

Coaching Your Kid's Team This Spring? Here's What You Should Know.

Expert advice on where to start.

by [Lisa L. Lewis](#)

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Each year, [more than 6.5 million youth sports coaches](#) take to the field — most of them volunteers. The American Youth Soccer Association, which oversees 800 recreational youth soccer teams, estimates that about one-third of its 40,000 volunteer coaches are new each year.

Some parents sign up to coach because of their love of the sport or to give back to the community; others do so simply because they know *someone* has to step up to lead the team.

As the spring sports season approaches, here's an overview of what to focus on to have a rewarding and safe season.



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Where to start

You don't have to have been an all-star player in order to be a coach, but if you're new to the sport, you'll need to learn the fundamentals and familiarize yourself with drills and age-appropriate skills. A good first step is to see what's available through your team's league.

First-time AYSO soccer coaches will find a range of resources, including required courses, on the [AYSO site](#). Little League also has information aimed at first-time coaches, including a suggested 10-week curriculum for its [Tee Ball program](#) for ages 4-6. Additional free resources,

including practice plans and general coaching advice, are available online through [Little League University](#).



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Coaching different ages

John Engh, executive director of the [National Alliance for Youth Sports](#), notes that coaching young players is a lot different than coaching pre-teens. “In the beginning, it’s all about having fun and developing motor skills,” he says.

In [National Standards for Youth Sports](#), NAYS recommends that youth sports programs for kids younger than 9 allow coaches on the field during games. The guidelines also discourage coaches for this age group from keeping score or tracking standings. “You can teach kids that winning is part of the game, but the idea that you celebrate beating the other team is kind of crazy,” Engh says.

Kristen Dieffenbach, Ph.D., who is an associate professor of athletic coaching education at West Virginia University, president of the United States Center for Coaching Excellence and executive board member of the Association for Applied Sport Psychology, recommends using lots of positive behavioral reinforcement for younger kids, including praising them for paying attention. “Be prepared that some of them may have trouble staying on task,” she says. She also

advises coaches of younger kids to introduce one new idea at a time and to repeat it in different ways. “They need time to process it,” she says. Remember that you’re not looking for them to execute a skill perfectly but to make attempts at it, she adds.

Dieffenbach also recommends talking to your child ahead of time about your dual roles as parent and coach. “I have to remind my 6-year-old that I’m there for him but I’m responsible for the other little boys and girls too,” says Dieffenbach, who coaches her son’s ice hockey team.

With kids who are 11 and older, coaches have the opportunity to engage more and talk about tactics and strategies. At this level, many coaches have already been doing so for a few years, which is a good thing: Older kids can tell if a coach isn’t very prepared, Engh notes.



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Focusing on safety

In its “[State of Play 2017](#)” report, The Aspen Institute’s [Project Play](#) noted that only about 30% of youth coaches had received training in key areas, including concussion management, general safety, and injury prevention, as well as CPR and basic first aid. Volleyball had the best-trained coaches overall. As part of its focus on improving these numbers, Project Play is working with its affiliated organizations to create free online coach resources, to be released later this year.

Free online concussion training for coaches is currently available through [NAYS](#) and through [Heads Up](#), a series of initiatives developed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The CDC also offers free [online training](#) and [information](#) about preventing heat-related illnesses in athletes.



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Dealing with parents

From the outset, it's important to enlist the support of the other team parents, Dieffenbach says, whether it's asking someone to shag balls in the outfield or serve as the go-to person on the sidelines if a child has a minor injury and needs tending to.

It's all about setting expectations. "Let them know what you're trying to do, and how they can help ensure it's a great experience," she says. "You can couch it as 'This is in the best interest of your child.'" She recommends holding an in-person parent meeting and setting some ground rules to let parents know you're happy to talk, but preferably not during games or practices.

You can ask them to email you, but to wait a day, Engh adds, noting that's what he did when he coached his kids' teams.

It's important, too, to keep in mind that you're there representing a league or other recreational sports organization, which should have already-established policies and guidelines about parental conduct. "Some parents may be more competitive, and others may have no preconceptions at all," Engh explains. "Hopefully the league will have a statement about being recreational and focused on having fun and developing skills." This is one of the elements NAYS will require for organizations as part of a [new designation](#) launched as a benchmark for quality in kids' recreational sports.

Guidelines may also come in handy when fielding complaints from parents that their kids aren't getting enough playing time or if parents are otherwise causing issues. For example, AYSO's [Kids Zone](#) program asks parents and spectators to sign a pledge that they'll show good sportsmanship, including not coaching kids from the sidelines or yelling at them.

Information about [interacting with parents](#) is also available online through the [Positive Coaching Alliance](#), which offers online courses and other resources.



Photo by [USAG-Humphreys/Flickr](#).

How to coach fun

Experts agree that the focus throughout the season should be on making the experience a positive one. “When a child walks out on a field or court for the first time, the coach is the person introducing them to that sport,” says Sue Hunt, project director for The Aspen Institute’s Sports and Society program. “Each day, find something good that every kid on the team did, not just the best athletes. If you line them up and give them drills from day one, that’s not going to be a fun experience.

“Today’s kids have so many options on how they spend their free time. If we don’t ensure it’s fun and enjoyable, we may lose these kids,” she explains.

Engl similarly notes, “Your goal should be to have every kid on your team want to sign up again – and even want you to coach them again.”