



MORE THAN A GAME

MENTAL HEALTH ESSENTIALS
FOR YOUTH SPORTS COACHES

About Momentous Institute

Momentous Institute, founded by Salesmanship Club of Dallas in 1920, is a leading mental health organization that exists to strengthen children, families, and communities. By working alongside and within larger systems, we are cultivating a world of emotionally thriving people reaching their full potential.

Mental Health Essentials for Youth Sports Coaches

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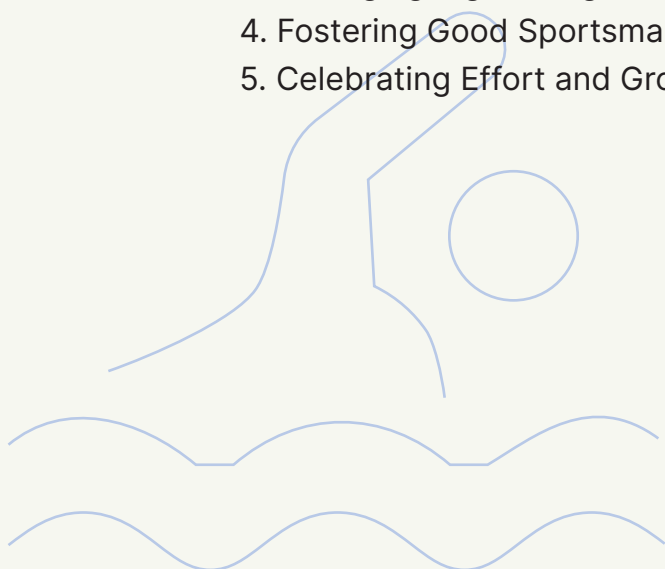
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What is Mental Health?

Mental health is how we think, feel and cope with everyday life. It encompasses how we engage in relationships, manage stress and make decisions. Just like physical health, it affects the quality of our lives and the way we show up in the world.

At Momentous Institute, we say that mental health is a state of action.

As a youth sports coach, you know the importance of training and practice for physical health. Mental health is no different. Small, everyday actions can make a big difference.

As a youth sports coach, you're in a unique position to positively impact a child's physical and mental health. Getting kids out of their houses, interacting with others, moving their bodies, and overcoming challenges are all invaluable tools to support their overall health. It can be easy to focus only on the physical side of health – making sure they stretch, improve their endurance, and ultimately become better athletes. But don't discount the importance of prioritizing mental health skills, too. Building teamwork, problem solving and navigating a frustrating loss are all part of building their health.

In this brief guide, you'll learn a few key mental health essentials that will support you and your young athletes.

YOUR ROLE AS COACH

Safe Relationships with adults are the foundation of youth mental health. When children have at least one safe adult in their corner, they're better able to manage their emotions and engage in healthy relationships.

As a coach, you may be one of many – or one of the few – safe relationships in a child's life. The importance of this relationship cannot be overstated. You have an incredible opportunity to impact a child's long-term trajectory, even in seemingly limited interactions.

Self-Reflection

To be a safe adult for a child, an adult must embody self-reflection. This process helps us learn from the past, make healthy decisions, and ensure that our behavior matches our values.

Think back to when you were a child, specifically the age of the athletes you currently coach. Reflect on the following:

What adults had the biggest positive impact on your childhood?

What specific actions did adults do in your life to help you feel safe, seen, heard, and appreciated?

How did the adults in your life behave when you or your peers demonstrated big behavior?

YOUR ROLE AS COACH

What positive and negative messages did adults tell you about achievement, effort, dreams, success, and failure?

Did you ever feel misunderstood or invalidated as a child? What did adults in your life do, or not do, to make you feel this way?

Do you recognize any of your behaviors as reflections of the messages you were taught as a child? If so, which are helpful and which might need to shift?

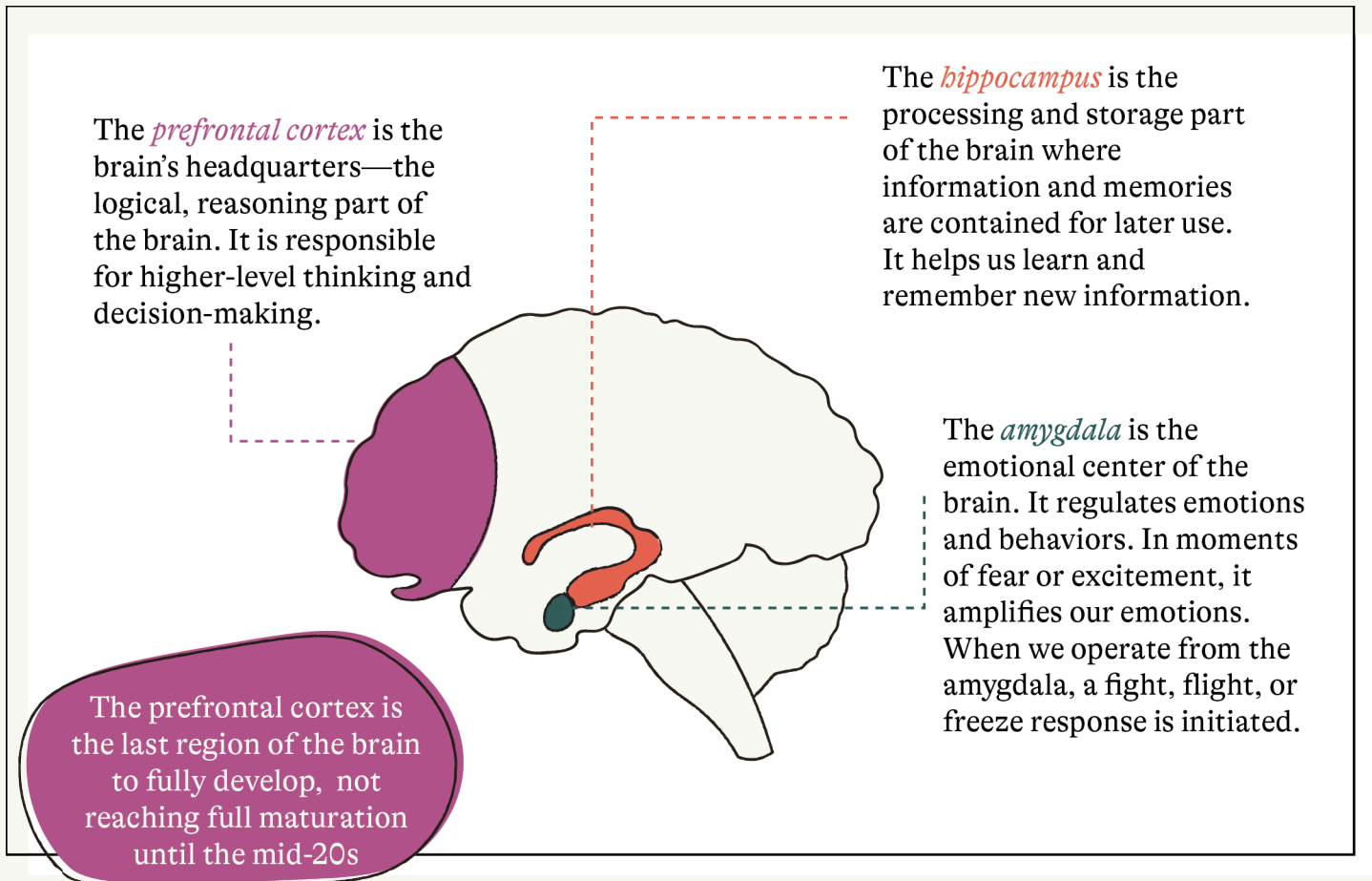
As you read through this guide, we invite you to remain open to new insights that may shift previous ways of thinking, as well as illuminate the strengths you already innately bring into the coaching role.

UNDERSTANDING THE BRAIN AND BODY

The Brain

The brain guides everything that we do: our body's movements, our decision making, and our emotions. When we understand how the brain works, we can make better sense of our reactions.

There's a lot to know about the brain, but for simplicity, let's focus on three important parts: the prefrontal cortex, hippocampus, and amygdala.



Amygdala Hijacks

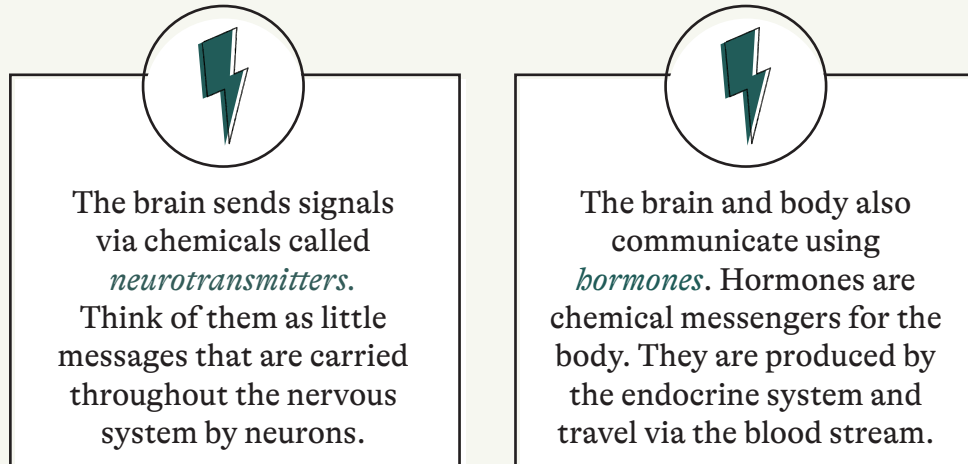
The amygdala is designed to protect us from harm. It reacts quickly, without thinking first, when we are faced with danger, such as a ball flying towards our face. When the amygdala reacts, the body knows to duck without having to pause and think about what to do. But at times, the amygdala can react when the threat is not real, such as an accidental bump from another player or a change of tone from a coach. When this happens, it takes intention to help settle the amygdala.

While their prefrontal cortex is still developing, so are children's impulse control and reasoning skills. This can cause them to shift into amygdala hijack mode more quickly or more often than an adult whose brain is fully developed.

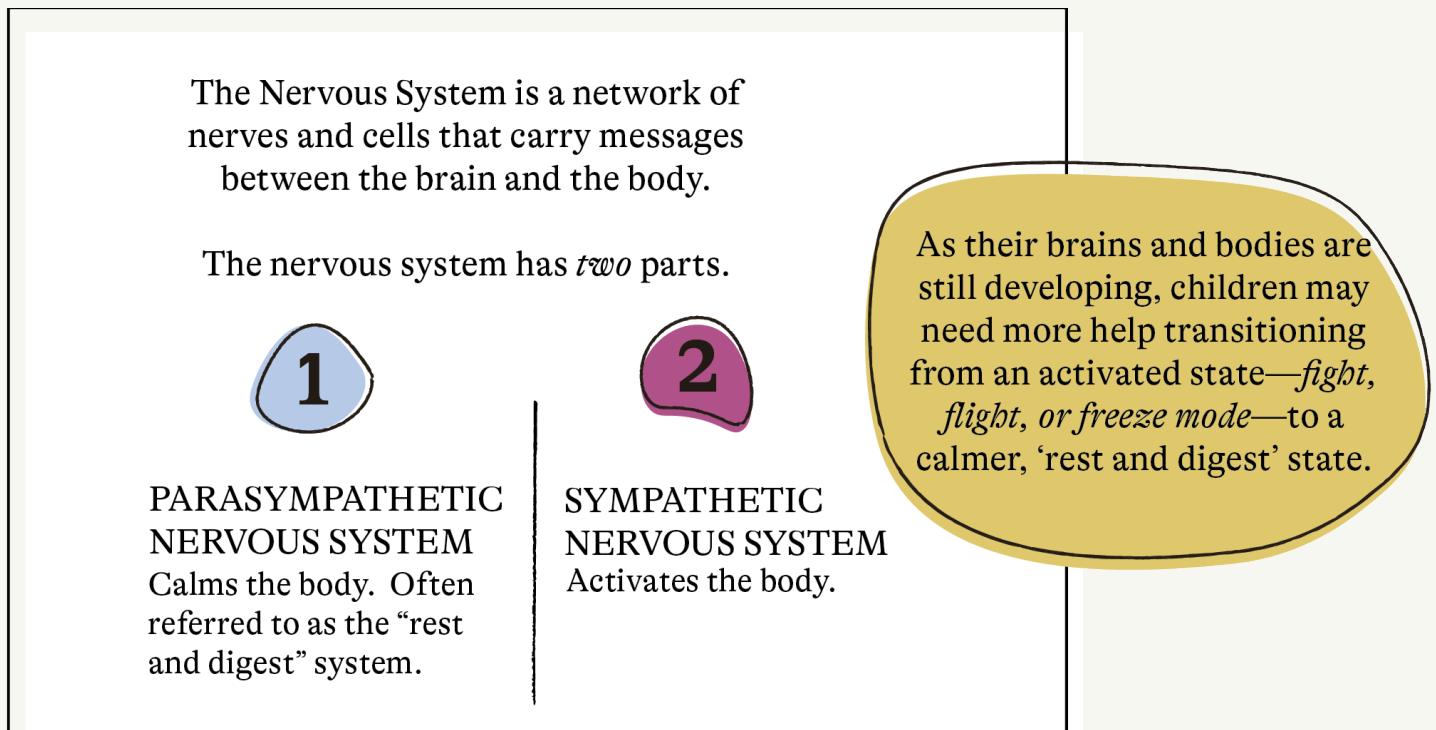
UNDERSTANDING THE BRAIN AND BODY

The Body

We often think of the brain and body as separate entities, but in truth, they work in partnership with each other. It is helpful to think of the brain and body as two integrated systems; what happens in one affects the other.



The Nervous System



Just like with adults, when a child is in a state of stress, their heart rate and breathing will speed up, and their muscles will tighten. When this happens, they may react by becoming emotionally dysregulated.

The Nervous System, Continued

The vagus nerve is the primary nerve of the parasympathetic nervous system. It connects the brain with major organs, including the heart, lungs, and much of the digestive system. Through these connections it helps regulate heart rate, breathing, digestion, and other automatic body functioning, supporting the body's ability to rest, recover, and adapt after stress.

When a child is dysregulated, supportive strategies such as slow breathing, movement, and safe, caring relationships can help engage the body's calming response and support the child in feeling more regulated and safe.

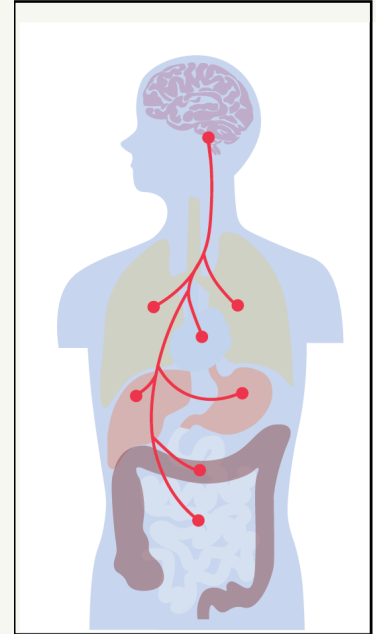
Self-Regulation

Self-regulation is the ability to manage our thoughts, emotions, and behaviors in ways that help us respond effectively to life's experiences. Self-regulation skills are essential for supporting mental health. Big emotions and reactions are a normal – and important – part of being human. Self-regulation is the ability to make sense of these dysregulating experiences and return to a state of balance. Humans are born with a limited capacity for self-regulation, and that capacity develops over time through supportive relationships and experiences.

Breathing

Breathing is something that we do all day, every day, automatically. It's essential for our basic survival. But it's also an effective tool for self-regulation.

One of the unique things about breathing is that, unlike many other automatic body functions, we can also choose to change the way we breathe.



When we inhale, we activate the sympathetic nervous system, which *increases* our heart rate.



When we exhale slowly, we activate the parasympathetic nervous system, *slowing* the heart rate.

Breathing, Continued

Slow, focused breathing can help us calm down in times of stress or overwhelm. This tool works to help both adults and children manage big emotions, which are common in youth sports. Like any new skill, breathing techniques are easier to learn and remember when practiced during calm moments. With practice, children are more likely to use them when they feel overwhelmed. In sports, this might look like starting and ending each practice with a mindful breathing activity or taking a deep breath to symbolize a transition or shift the energy of the group. Breathing can be as simple as a slow, deliberate breath, or you can use one of the strategies found in this guide.

Once your athletes have a practice of mindful breathing during calm times, it becomes a helpful tool for regulation when needed. You may want to show videos of successful athletes – chances are, you'll find them using breathing to center and calm when tensions arise or when they want to focus.

Co-Regulation

Young children are still developing self-regulation skills, so they often benefit from caring adults who help them navigate big emotions. Self-regulation develops through repeated experiences of co-regulation. Caring adults help children manage strong emotions, and over time, children gradually learn to regulate themselves more independently.

Strategies for co-regulation will depend on the child's emotional state; a highly dysregulated child will need different levels of support than a slightly dysregulated child. The one important element that should always be incorporated is to create a sense of safety for the child. When a child is dysregulated, this is not the time for conversation that relies on logic or to deliver consequences. Safety can be communicated through simple reassuring statements like:

- | | |
|---|---|
| • "I'm going to sit here next to you." | • "You are safe here." |
| • "I'm going to take some deep breaths with you." | • "We'll get through this." |
| | • "Just rest your head on your arms for a bit." |

A child may be able to regulate with the support of another person very quickly, or it may take time. After the initial regulation occurs and the child feels a sense of safety, they may be able to use their own self-regulation resources and strategies.

To be a helpful co-regulator, a person must be regulated. It is very difficult for a dysregulated person to regulate another person. For this reason, it is important to be aware of your own emotional states to determine if you're able to provide support through co-regulation.

CHILD DEVELOPMENT

To support youth, it helps to understand child development. Knowing what's typical can help us set realistic expectations and can prevent frustration. While every child is different, here are a few general patterns that you may see in the young people you coach.

Ages 3-5

Young children between the ages of three to five experience a lot of emotions, sometimes changing by the minute! But they have limited ability to regulate their emotions, especially when they're tired, stressed or overwhelmed. They're practicing social skills, and you may see bossy or aggressive behavior. They need safe adults like you to help them manage emotions and build positive relationships.

Ages 6-8

Children between six and eight become more sensitive and serious, with noticeable mood shifts. Many kids this age begin to worry about bigger issues and can become anxious. They are highly sensitive to criticism and may cry but hide their emotions. While they're learning emotional regulation, they still rely on adults for support, especially for issues that are too big for them to handle.

Ages 9-11

Older children are more independent, motivated, and concerned with belonging. They develop a strong sense of right and wrong and seek activities where they feel capable. They may challenge adults more — including parents, coaches, teachers and others. But despite their independence, they still need adult support to manage emotions.

Ages 12-14

The early teen years are marked by increased moodiness that might come across as rude or short-tempered, but these moods can be fleeting. At this age, they often experience more stress from school and extracurriculars, and it is important to help them navigate priorities and monitor which activities support their mental health and which cause more stress.

Ages 15-17

Older teens begin to show more independence from their parents and caregivers and lean more into peer relationships and non-parent adults. At this age, they begin to navigate more complex thoughts about the world and their identity.

Understanding these development milestones helps you, as a coach, know when behavior is typical and when you might need to seek additional support.

MENTAL HEALTH ESSENTIALS

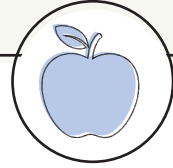
Mental health is a state of action, which means small, everyday actions can make a big difference. Let's explore a few key components of mental health that are essential to our overall wellbeing.

MOVEMENT



Movement releases endorphins, hormones that give feelings of pleasure and help reduce stress. The brain releases feel-good neurotransmitters such as endorphins, dopamine, and serotonin when we exercise. Because of this, exercise has been linked to decreased anxiety and depression. Research shows that 30 minutes a day of moderate exercise three days a week can improve mental health outcomes. Youth sports are an incredible opportunity to help children move their bodies in a constructive way that supports their mental health.

NUTRITION



Research shows that eating a well-balanced nutrient rich diet can lead to improved mental health. Studies have shown that people who eat diets rich in vegetables, fruits, unprocessed grains and healthy proteins have a lower risk of depression than those who eat a diet with refined foods and sugars. In youth sports, nutrition and hydration are essential. Encourage your athletes to have a balanced diet and ensure ample opportunity for water breaks on and off the field.

COMMUNITY



The human brain is a social brain. It is wired to connect, meaning that connection with others is a basic human need. Many young people are experiencing loneliness, fueled by post-pandemic societal changes, increased access to technology and other factors. This lack of social connection has caused a decline in mental health across much of the population. It is important to remember that relationships aren't just nice to have, they are part of our brain's biological function. In youth sports, connection among teammates is just as important as physical performance.

SLEEP



Research has found a strong link between sleep and mental health. Poor sleep is one of the key symptoms of depression and can often be one of the first reasons people seek help. Sleep is more than just lying dormant for hours at a time. During sleep, your the brain is hard at work. Neural pathways in the brain are connected and strengthened, helping us process and store information. And a process called pruning helps us get rid of things we don't need and clear the brain of toxins. During childhood, sleep is essential to healthy development. Youth sports are part of a healthy sleep routine, as both physical activity and time outdoors are both positive contributors to a good night's sleep.

The background of the entire page is a solid dark orange color. It is decorated with a repeating pattern of white line-art icons representing various sports and activities. These icons include a soccer ball, a person on a bicycle, a kettlebell, a hand holding a target, a bowling ball, a pool ball, a swimmer, a volleyball, a hockey stick, a chess knight, a tennis racket, a basketball, a football, a tennis ball, a badminton racket, a shuttlecock, a tennis ball on a stand, a boxing glove, and a soccer ball. The icons are arranged in a grid-like fashion, with some appearing more frequently than others.

FIVE STRATEGIES FOR MENTAL HEALTH INFORMED COACHES

Now that you know the basics of mental health, let's explore five high-impact strategies that can set your season, and your athletes, up for success.

1. Building a Team

2. Establishing Expectations

3. Managing Big Feelings

4. Fostering Good Sportsmanship

5. Celebrating Effort and Growth

FIVE STRATEGIES FOR MENTAL HEALTH INFORMED COACHES

STRATEGY 1 BUILDING A TEAM

It can be tempting to jump straight into drills and rules, but taking the time to form a team will pay off in the long run. Here are two powerful strategies to build a strong team: games for learning names and an outline for a consistent huddle up.

Learning Names

There are many ways to help athletes learn each other's names. Depending on age, sport and other factors, consider one of these simple games and strategies.

BALL TOSS NAME GAME

- Have everyone stand or sit in a circle.
- Go around the circle once. Each person says their name, and the group repeats it.
- Toss a ball to one player. When they catch it, everyone says that player's name.
- The player tosses the ball to someone else, and everyone says that player's name.
- Keep going until everyone has had the ball several times.

Make It Harder:

Once players start learning names, have the person with the ball say the name of the person they are throwing it to before they toss it.

SHEET DROP NAME GAME

- Gather a sheet or tarp.
- Divide the team into two groups. Have the groups stand in a line on opposite sides of the sheet. Two coaches or leaders hold the sheet high up in the air so that it acts as a wall between the two groups.
- One person from each group approaches the sheet and stands facing it. The leaders drop the sheet.
- The object is for the two players standing on either side of the sheet to be the first person to say the name of the person on the other side. Whichever player succeeds in saying the other's name first stays on their own side, and the other player moves to the other side with them.
- The sheet is then raised back up and another player from each side approaches. Players should take turns so that each player has an opportunity to go to the sheet. The game continues until all the players are on one side of the sheet. The game can also end within a certain amount of time; whichever group has more players wins.

FIVE STRATEGIES FOR MENTAL HEALTH INFORMED COACHES

Huddle Up

Many sports teams have some variation of a huddle, where the coach calls the team together for a quick debrief and team cheer. This simple practice is a great model for how to build a quick mental health moment that supports team building. Consider starting each practice with a simple huddle using these supportive strategies.

1. GREETING

Have each player greet another player by name, using one of these strategies, or make up your own.

- In a circle, each player turns to the next and gives a high five or handshake and greets them by name, such as, “Hi, Jonathan.”
- Split athletes into two groups and have them do a high-five lineup, saying each player’s name as they pass them.
- Do a compliment circle where each player compliments the player next to them.

2. SHARING

Have each player share a response to a prompt. You can go around the circle, toss a ball, pass a talking stick, or any other method to get participation. Consider these prompts or make up your own.

- What’s your favorite... (movie, TV show, food, dessert, color, etc.)
- What is one thing you did this weekend?
- What’s your favorite thing about ____ (the sport)?
- What is one skill you wish you had?

3. BREATHING

Focused, mindful breathing is a tool for self-regulation that helps with managing impulses and emotions. Teaching children how to use their breath to return to calm during times of dysregulation gives them a powerful tool for self-regulation that they can always access. This simple practice can be introduced at the beginning of the season and reinforced in each practice and game. Leading a mindful breathing practice while calm helps your athletes know how to use the tool when they need it.

Mindful breathing doesn’t have to be complicated! Consider the simple strategies on the next page.

FIVE STRATEGIES FOR MENTAL HEALTH INFORMED COACHES

SIMPLE BREATHING

Have the group sit up straight with their hands in their laps. They can close their eyes or look down. Have them breathe in slowly for about three seconds, then breathe out slowly.

TRACE YOUR HAND

Hold one hand in front of you and use one finger on the other hand to trace the hand's outline. Breathe in as you trace up a finger and breathe out as you trace down.

BELLY BREATHING

To avoid breathing from their chest, shallowly, have them place a hand on their belly. Have them take a few deep breaths in and out to feel their stomach rise and fall with their breath.

BOX BREATHING

Either trace a box with your fingers or visualize a box in your mind. As you trace, breathe in for four seconds along one side of the box, hold your breath for four seconds along the next side of the box, breathe out for four seconds, and then hold your breath for four seconds, completing the box.

MAKE SOME NOISE

Breathe in deeply for a count of four. As you release the breath, make a noise. You can hum, hiss, sigh, sing, or get creative with it.

STRETCH AND RELEASE

As you inhale, stretch your arms above your head. Stretch a bit as you hold the breath. As you exhale, slowly lower your arms back down to your side.

GRATITUDE BREATHING

Take several deep, mindful breaths – breathe in for four, breathe out for six. As you breathe out, think about someone or something you are grateful for.

5-7-8 BREATHING

Breathe in for a count of five, hold for seven seconds and breathe out for 8. Repeat 3-4 times.

Closing Huddle Up

You can also end each practice in a quick huddle! Send your athletes off on a high note by closing practice with one of these tips.

- Fold a simple gratitude practice into your closing huddle, expressing thanks for an individual, a moment of resilience, a kind act or for effort.
- End with a simple breathing practice – just one slow deep breath in and out.

These huddle ups take no more than a couple minutes but can have a big impact on the culture of your team.

FIVE STRATEGIES FOR MENTAL HEALTH INFORMED COACHES

STRATEGY 2

ESTABLISHING EXPECTATIONS

Children need clear expectations and repeated opportunities to practice them. Telling them once isn't enough. Set consistent routines, teach expectations explicitly, and model what success looks like. When expectations are predictable, children's behavior often becomes more predictable too.

Consider establishing your expectations around the following, and add your own:

☐ Entering the practice space	☐ Using the restroom
☐ What they need to be prepared (clothing, gear, water, etc.)	☐ Getting water
☐ How you will get their attention	☐ Asking questions
☐ Using and returning equipment and materials	☐ What needs to be done before they leave
☐ Getting into and out of groups	☐ How they will dismiss
☐ _____	☐ _____
☐ _____	☐ _____
☐ _____	☐ _____
☐ _____	☐ _____

Use the guide on the next page to determine:

- What steps they need to follow for each routine (be specific!)
- What will help them remember the routine (signs, visual cues, posted instructions, etc.)

Remember, practice makes permanent. Routines must be practiced repeatedly to help your athletes follow them correctly.

ROUTINE	STEPS TO FOLLOW	REMINDERS

STRATEGY 3 MANAGING BIG FEELINGS

Big feelings are part of childhood, and definitely part of youth sports! Competition is high, kids are tired and overwhelmed, and big feelings can pop up in the blink of an eye. For some, that might look like throwing a ball across the gym, kicking over cones or even pushing another player. For others, it might look like shutting down or walking away. It is important to notice big feelings, especially those that aren't as obvious.

Consider these tips for managing big feelings in your athletes.

LOW AND SLOW

Low means lowering your body, your voice, and your words. Get at or below a child's eye level to feel non-threatening. Use a calm, quiet voice, and keep your message simple — upset brains can't process a lot of language.

Slow means slowing yourself down. Take a breath to lower your heart rate, speak more slowly, and move calmly. When you slow your body and voice, it helps children mirror these behaviors and models an appropriate response. In turn, you help children feel safe and supported.

TIME, SPACE AND MOVEMENT

When a child is having a big feeling, they may benefit from one of three strategies to regulate their emotions: time, space, or movement.

Some children need *time*, a moment to sit and calm down before talking about behavior. Others need *space*, from another child, an adult, or the activity itself. And some need *movement*, such as walking, running, or safely throwing or kicking something to release energy.

FIVE STRATEGIES FOR MENTAL HEALTH INFORMED COACHES

Notice Duration, Intensity and Frequency

When a child shows big behavior, consider three things: duration, intensity, and frequency.

Duration: How long has this behavior been happening? Is it new or ongoing?



Intensity: How big is the behavior and how long does it take for the child to regulate?



Frequency: How often does it occur — occasionally or repeatedly?



These questions can guide how you respond and help determine when additional support or resources may be needed.

STRATEGY 4

FOSTERING GOOD SPORTSMANSHIP

As competition ramps up, some young athletes (as well as coaches, spectators and families) begin to struggle with sportsmanship. Good sportsmanship is about acting with respect and kindness, whether winning or losing. Here are a few strategies to support positive behavior throughout the season.

MODEL WHAT YOU WANT TO SEE

Coaches set the stage for what behavior is acceptable. The first step to building good sportsmanship on the team is to lead by example. Consider these tips:

Tips for Winning:

- Praise effort: congratulate athletes on their hard work and persistence, not just the final score
- Celebrate the competition: point out things the other team did well
- Avoid bragging: do not gloat or talk badly to or about the competition

Tips for Losing:

- Point out strengths: start by emphasizing what they did well before talking about the loss
- Highlight positive examples: shout out any athletes who demonstrated resilience, grit or positive attitude
- Reframe: help your athletes focus on what they can improve next time

BUILDING “GOOD SPORTS”

Becoming a good sport isn't just something that happens naturally. Kids need practice to learn these skills, just like they need practice in their sport.

Consider these tips:

- Set up activities where they don't compete against each other but work together to achieve a common goal.
- Demonstrate how they can cheer and support each other even in competition.
- Practice explicitly how to congratulate their competition after a game or match.
- Here are a few activities and games that can help build sportsmanship.
- Play musical chairs, and after each person gets out, they become part of the cheering squad.
- Toss a beach ball around a circle, keeping it from hitting the ground. If it drops, they do a small cheer (such as “1, 2, 3, let's go!”) and try again.
- Pair up students and blindfold one partner in each group. Place small items on the ground. The non-blindfolded person must guide their partner around the room without hitting an object. Both players congratulate each other on what they did well.

TIPS FOR FAMILIES AND SPECTATORS

Athletes aren't the only people who may need a reminder of sportsmanship. It's not uncommon for family members and spectators to get heated or model inappropriate behavior. As a coach, you have the opportunity to set expectations for families to ensure a healthy team culture. Create your own expectations around the following, naming explicitly what you hope to see.

- Disagreements with referees or judges
- Interactions with the team after a win or loss
- Interactions with opposing teams
- Commenting from the sidelines

STRATEGY 5

CELEBRATING EFFORT AND GROWTH

Celebrating effort and growth with kids builds their resilience and confidence. Rather than focusing solely on the scoreboard, paying attention to progress helps them develop skills they will use throughout their lives. Consider these tips.

PRAISE THE PROCESS

We often praise the result of hard work without stopping to highlight the skills it took to achieve that result. Instead of “Great job!” consider praise that emphasizes the growth, using clear, specific language, such as:

- At the start of the season, you could barely hit the ball over the net, and now you hit it over during a game!
- Look how far you can throw/kick the ball now compared to when you started!
- Look how much faster you are now than you were at the beginning of the season.

USE “YET”

Adding this simple three-letter word to the end of a sentence helps kids develop a growth mindset and reframe their thinking. “I’m not good at playing defense” becomes, “I’m not good at playing defense YET.” When we believe that our skills and qualities are fixed traits that are unchangeable, we are less likely to try new challenges and ultimately achieve goals. But when we shift our thinking to the idea that we can always change and grow, we open new possibilities for success.

I SAW YOU TRY

Effort often comes with disappointment, especially as we learn new skills. It can be easy for kids to decide not to try something new after a failure. It's much easier to stick with what they know they can do than to risk embarrassment. To help alleviate this, it can be useful to praise young athletes on their risks, regardless of the outcome. This can be as simple as calling out when you see them try something new. For example:

- I saw you try to hit that three-point shot! Nice effort.
- I saw you try to pass the ball to your teammate when you were being guarded. Great idea.
- I saw you try to keep running fast even though you were tired. Good hustle.
- I saw you try to save the ball from going in the goal. Keep it up.

CELEBRATIONS AND AWARDS

At the end of the season, it is common to celebrate with awards. Consider designating awards that highlight strong mental health skills, such as:

- Sportsmanship Award
- Relentless Effort Award
- Positive Attitude Award
- Amazing Resilience Award
- Super Problem Solver Award
- Kindness Champion Award

You don't need to know everything, have all the answers, or be a mental health professional to have a positive impact in the life of a child. When you are present, supportive and intentional, you can change a child's life in ways you may never see.