not too much so they become overwhelmed. Every time we engage in one of these manageable challenges, we're getting practice (or reps) at having a proportionate response to stress.

For athletes who are generally well-regulated, they continue to strengthen their ability to respond to stress. For athletes who have experienced significant adversity or trauma, they start to rewire the patterns that have been created by that adversity. They start to be less likely to overreact to stress.

They become more resilient.



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When we approach it intentionally, sport is full of opportunities to engage in manageable stress, like the process of building skills [adding speed, fatigue or pressure when asking a player to perform] or turning up situational stress [bottom of the ninth, time running off of the clock, final race for the championship, etc.]

Resilience is built when we progressively introduce these challenges in ways that are manageable, not by throwing kids into the highest-pressure situation and seeing how they do.

FOLLOW THE ATHLETE'S LEAD

Always give athletes the chance to “opt in or out,” take a break, or reset themselves if they start to get dysregulated. Let them say when they are ready for a challenge.

GIVE INSTRUCTION WHEN THEY CAN HEAR IT

Giving instruction in the heat of a game or match or when an athlete is dysregulated is not the optimal time for them to learn. Choose moments when they are more regulated to add challenge.

CONSIDER YOUR LANGUAGE

How you introduce a new challenge matters. Try saying something like “We’re going to try a new play. Since it’s new, I expect that we’ll all make mistakes at first and that’s ok.”

GIVE THEM LANGUAGE

Help them find ways to talk about how they are feeling during a challenge. Are they in their “comfort zone, stretch zone, or panic zone?” Are they feeling “**green** (comfortable), **yellow** (a little uncomfortable), or **red** (uncomfortable)?”

MANAGE THE COMPARISON GAME

Try to keep your athletes from comparing themselves to one another. Focus on individual growth and shout-out players who set a new personal record or best.

BE AS PREDICTABLE AS POSSIBLE

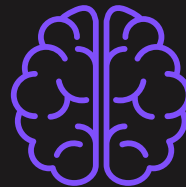
Preview when new challenges are coming. Keep challenges time-bound and update athletes on timing. Be transparent when things change or something unexpected happens.

BE AS PRESENT IN FAILURE AS YOU ARE IN SUCCESS

Give your athletes tools for how to handle failure and give them as much time, attention and positive reinforcement as you would if they just hit the winning shot in the championship.

BELIEVE THEY CAN DO IT (AND MAKE SURE THEY KNOW YOU BELIEVE)

Young people can spot a phony from a mile away. As the person with the most power on the team, you set the tone. If you genuinely believe they can get better, they will genuinely believe it, too.



CREATING AN OPTIMAL ENVIRONMENT FOR MANAGING STRESS

This section will focus on sport’s best places to practice stress: competition and skill-building. The best way to make sure that our athletes can handle the stress of learning new skills and the pressure of competing is to create an environment in which they feel supported and safe.

Safety is essential for learning – our athletes won’t try new things or take risks if they don’t feel safe, and they won’t learn if they don’t have access to their cortex. The following strategies create safety.



SKILL BUILDING STRATEGIES

Coaches are already good at building skills. They know how to help a young person fix the hitch in their golf or softball swing; they craft running programs that help a novice runner train for a marathon; they create the conditions in which a young person sticks the landing every time. However, coaches also know that in building skills, our athletes require that we dose challenges to fit their individual needs.

Below are four strategies that coaches use to help their athletes build skills - **Positive Reinforcement, Demonstrating a Skill, Breaking Down a Skill,** and **Changing Perspectives.** With each, you'll find three additional ways to think about creating manageable challenges while introducing new skills.

POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT

Be supportive; encourage the player in their effort and progress.

- 01. Share the story of their success:** Remind them of a specific time when they learned something new.
- 02. Create evidence of growth:** Have them rate themselves when they start a new skill. Check in to see where they see themselves as they grow.
- 03. Be Specific:** Offer praise that is specific; be sure to include how **brave** they are being for trying something new.

DEMONSTRATING A SKILL

Don't just tell a player how to do a new skill - **show** them.

- 01. Add the Why:** Don't just share how to do a skill, include why a skill is important - the more they understand about the skill, the better.
- 02. Make a Mistake:** Let them see that you aren't perfect! They'll be ok making a mistake if you show them that it's ok.
- 03. Trust the Process:** And talk about it. Share a story of how you struggled learning a new skill. Or explain typical pitfalls when players try it for the first time.

BREAKING DOWN A SKILL

Break a skill down into its smallest parts.

- 01. Scaffold Up and Down:** Add challenge in small doses, but also pull back the challenge after pushing beyond the comfort zone so they end with success.
- 02. Player's Choice:** Only move on to the next challenge when a player says they are ready; give them ownership over their experience.
- 03. Celebrate Small Wins:** The journey to mastery is filled with infinite victories of improvement - celebrate them!

CHANGING PERSPECTIVE

Manipulate the environment; show the skill from different perspectives; use analogies or something that's familiar to the player.

- 01. Be Parallel:** Standing next to your player is less aggressive and signals that you are facing the challenge together.
- 02. Ask What They Need:** You don't have to solve the problem alone. Involve your players in identifying what can help them improve.
- 03. Focus on Personal Bests:** Keep your players from comparing themselves to others by having them strive for (and keep track of) their personal bests.



PARTNER SPOTLIGHT : i-tri girls

On Long Island, **Theresa Roden, Alyssa Channin** and their team support girls to compete in triathlons. But first, they have to convince them to do it. The girls who are part of **i-tri** often come from historically disinvested communities and don't otherwise have access to opportunities to participate in sports, particularly sports that require access to pools or the beach, a bicycle, and/or proper training equipment.

Further, many of the environments in which they will compete and train are new and uncomfortable – they are not confident near or in the water and may not have had experiences riding in traffic. i-tri designs a journey for each individual athlete that meets their needs. They break each activity down to small doses and allow each athlete to determine where they are comfortable and when they are ready to move on to the next challenge. Two examples of getting girls comfortable in the water and on the road are below:

Challenge: Being comfortable in water

Steps:

- Put on a bathing suit
- Walk to the edge of the pool
- Put feet in the pool
- Progressively get more of your body in the pool
- Walk into pool with swimming arms
- Swim in pool

Challenge: Riding a bike on the road

Steps:

- Tiny loops in the school parking lot, each participant goes one at a time
- Loops in a bigger parking lot, one at a time
- Loops in the parking lot, one on one with a coach
- Loops in the parking lot, three participants and a coach
- Small group, small distance on the road (coach at the front and in the back)
- Small group, longer distance on the road (coach at the front and back)
- Larger "paced" groups with a coach between approx. every 10 participants

STRATEGY SPOTLIGHT :

ASK QUESTIONS

Showing genuine interest and asking young people questions about themselves is one of the best ways coaches can show they value the contribution of every athlete. Questions are also a great skill building tool. When we ask more questions (instead of giving more instructions), our athletes are more engaged in the learning, the learning is stickier, and it helps them engage their cortex - the thinking, not reacting part of the brain. Being a "questions coach" also slows us down (and gets US in our cortex) while building the habit of working together with our athlete with their learning at the center.

Try questions like:

- What did you notice out there?
- How do you think you're doing with this new challenge?
- What can I do to help?
- What would you like to take on next?
- On a scale of 1-5, where do you think you are with this skill? Where would you like to be?

STRATEGY SPOTLIGHT :

CHANGE GEARS

Encourage athletes to think about what "gear" they are in and how they have the power to shift up to a higher gear or down to a lower gear. This allows young people to determine for themselves what different levels of challenge mean for them.

This also keeps us, as coaches, from making assumptions about how "hard" an athlete is trying or how much effort they are putting into practice. Too often we hold our players to the standard of "maximum effort" (or what we think it looks like) when maximum effort actually looks different for every athlete.



MANAGING COMPETITION

Competition is a critical part of the sport experience. It's an opportunity for athletes to put what they've learned into practice when there are real stakes - they get to practice performing under pressure. All athletes need the chance to practice this skill and young people for whom stress is hard to manage need the practice even more. Here are some strategies for helping manage the competitive experience.



FOR ATHLETES

When it's game time, all of the strategies that we integrate in practice start to become even more important. Ensure that players have the tools they need by focusing on:

- Team and individual warm-ups. Check-in to make sure players feel ready.
- A way to talk with your athletes about how they are doing and when they are feeling outside their comfort zone.
- A space for regulation and established routines for regulating in and managing critical moments.
- Your own strategies for regulation - how will you stay regulated during the match? What strategies do you have to ensure that you will be as predictable to your athletes as possible?

FOR PROGRAMS, LEAGUES, TOURNAMENTS

Strategies for resilience building don't have to happen only at the coach level. There are things that programs or leagues can implement that will create a better environment for all athletes.

- Mid-season schedule changes: Re-evaluate the teams at the midway point so that teams with similar abilities play each other in the second half of the season. There's no reason for the top team to play the bottom team.
- Tournaments: Create groupings so that teams of similar ability have the chance to play one another. Set brackets up so there is not only one winner of the tournament, but winners of a group or division. More teams will have more good games when there is parity.
- Referee relational moments: Create opportunities for players and referees to interact. When players and referees engage on a personal level, there will be fewer confrontations on the court.
- Cross-team relational moments: Have a pre-game handshake so that players have a chance to connect. Connecting before the game can help ensure that they treat each other as humans during the heat of competition.
- Cross-team regulating moments: Have one (patterned, repetitive, rhythmic) activity that the two teams do together prior to the start of the game.

TAKE A BREAK

PUT THE TOOLKIT DOWN. CLOSE YOUR SCREEN.

LET'S DOUBLE DOWN ON OUR REGULATION WITH MUSIC AND PATTERNED, REPETITIVE, RHYTHMIC ACTIVITY. CHOOSE ONE OF THE OPTIONS BELOW.

A MOVEMENT AND MUSIC MOMENT.



Choose a core skill-building activity from a sport (it doesn't have to be your sport, consider it cross-training), like dribbling a basketball, soccer footwork, or throwing, hitting, or kicking a ball against a wall. Turn on some music, and try it out!

- OR -



Choose a movement that's good for promoting strength or agility, like jumping rope, working with a medicine ball, riding a stationary bike or rolling on a foam roller. Turn on some music, and try it out!



CREATING SAFE ENVIRONMENTS

Nothing is more important to an athlete's experience than being safe. Kids are safest when they are around people they trust, they have control over their experiences, and they know what to expect. These checklists help us bring these concepts to life.

PREDICTABLE SPACE THAT MEETS ATHLETES NEEDS

- ✓ Athletes are safe when they arrive at practice or games. Entrances and activity spaces are hazard-free, well-lit and appropriately supervised.
- ✓ Kids know where to go and what to do when they arrive.
- ✓ Players understand who will be present in the space - will they share with another team? Will other activities be going on?
- ✓ Bathrooms or locker rooms are accessible. Private space is available to any young person who wants it.
- ✓ Kids have access to items that meet their basic needs, like water, snacks and menstrual products.
- ✓ Athletes have access to sports equipment they need: the right size, appropriate to the rules of their sport, and inclusive of things like sports bras, hair ties, jock straps and cups.
- ✓ Players are allowed to dress in ways that are culturally and religiously appropriate.
- ✓ Coaches are predictable - they are able to stay calm and not "lose their cool."

WELCOMING AND INCLUSIVE TEAM CULTURE

- ✓ Players are actively and intentionally welcomed to the space and included in the activities.
- ✓ Accommodations are actively made for athletes with different physical abilities.
- ✓ Kids are referred to in gender-neutral terms. Coaches don't refer to all players as "guys."
- ✓ Coaches use the pronouns with which each player on the team identifies. Coaches share their pronouns with team to establish a norm of proper pronoun use.
- ✓ Important information is shared in languages that meet the needs of the athletes and their families.
- ✓ Kids see adults who look like them when they participate in sports.
- ✓ Athletes see pictures of diverse adult role models in spaces where they participate in sports.
- ✓ Players see their coaches reflect on their biases and work to change them.
- ✓ Kids see their coaches intervene when they hear comments or see actions that

CHOICE, CONTROL AND CONTRIBUTION

- ✓ Kids are given opportunities for meaningful contribution, no matter what their sport skill level.
- ✓ Players are provided with opportunities for leadership (captains, choosing activities, leading activities, etc.).
- ✓ Athletes are invited to participate. They are always given the opportunity to opt out.
- ✓ The team has established routines for kids who need to reset. Needing a reset is seen as a normal part of the activity.
- ✓ Reflection is part of the experience. Kids are encouraged to reflect on their experiences.
- ✓ Players are encouraged to provide formal and informal feedback to coaches about their experiences.



PRACTICE PLANS

RELATIONSHIPS, MOVEMENT, AND
MANAGEABLE STRESS IN ACTION



PRACTICE PLAN

INCORPORATING RELATIONSHIPS, MOVEMENT AND MANAGEABLE STRESS INTO PRACTICE PLANNING.

TIME	ACTIVITY	COACHING POINTS
10 MIN	Transition (prior to the official start of practice): Provide time for kids to get ready for practice. Players are less stressed when practice is predictable, they have control and they are with people they trust.	Space: Be consistent so young people know where to go and what to do. Interactions: Facilitate connection with and between players. Rituals: Offer options for players to set their own pace and choose how they get active. Provide time cues.
15 MIN	Warm Up (official start of practice): Patterned, repetitive, rhythmic activity creates unparalleled bonding and regulation.	Circle Up: Check in with everyone. Preview the day. Activities x 3: Offer 1) something the team does together, 2) something each player chooses, 3) something "at speed" / "game-like."
60 MIN	Play (skills, drills, games): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Skill building and regulation go hand in hand. • Drills are a great chance to provide different challenges to different young people. • Games help us turn the stress dial up and back down. 	Choice & Control: Provide options. Ask questions. Have kids take the lead. Intentional Praise: Offer specific praise for things young people can control and you want the whole team to prioritize. Scaffold Up & Down: Give space to recover when players are pushed out of their comfort zone. Resets & Rituals: Kids call time-outs. Players create and practice their own mistake and reset rituals. Differentiated Instruction: Consider groupings. Have young people use their own "gears" and spend time with every player. Critical Moments: Plan ahead for high stress moments and use relational and regulating moments from your sport. Interventions: Instead of isolate and contain, encourage movement and connection.
15 MIN	Cool Down (official end of practice): Set young people up to be well-regulated by engaging in patterned, repetitive and rhythmic activity and allowing them control and connection during team time.	Activities x 3: Offer 1) something the team does together, 2) something each player chooses, 3) stretching. Team Time: Young people talk about what they want to talk about.
10 MIN	Transition (following the end of practice): Allow young people to get ready for what's next. These are the last moments of connection and rituals to end the day.	Space: Be consistent so young people know where to go and what to do. Interactions: Connection with and between players. Rituals: Offer options for players to set their own pace and choose how they wind down. Provide time cues.



TRANSITIONS

Predictability is protective. Even when it means we're letting a young person know that something hard is coming. Surprise stress is much harder to deal with than stress we have the chance to plan for (controlled, moderate and predictable stress vs. prolonged, extreme and unpredictable stress). Things to consider in creating more predictable transitions so that young people know what to expect:

SPACE

Be consistent so young people know where to go and what to do. Some questions you may consider when thinking about the space during transitions before and after practice:

- Where do players put their things? Will their things be safe?
- Where do they change their clothes or get their shoes on?
- What is the first thing that they should do when they get to the space?

INTERACTIONS

Connection with and between players helps everyone feel safe. Some particularly powerful interactions during transitions include:

- Greetings and goodbyes - make sure young people feel seen and welcome. Use phrases like "I'm so glad to see you," and "I can't wait to see you again tomorrow," (as long as you mean it).
- Informal check-ins - Transitions are a great time to check-in with your players, especially when you've established a consistent way of doing so. It's also a great time to check-in on something that's going on in a young person's life outside of the team.

RITUALS

Have some team-focused and individual rituals that always happen during transitions, like:

- Informal games or activities that are always available during this time
- A "sign-in" or "check-in" routine
- Handshakes or other greetings/goodbye routines
- Time cues

STRATEGY SPOTLIGHT:

FUN FIELD

A men's college soccer team created a dedicated "fun field" to use during the transition to practice.

All players start on the fun field where they can do whatever they want and "shake off the day" before transitioning to practice.





TIME CUES

One great way to help practices be more predictable is to give updates about what's coming next or time cues. When doing this, it's important to remember:

- The purpose of a countdown is transparency, not pressure. Think about how you're framing it. Be sure that it's "this is to let you know we're going to get started in one minute" not "one minute to go, be ready or else."
- Be explicit about it not being a competition. Say "I don't care how many toe-taps you get in 20 seconds as long as you're giving your best effort," or "I'm excited about the next drill. We will wait for everyone to be back, and I'd like to start in about a minute."
- Give some control back to players: "Would you like a one or two minute water break?"

WAYS TO USE TIME CUES

- Blow the whistle (or yell whistle) once when there is ten minutes left before the official start of practice; twice when there is five minutes left, and three times for two minutes left.
- Wrap up every practice with the same fun activity, like the "two minute drill" - a free for all where kids can take any shot they want to take, but they have to end on a "make." Once they make their last shot, they leave the court, but wait for all the players to make it before they leave the gym.

BEING TRANSPARENT DOESN'T ONLY WORK FOR TIME CUES.

UNFORTUNATELY, THOUGH, COACHES DON'T OFTEN SHARE THEIR THINKING WITH PLAYERS OR DO A GOOD JOB OF PREVIEWING WHAT'S AHEAD. PROVIDING VOICE-OVER AROUND THE WHAT, HOW, AND WHY OF PRACTICE OR AN ACTIVITY MAKES THE EXPERIENCE MORE PREDICTABLE AND SAFE.

WHEN A TEAM OR PROGRAM HAS SET RITUALS AND ROUTINES, IT MAKES IT EASY FOR MULTIPLE ADULTS TO INTERACT WITH YOUNG PEOPLE WHILE STILL MAINTAINING A SAFE AND PREDICTABLE ENVIRONMENT.

SPECIAL NOTE:

NO STRATEGY WORKS FOR EVERY KID. IN FACT, THAT'S EXACTLY THE POINT OF UNDERSTANDING THAT EVERY KID COMES WITH DIFFERENT EXPERIENCES AND NEEDS DIFFERENT INSTRUCTION TO DEVELOP IN THEIR OWN WAYS, AND IN THEIR OWN TIME.

IF TIMES CUES OR OTHER PREVIEWS ARE MAKING A YOUNG PERSON NERVOUS, INSTEAD OF HELPING THEM PLAN FOR WHAT'S AHEAD, THEY MAY NEED HELP BREAKING DOWN THE UPCOMING CHALLENGES INTO SMALLER PIECES. HAVING A GOOD RELATIONSHIP WITH A YOUNG PERSON MEANS YOU CAN COME UP WITH AN INDIVIDUALIZED APPROACH THAT WORKS FOR THAT YOUNG PERSON.



WARM-UPS & COOL DOWNS

Warm-ups and cool downs can be regulating activities that help kids transition from wherever they've been to practice (or a game), or from practice (or a game) to wherever they are going. Transitions are most effective when they are:

SAFE

- There are no distinguishable threats in the area
- The warm-up and cool down is predictable and players know what to expect, and
- Norms around players opting-in and out (taking a break when they need to) are established

CONNECTED

- Connecting with their coach and teammates reminds young people that this is a safe place

ACTIVE

- Physical activity, or patterned, repetitive, rhythmic experiences, can help us regulate. This minimizes the chance that a young person will be "wound up" or "dysregulated," which can lead to disproportionate reactions to stress or behaviors that seem out of place. Opportunities for players to move should be abundant. They can move:
 - Together - engaging in patterned, repetitive rhythmic activity **together with others** creates a unique neurobiological unity between teammates - and,
 - On their own - in a way that young people choose. This can be framed as an individual way that they like to "get ready" and might include things like:
 - A few extra stretches
 - A couple of sprints
 - Jogging with a partner
 - Having a quick catch
 - Putting ear buds in and dribbling the ball to the rhythm of one song



EXAMPLES OF WARM-UPS & COOL DOWNS

DYNAMIC STRETCHING

Have participants move back and forth across a space (half a basketball court, in the 18-yard box of a soccer field, or across the outfield). Each time they switch direction, they switch movements, like jogging, skipping, running backwards, sliding, lunges, butt-kicks, high-knees, and grapevines. Have the whole team do them together (with different players calling the moves for the whole team) or have them break into smaller groups that direct their own movements and pace.

STATIONS

Set up stations around the space with different equipment or instructions for each station. Stations might include jump ropes, a speed ladder, a mat for sit-ups or push-ups, hula hoops for moving their bodies, a line over which a player can jump side to side (ski jumps) or front to back. Let players choose which stations they go to in which order and call for them to switch after 30 seconds.

PASS & MOVE

This can be used in lots of different sports - by throwing, kicking or hitting the ball back and forth. Small groups of players should take a ball and pass it in a specific, consistent order while moving in space. They should look up and make eye contact with the person they are passing to, or receiving from, in order to let them know they are ready for a pass. Encourage groups that get into a good rhythm to challenge themselves by incorporating a change of speed before every pass or switching to an unpredictable order. (Remember - introducing unpredictability after something that is predictable and rhythmic means the player will be more ready to deal with the increased stress).

A SPECIAL NOTE:

There is significant overlap between these warm-ups and cool downs and the [regulating strategies](#). This is an intentional reminder that regulation needs to happen throughout the sport experience. Integrating regulation at the beginning and end of practice will help create a better overall experience.

STRATEGY SPOTLIGHT:

CATCH (or whatever is your sport's version of catch)

PLAYING CATCH WITH ANOTHER PERSON ALLOWS ATHLETES TO GET "ATTUNED" WITH THE OTHER PERSON. PLAYERS ARE IN CONTROL OF HOW THEY PASS - THE SPEED, THE VELOCITY, THE DISTANCE. GETTING INTO A RHYTHM AND BEING ABLE TO COMMUNICATE NON-VERBALLY WITH A PARTNER CAN HELP REGULATE THE STRESS RESPONSE SYSTEM.

CATCH CAN BE USED AS:

- **FIRST PART OF A WARM-UP - AS A WAY TO TRANSITION INTO SOMETHING MORE ACTIVE,**
- OR**
- **SECOND PART OF A COOL DOWN - AS A WAY TO TRANSITION OUT OF SOMETHING MORE ACTIVE.**



PLAY: SKILLS, DRILLS & GAMES

The heart of a practice usually involves skill-building, drills that put those skills into practice, and games that bring it all to life. The following are strategies that can be implemented during the heart of practice to make sure you're taking full advantage of resilience-building moments. These strategies can also help proactively avoid the behavior and performance challenges that are often linked to athlete dysregulation and effectively intervene to help athletes regulate.

CHOICE & CONTROL

If trauma is the "wrenching away of control when we need it the most," then it's not hard to see how offering athletes more autonomy over their experience will help ensure that the space feels safe.

Here are some strategies for offering choice and control (which are also good power-sharing, relationship-building strategies):

- provide options
- ask questions
- let kids take the lead
- offer opt-ins and outs
- kids call timeouts

INTENTIONAL PRAISE

Every positive moment counts.
Give more and better praise.

1) Prioritize being as specific about the praise you give as possible. If we want to keep seeing certain behaviors or effort, it's much more effective to say "I love how you remembered to move into space" than "great job." Instead of "great shot", try "nice job aiming for the corners."

2) Praise things that your athlete can control. Without meaning to, we often praise things in sport over which the athlete has little control. Instead of only praising the fastest athlete for winning, also look to shout-out who had the best form or improved the most.

SCAFFOLD UP & DOWN

Most coaches understand how to manage the "load" of a skill or drill. They add on challenge incrementally so that athletes have the opportunity to practice with increasing pressure. We push athletes beyond where they are currently comfortable so that they can practice under more extreme conditions.

What we don't do is help an athlete manage their regulation when they've been pushed beyond their comfort zone. We expect them to just be able to "handle it" and don't leave room to regulate. Instead of moving on to the next thing, scaffold back down to a level of challenge the athlete is comfortable with. It doesn't take long and it will help the athlete be more regulated for the next challenge.

DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION

Every young person is on their own learning journey and has their own needs. Below are some strategies for managing individual needs within a team context:

- Group young people according to ability (but make sure not to generalize - athletes who are struggling at some things may be excelling at others).
- Encourage young people to set their own **"gears."**
- Do check-ins with all athletes to see how they think they are doing on each skill. Check-ins don't have to be long but give you an idea of who needs what kind of support.
- Approach "soft" skills like you do sport skills. Not knowing how to do something isn't an athlete's "fault" - they just need more opportunities to practice.

See the following pages for in-depth descriptions of: **Resets & Rituals**, **Critical Moments**, and **Interventions**



RITUAL & RESETS

TYPE OF RITUAL

EXAMPLES

READY RITUALS

How a player gets ready for practice or a game or how athletes transition from one activity to the next.

Basketball players having to “make” their last shot; baseball players going around the infield before tossing the warm-up ball off the field to start each inning.

TEAM READY RITUALS

Chance for teams to bond and for everyone to contribute.

The New Zealand All Blacks’ ceremonial Haka; pasta dinners before a race.

RISK-TAKING RITUALS

The thing athletes do to get themselves ready to try something new.

A “pump-up” mix; a special handshake with a teammate; an athlete’s mantra (I am a strong and capable person).

MISTAKE RITUALS

Whatever the player can do to move on from a mistake; often something the whole team does.

Saying “my bad” and pounding their chest; A softball player throwing out snaps and the team snapping back.

TEAM CELEBRATION RITUALS

The way a team celebrates, in the moment, or when a player achieves some kind of goal.

Dumping Gatorade on a coach after an important win; goal celebrations in soccer; throwing the coxswain into the river after a race.

RESET RITUALS

How a player calm downs, restart or focuses through pressure.

Free throw routines; volleyball team huddles between every point.

STRATEGY SPOTLIGHT: KIDS CALL TIMEOUTS

Allow kids to call time-outs so they can take a break or reset themselves. Allow them to call time-out when they think the whole team needs a reset.

STRATEGY SPOTLIGHT: REWIND

Coach **Christine Bright** has her nine year old son’s team “rewind” if she doesn’t like the energy they brought to practice - they walk backwards to the car they came in and then start their practice over again.

STRATEGY SPOTLIGHT: HALFTIME JOKES

During halftime, a college coach makes sure to meet with her assistant coaches before addressing the whole team.

One of the assistant coaches was responsible for telling a joke right away to help make sure the coach was as regulated as possible before chatting with the athletes.



CRITICAL MOMENTS

No matter how much we prepare, there will still always be moments of high stress that push young people beyond where they are comfortable. Below are examples of critical moments that we know can cause athletes to become dysregulated. They are paired with strategies that can help manage the distress. Use them as ways to consider the critical moments in your sport and how you might plan ahead to handle these situations when they occur.

CRITICAL MOMENT

STRATEGY

Arriving at a new field, gym, pool, track, course, etc.



Give as much information ahead of time as possible; walk the space; keep your transition and warm-up routines consistent.

Substitutions



- **Build Your Bench:** let the player decide when they are ready to talk;
- **Ask questions:** help players regulate and contribute in a meaningful way

After a meaningful goal, point or run is scored by the other team.

Following an injury.

When there is a controversial call by the referee.



Have a team or individual reset ritual:

- The team takes a quick moment of connection (to regulate)
- "Let's go over what just happened" (mistake or reset ritual)
- Moves forward (opportunity to connect with teammates and set a goal)

High stakes situations - bottom of the ninth, lining up for the final heat, time winding down on the clock, etc.



Talk with each athlete about what helps them in moments of stress - and come back to that.

STRATEGY SPOTLIGHT

Williams College's Head Track and Field Coach, **Ethan Barron** meets with all incoming athletes to talk about what kind of support they like from their coaches and teams when things don't go their way. Do they like to talk to someone right away? If so, who is that person? Do they prefer that no one speak to them? Do they want positive support in the moment before digging into strategy in the following days or do they want to immediately analyze every aspect of the race?

Coach Barron has found that even the act of having these conversations builds trust with his athletes. And, certainly, it's made post-race interactions significantly more smooth.



REGULATING INTERVENTIONS

To minimize dysregulation, it's essential to proactively build regulation opportunities into our sports environments. But the reality is that players will still get overwhelmed by stress. The good news is that many of the strategies we use to help **prevent** dysregulation also work as **interventions** when a young person gets dysregulated.

PREVENTION

Athletes can go to the regulation station whenever they want to; a coach can send themselves to model using it; the whole team can go to the regulation station to work on skill building or have a strength moment.

Simply having this conversation with a young person can be regulating - it shows an athlete that their coach cares and they are free to be their whole selves, even when they aren't their best selves..

Use this strategy at practice so it becomes the norm. Players learn to recognize when they are dysregulated and avoid situations that might make it worse.

Catch is regularly used as a way to "warm-up" the body and prevent injuries. It can also be used to "warm-up" the brain.

REGULATION STATION

A dedicated "zone" at practice loaded with regulating opportunities that are sport specific (a place to throw the ball against the wall, basketballs to dribble) or general (foam roller, medicine balls, jump ropes).

All activities should be skill building or strength and fitness promoting.

COOL-IT CARDS

Coach **Anthony Andino** asks every athlete to write down what they need when they need to "cool down." This provides an opportunity to get to know the players and get on the same page before something goes wrong

BUILD YOUR BENCH

Always have two seats next to the coach on the bench - if the player chooses to leave a seat between themselves and the coach, they aren't yet ready to talk. When they slide down to the spot next to the coach, they are ready.

PLAY CATCH

Catch is magic. It's relational, patterned, repetitive and rhythmic and you're in control (you decide the spacing, pace, velocity, etc.)

INTERVENTION

Coach can send a dysregulated athlete (or one on the verge of dysregulation); athletes can bring another athlete to the regulation station; Coach can send the whole team to the station if they want to change the energy or thinks the team needs it.

Refer back to the card when an athlete is dysregulated.

Let the player know that they can "slide down" (literally or metaphorically, depending on the environment) when **they are ready**. Make sure to let players circle back on their own time.

A traditional response to dysregulation is to isolate and contain (remove from practice, sit on the bench, etc.) when the brain really needs to move and connect..

TAKE A BREAK

PUT THE TOOLKIT DOWN. CLOSE YOUR SCREEN.

LET'S STRETCH AND SWAY.



First, reach up as high as you can. Put your arms up and your head back. Puff out your chest (fill your chest up with air) as if you're reaching for the sun. Now with your arms in the air, sway back and forth...side to side, side to side.



Now let's twist our core. Arms bent and swing your shoulders and arms across your body, side to side, side to side.



Now let's fold our body over at the waist so our head is down. Hold the opposite elbow in each hand and let your arms fall down below your head. Sway from side to side, side to side



ATHLETES WHO NEED MORE SUPPORT

If you do this work well, you'll become a person that your athlete trusts. Being around you will make them feel safe. Chances are they might tell you things or ask you for support that stretches **you** outside your comfort zone. **And that's ok.** No one expects you to be able to handle everything or provide every support that your athletes need. So, what do you do when your athlete reveals something that you can't handle?

1. CREATE SPACE

Find a time and space that works for the athlete - suggest "walking and talking" so that you can both be as regulated as possible. Be present (turn off your phone and minimize distractions) and parallel (next to is less aggressive than face to face).

2. LISTEN GENEROUSLY

Sometimes all an athlete needs is to be heard. Listen and show real empathy - let them know that you understand that what they are going through is hard and you're sorry they are struggling.

3. STAY CONNECTED

Let them tell you what they think they need. If they can't identify something concrete, ask them if you can check back in with them to see how they are doing the next time you see them (or earlier if that feels too far away).

4. SUGGEST GROWING THE TEAM

If it's above your head, tell them that. You can say "this feels like something you should talk to someone else about this." Ask who they might want to involve - a parent? A counselor? A teacher? Offer to help them plan the conversation or go with them.

5. MAKE PERSONAL CONNECTIONS TO RESOURCES

If they need to talk to someone and can't identify support, offer to connect them personally with someone in your network who can either speak with them directly or can make a referral.

6. AUTHENTIC AND ONGOING

No matter where the conversation goes, always plan to check back in on them at a later date. This doesn't have to be a formal conversation - just make sure they know you've been thinking about them and are available if they need you.

WHEN THE WHOLE TEAM NEEDS MORE SUPPORT

LEARNING FROM THE **E-MOTION** PROGRAM

There may be times when an entire team is experiencing a high level of stress, disconnection or loss.

Through movement and community, we can be with pain and hard emotions in a way that builds connection and resilience. Instead of focusing on minimizing pain and loss, we can turn toward hard things to enhance our capacity to cope. So, how do we support our team in moving with hard things, rather than away from them?

We Create a Sacred Space of Shared Values

Be where your feet are
Honor all feelings
Consider both/and thinking
Connect vs. compare
Invite other essential values



We Encourage Athletes to Move With Hard Things

Through E-Motion Curriculum



We Move Together

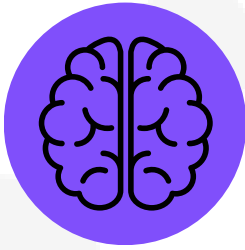
Running programs,
walking clubs or any kind of
movement



BRAIN-BASED COACHING: A CASE STUDY

The strategies in this playbook help us look at coaching through the lens of the brain. They help us leverage those things that help all athletes be their best: relationships, movement and manageable stress. The example below is a great illustration of the kind of coach every kid deserves.





TRADITIONAL VS. BRAIN-BASED COACHING

To create more healing-centered environments for our athletes, we must take a hard look at some things that are widely accepted in sport. Below are some examples of the "norms" that need to change followed by a check-list you can use to measure your progress.

INSTEAD OF THIS	DO THIS	WHY?
<p>A player shows up to the pool, court, field or gym for the first time for a try-out or practice. She doesn't know anyone. All of the adults are standing off to the side with clipboards, talking to each other.</p>	<p>The adults enthusiastically greet kids as they approach. Explain where the player should go and what will happen next.</p>	<p>Unpredictability is stressful. In times of stress, we need positive relational interactions to help buffer that stress and make us feel safe. A player's positive experience and their performance depend on it.</p>
<p>When a player arrives late to practice, the coach makes them run laps or assigns some other way to "make up for" being late. They don't ask why the player was late and may even provide an ultimatum about being late again.</p>	<p>When a player is late to practice (something that is often not the player's fault), the coach says "I'm glad you made it. Get warmed up and I'll catch you up." Coach circles back later to make sure everything is ok and to troubleshoot ways to help the player come on time in the future.</p>	<p>Punishment does NOT spark learning. When a player is anxious about their coach's reaction or worried about punishment, it dysregulates them. They aren't learning. Punishment won't change their behavior.</p>
<p>A player misses a shot, strikes out or doesn't win the race. The first thing they do is look at their coach. And the coach looks away. Or hangs their head. Or throws their clipboard. Or all of the above.</p>	<p>A player misses a shot, strikes out or doesn't win the race. The first thing the coach does is encourage their effort, tell them how brave they were for trying, or help them move on by using a mistake ritual or redirecting them to their next opportunity.</p>	<p>As a coach (or a parent, or the adult in a young person's life) you have more power than you think. Because the coach is the more powerful person in the relationship, the player's reaction to them is "out-sized." The interpretation of their coach's behavior is exaggerated.</p>

NEW COACHING CHECKLIST



BRAIN-BASED COACHING TOOL KIT



NEW COACHING CHECKLIST

Brain-based coaching is different. It means that you are part of a group of coaches who are intentionally changing sport so that it meets every player's needs. You are willing to do things a little differently because you know it is what is best for your team.

Where do you fall? Check the box on the left if you're taking a traditional approach to these situations or check the right if you're moving towards brain-based coaching. Remember, none of this happens overnight. It's most important to start with what works for you.

TRADITIONAL COACHING	BRAIN-BASED COACHING
<input data-bbox="126 726 201 802" type="checkbox"/> When a player shows up at the field, court, or pool, you (the coach) are standing off to the side with other adults (maybe your arms are folded or you're holding a clipboard).	<input data-bbox="1425 726 1500 802" type="checkbox"/> When a player shows up, you enthusiastically greet them and invite them into the space. You let them know what is going to happen next.
<input data-bbox="126 974 201 1050" type="checkbox"/> When a player is late to practice, you make them "do laps" or something else that indicates their fault in arriving late.	<input data-bbox="1425 974 1500 1050" type="checkbox"/> When a player is late to practice, you say "I'm glad you made it, get warmed up, and I'll catch you up." You address the player being late at a different time as a problem for you to solve together.
<input data-bbox="126 1178 201 1253" type="checkbox"/> When you are speaking to your team, you expect players to sit/kneel while you stand above them.	<input data-bbox="1425 1178 1500 1253" type="checkbox"/> When you are speaking to your team, you form and are part of a circle so that everyone is at the same level.
<input data-bbox="126 1394 201 1470" type="checkbox"/> A player shoots and misses (or strikes out, doesn't win the race, etc.) and you criticize with words or body language. You might look away, act disappointed or angry or immediately jump in with instructions	<input data-bbox="1425 1394 1500 1470" type="checkbox"/> A player shoots and misses (or strikes out, doesn't win the race, etc.) and you encourage the effort and remind them how to let go of their mistake and move forward.
<input data-bbox="126 1629 201 1705" type="checkbox"/> When a player comes off the field, court, or out of the pool, you say "you should do this next time" or "why didn't you do this?"	<input data-bbox="1425 1629 1500 1705" type="checkbox"/> When a player comes off the field, court or out of the pool, you say: "what did you notice out there?"
<input data-bbox="126 1833 201 1908" type="checkbox"/> You micromanage games - you give instructions while players are playing (even when players can't hear them).	<input data-bbox="1425 1833 1500 1908" type="checkbox"/> You encourage the play and use time on the bench or time outs to give instructions to a player (when they are better able to be engaged).



NEW COACHING CHECKLIST

	TRADITIONAL COACHING	BRAIN-BASED COACHING	
<input type="checkbox"/>	When a player exhibits challenging behavior, you send them to a time out or kick them out of practice. They have three strikes, and then they are out.	When a player exhibits challenging behavior, you (or another adult) take them for a walk, play catch with them, or have them move their body in a way that helps them calm down	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	You are easily dysregulated - you're very emotional, you yell from the sideline, you get agitated and/or fight with the referee.	You stay cool to help players stay regulated with a consistent, calm demeanor.	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	Every activity is the same for every player.	Activities are adapted to meet players where they are.	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	Fitness is used as punishment - players are sometimes made to be responsible for their teammates through extra fitness.	Fitness is never used as punishment - practices are highly active; "pressure" is put on players through game-like scenarios, not the threat of running sprints.	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	You expect your players to do what you (the coach) say with no questioning.	You invite your players to do what you (the coach) say and give them opportunities to ask questions and express opinions.	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	You do not seek feedback from your players.	You actively seek formal and informal feedback from your players.	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	You do not admit when you are wrong or take responsibility for your mistakes.	You admit when you are wrong (and apologize, when necessary) and make it "normal" to make mistakes by taking responsibility.	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	You only provide positive feedback when a player accomplishes something (scores a point, wins a race, etc.)	You provide positive feedback when a player progresses in some way (beats a personal record or tries something new for the first time).	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	You encourage players to "push through" whenever they are too far out of their comfort zone.	You allow players to opt in and out of play when they go too far out of their comfort zone.	<input type="checkbox"/>

READY TO START THE WORK WITH US?

FIND TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES, RESOURCES AND
ADDITIONAL INFORMATION AT:



www.CHJS.org



The Neurosequential Network
www.neurosequential.com



Thank you to our Founding Partner NIKE, with extra gratitude to the Nike Social and Community Impact team for consistently being so much more than a funder. We're so proud to be on your team



Thank you to the Neurosequential community for everything we've learned and continue to learn from you. Thank you, Bruce, for your uncommon generosity and support.



Thank you to the Susan Crown Exchange for making this toolkit, and many other critical coaching conversations, possible.

TO THE CHJS TEAM:

NOT A SINGLE WORD OF THIS WOULD EXIST IF NOT FOR YOUR BRILLIANCE OR KINDNESS. THANK YOU FOR ALWAYS BRINGING YOUR WHOLE SELVES TO EVERYTHING WE DO TOGETHER.

AND FROM THE CHJS TEAM TO MEGAN BARTLETT, FOUNDER OF CHJS AND PIONEERING CREATOR OF THIS PLAYBOOK:

YOU ARE THE TRAILBLAZER OUR WORLD NEEDS TO HEAL.
WHERE YOU GO, WE FOLLOW.





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