TRAUMA RESPONSIVE COACHING

Traditionally, coaches may have dealt with the behaviors manifest post-trauma as circumstances of misbehavior and thus apply disciplinary measures upon those athletes. Coaches stop to ask, "What's behind this behavior?" Discipline may NOT be the appropriate response to trauma. In fact, it rarely is.

Coaches should know:

1. Kids who have experienced trauma aren't trying to push your buttons.

If a student-athlete is having trouble with transitions or staying focused during practice, remember that children may be distracted because of a situation at home that is causing them to worry. Instead of reprimanding athletes for being late or forgetting playbooks, etc., be affirming and accommodating by establishing a visual cue or verbal reminder to help that athlete. Switch your mindset and remember the kid who has experienced trauma is not trying to push your buttons.

2. Kids who have been through trauma worry about what's going to happen next.

A daily routine for your teams (practices, workouts, game day) can be calming, so try to provide structure and predictability whenever possible. Since words may not sink in for kids who go through trauma, they need other sensory cues. Besides explaining how the day/practice will unfold, have signs or a storyboard that shows which activity the team will do when.

3. Even if the situation doesn't seem that bad to you, it's how the child feels that matters.

Try not to judge the trauma. As caring coaches, we may unintentionally project that a situation isn't really that bad, but how the team member feels about the stress is what matters most. "We have to remember it's the perception of the child … the situation is something they have no control over, feeling that their life or safety is at risk," says Caelan Kuban Soma, clinical director of the National Institute for Trauma and Loss in Children. It may not even be just one event, but the culmination of chronic stress–for example, a child who lives in poverty may worry about the family being able to pay rent on time, keep their jobs or have enough food. Those ongoing stressors can cause trauma. "Anything that keeps our nervous system activated for longer than four to six weeks is defined as post-traumatic stress," says Soma.

4. Trauma isn't always associated with violence.

Trauma is often associated with violence, but kids also can suffer trauma from a variety of situations–like divorce, a move, or being overscheduled or bullied. "All kids, especially in this day and age, experience extreme stress from time to time," says Soma. "It is more common than we think."

5. You don't need to know exactly what caused the trauma to be able to help.

Instead of focusing on the specifics of a traumatic situation, concentrate on the support you can give athletes who are suffering. "Stick with what you are seeing now–the hurt, the anger, the worry," Soma says, rather than getting every detail of the athlete's story.

Carrie Hastings, Psy.D., askdoctorcarrie@playlikeachampion.org

You don't have to dig deep into the trauma to be able to effectively respond with empathy and flexibility.

6. Kids who experience trauma need to feel they're good at something and can influence the world.

Find opportunities that allow kids to set and achieve goals, and they'll feel a sense of mastery and control. Assign them tasks and responsibilities that they can do well or let them be a peer helper to someone else. Empower them. Set them up to succeed and keep that bar in the zone where you know they are able to accomplish it and move forward." Rather than saying a student is good at ____ (insert element of sport), find experiences to let him or her feel it. Because trauma is such a sensory experience, kids need more than encouragement–they need to feel their worth through concrete tasks, (show rather than tell).

7. There's a direct connection between stress and learning.

When kids are stressed, it's tough for them to learn. Create a safe, accepting environment on your team by letting children know you understand their situation and support them. Kids who have experienced trauma have difficulty learning unless they feel safe and supported. The more you coaches can do to make the child less anxious and have the child focus on the task at hand, the better the performance you are going to see out of that child. There is a direct connection between lowering stress and academic outcomes."

8. Self-regulation can be a major challenge for students suffering from trauma.

Some kids with trauma are growing up with emotionally unavailable parents and haven't learned to self-soothe, so they may develop distracting behaviors and have trouble staying focused for long periods. To help them cope, schedule regular brain breaks. Tell the team at the beginning of practices when there will be breaks–to relax their minds and recharge their bodies. If you build it in before the behavior gets out of whack, you set the athlete up for success. A child may be able to make it through a 20-minute block of practice activity if it's understood there will be a break to recharge before the next task/activity.

9. It's OK to ask kids point-blank what you can do to help them make it through the day.

For all students with trauma, you can ask them directly what you can do to help. They may ask to listen to music with headphones or run some more to burn off energy. We have to be willing to step back and ask them, "How can I help? Is there something I can do to make you feel even a little bit better?"

10. You can support kids with trauma even when they're outside your team setting.

Share trauma-informed strategies with all staff, from bus drivers to parent volunteers to classroom teachers. Remind everyone: "The kid is not his or her behavior,". Typically there is something underneath that driving that to happen, so be sensitive. Ask yourself, "I wonder what's going on with that kid?" rather than saying, 'What's wrong with the kid?' That's a huge shift in the way we view kids."

Best Practices: What Can Coaches Do

It's all about the Coach/Player Relationship

First and foremost, concentrate on building a positive relationship with your athletes. Trauma Care specialist Allison Jackson notes that 70% of what causes someone to make a significant health change in their life can be attributed to the relationship they have with a helping individual. The alliance that you form with that student athlete is more important than adhering to every step of a trauma-sensitive protocol. Here are three things to keep in mind when forming an alliance with a traumatized student-athlete ...

Warmth, authenticity & compassion should characterize the coach/athlete relationship

Develop rapport

A **collaborative** relationship is important

A Trauma-Responsive Coaching Plan

Follow these suggested practices for a trauma-informed coaching plan which will ultimately, benefit the entire team. No need to single out those athletes who are struggling.

- **Coaching in pairs** enables more opportunities for one-on-one work and support. This can be especially helpful when a player is having difficulty regulating his or her emotions/behavior
- **Predictable practice plan** - incorporate patterns of high intensity and rest/recovery - this is metaphorical & shows that even when a player experiences heightened emotions or out-of-control behavior, he/she can recover & have a fresh start/ another try.
- Establish a **team code for conduct**
    - Get on same page regarding expectations and consequences
    - Everyone is to contribute
- Create **leadership opportunities**
    - E.g. Lead warm-ups; huddle cheer; prayer
- Create **service opportunities**
    - Set up equipment, carrying gear
- Create **friendship opportunities**
- Allow for **periods of team reflection**
- Be **flexible and creative!**
    - It's ok change things up... e.g., Add time-outs; include refs in team discussions
- Remain **Goal-oriented** to build self-efficacy and confidence
- Maintain the **FUN** [Play!]

Communication is Key

Be available before and after practices. Sometimes, it is the unstructured, unplanned, informal time together that generates the most authentic connectivity. There is less pressure and no expectations. The athlete is in control of when and how to start a conversation about what is on their mind, which can feel empowering. It is also a time when coach and athletes can share a few laughs. Your accessibility helps build trust with the athletes & lets them know that you are invested in them - your role is not just a formatted agenda of winning games.

Coaches can learn how to reframe their coaching language to be less accusatory and more supportive.

Carrie Hastings, Psy.D., askdoctorcarrie@playlikeachampion.org

Deficit-Based Coach Comments:	**Strength-Based Coach Comments:**
He's disruptive and a bad kid.	His behaviors might be a challenge, but he's not a bad kid.
What's wrong with him?	What's right with him?
There she goes again.	I wonder what's the underlying reason she's doing that?
He can't be trusted.	He needs a positive person to teach him how to trust others.
We are the adults. We are in charge around here.	Let's give them choices to help them learn Decision-making.
I don't want that troublemaker on my kid's team.	Playing alongside a good influence like your kid can Teach him/her the social and physical skills to give up trouble-making
It's unfair to the talented players to let that kid play.	When lesser talented kids are given a chance to compete and learn from more talented kids, everyone gets better.
I'm such a loser, nobody wants me on their team.	You impress me as someone who's willing to work Hard to improve. Who wouldn't want someone like that on their team?

Respond with Compassion when emotions run high

What can a coach do when an athlete reacts and displays some of the inappropriate behaviors potentially due to traumatic emotions being triggered?

- Remain calm and enlist help from other coaches (take care of the rest of the team etc.).
- Watch your body language - Do not communicate anger or frustration.
- Give the athlete time to cool down If she/he appears highly agitated. The 18 minute rule is a good guide.
- Help the student-athlete **identify and label** his or her emotions (emotional literacy) (*e.g.,"I feel frustrated."*).
- Use reflective questioning (*e.g.,"Can you tell me how you are feeling now?"*).
- Describe what you're noticing -e.g., heavy breathing, clenched fists, etc. (stay out of meaning (*e.g.,"I know you're angry."*)
- Avoid confrontational stances - side-by-side vs. face-to-face; if possible separate team from the individual.
- Ask student-athlete what he/she thinks would be helpful right now; if "I don't know" offer some options. (stay out of "fix it" mode).
- Use the law of inverse volume: the louder the student gets, the quieter you get.
- Minimize directives (especially things like "calm down"

Carrie Hastings, Psy.D., askdoctorcarrie@playlikeachampion.org

- Talk one-on-one with the athlete when calm is restored, about the situation, allow them to "tell their story" summarize around values or tools as needed.
- Let the student-athlete know that his or her emotions are **normal and understandable.**
- Help students recognize reminders (triggers) that can result in overwhelming emotions.
- Offer **choices that empower** rather that restrict or threaten.
- Employ **non-threatening language.**

"What happened here?" Vs. "What's wrong with you?"
"Do me a favor and __" vs. "Get in line right now!"
"Help me understand__" vs. "What were you thinking?"

Coaches, recognize when to ask for professional help for your athletes.

- When a student-athlete discloses
    - Abuse/neglect of any kind (state mandated reporting applies)
    - Self injury, e.g. self-cutting
    - Suicidal ideation or suicide attempt
    - Alcohol/drug use/overdose/dependence
- When behavior/emotions continue to get worse in spite of current compassionate efforts

Carrie Hastings, Psy.D., askdoctorcarrie@playlikeachampion.org