



Using Sports Psychology with Youth Athletes

This resource stems from a question submitted to the Ask PCA blog. Responses come from our experts including PCA Trainers, who lead live group workshops for coaches, parents, administrators and student-athletes.

“Coaching my daughters’ teams (ages 6-13) I have started using what you might broadly categorize as ‘Sports Psychology.’ I have been pleasantly surprised – and occasionally blown away – by the quality of the outcomes. I ensure alignment with PCA principles of focusing on effort and fun. Question is, how much sports psychology is OK, and at what ages? Also, can you refer me to specific books, websites, and other resources?”

PCA Response by Eric Eisendrath, PCA Lead Trainer

Yogi Berra was right when he famously said, “90% of the game is half mental,” so it makes sense to focus on the psychological aspects of the game.

Sport Psychology has gradually been working its way into the youth sports mainstream because it has a lot to offer youth athletes (and coaches!). PCA’s research-based approach to coaching, especially our ELM Tree of Mastery (E for Effort, L for Learning, M for bouncing back from Mistakes) comes directly from sport psychology research. So if you are coaching to the ELM Tree, you are already using sport psychology with your athletes.

PCA Founder Jim Thompson describes how he used visualization with his high school basketball players in his memoir, “Shooting in the Dark: Tales of Coaching and Leadership” (available at www.balancesportspublishing.com). Jim found out that his players initially were unsure how to react to his use of visualization but he persevered through the “giggly” stage. Ultimately, his players came to believe it was instrumental in their winning their league title and asked him for more when he forgot to use visualization for awhile. With younger athletes you might experiment with it and see how your players react while erring on the side of too little versus too much.

Other resources for high school and youth coaches include:

- *Get Your Game Face On* by PCA Trainer Kathy Toon, available at <http://coachtoon.com/book>
- *Heads-Up Baseball: Playing the Game One Pitch at a Time* by PCA National Advisory Board member Ken Ravizza and Tom Hanson. (Although this book is baseball specific, many of the tools can be adapted to any sport.)
- *Thinking Body, Dancing Mind* by Chungliang Al Huang and Jerry Lynch. This book applies Eastern philosophy principles to sports in a really interesting way.
- *Mindset: the New Psychology of Success* by PCA National Advisory Board Member Carol Dweck isn’t traditional sport psychology but her notion of the power of the “growth mindset” is a wonderful mental framework for success in sports as well as life.

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