



## HOW SPORTS CAN PREPARE YOU FOR LIFE

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Sports are fun activities that help kids learn skills, like how to shoot a free throw or skate backwards. But what if sports could teach us more than physical skills and prepare us for life? If the environment is safe and welcoming, sports can also teach us skills that we can use in our lives—*life skills*! Participating in sports can teach us about teamwork, being a leader, how to relax if we are upset, and much more! In this article, we discuss different ways that life skills can be developed through sports. We also talk about what you and your coaches can do to help you develop life skills. As you learn these skills in sports, you can use them anywhere, like at school or home. Life skills learned in sports can help you become a good person on whatever path you choose in life.

### HOW SPORTS CAN PREPARE YOU FOR LIFE

Sports can be fun activities that help kids to learn different skills, like how to shoot a free throw, skate backwards, or hit a fastball. But what if sports can teach us more than physical skills? What if they can prepare

us for life? Kids across the world engage in different types of organized sports, whether at school or in their communities. This makes sports an important context to help prepare kids for life. You might have heard the phrase “sports build character” before. Building positive character does not always happen by accident. It requires hard work from the kids participating, but also from their coaches and teammates.

Coaches play an important role in sports. If coaches make sports safe and welcoming, kids can have fun, learn new skills, and be part of a team or club. If coaches do not structure sports well, sports can lead to negative things, like not having fun, cheating, or bullying. In this article, we discuss how coaches can help kids learn **life skills** through playing sports.

### LIFE SKILLS

Values, assets, or skills that help us in life. They can include respect, honesty, teamwork, emotional regulation, perseverance, and many more.

### WHAT ARE LIFE SKILLS?

If the sports environment is safe and welcoming, sports can teach kids skills they can use in their lives—*life skills*! Life skills means different things to different people. Sometimes people use words like values, assets, lessons, or character traits. In this article, we will call them life skills. Within sports, life skills can include:

- *Respect*: showing consideration and being kind to people (teammates, opponents, referees) and things (rules of the sport, equipment, sports facility);
- *Honesty*: always telling the truth to yourself and others;
- *Teamwork*: working together as a group to achieve a goal;
- *Emotional regulation*: having control over your emotions and staying calm; and
- *Perseverance*: always trying your best and never giving up.

You may learn about some of these skills at school, when you are working on a group project, or at home, from your parents and family. Learning life skills in many different contexts is an important part of your development. Developing life skills is a *process*, which means they take time and practice to develop. Sports can be one part of the process of developing life skills. Life skills can be learned, practiced, and improved upon in any sport, whether team or individual. Yet, for these skills to be called life skills, kids need to transfer these skills. **Life skills transfer** means that life skills learned in sports are used in other areas of your life, like at school, at home, or in other sports or activities [1].

### WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO DEVELOP LIFE SKILLS?

You may be asking yourself why developing life skills is important. Learning and practicing life skills in sports can help you be a good

### LIFE SKILLS TRANSFER

The process in which the life skills learned in sports are applied in other areas of a kid’s life, like at school, at home, in other sports, or in their community.

teammate and player, but they can also help you to be a good person outside of sports. Even if you do not become a professional athlete or play sports your whole life, you can still use life skills in other contexts. For example, learning relaxation techniques can be very helpful in sports. When stepping up to the plate for your first pitch in cricket or standing on the basketball free-throw line, you can learn different ways to relax, such as taking deep breaths or calming your mind by counting to five. Learning about relaxation techniques in sports can also help when you feel nervous or anxious at school. Before a test, you can take deep breaths to relax and calm your nerves. If you get into an argument with a friend or sibling, relaxation techniques, like deep breathing, can also help you act calmly, so you choose your words carefully and come to a peaceful solution.

## HOW CAN I DEVELOP LIFE SKILLS IN SPORT?

There is a lot to focus on while playing sports—the rules, your position—without thinking about life skills. But do not worry; you do not have to go through this process on your own! As mentioned, coaches are important in helping kids develop life skills when playing sports. Life skills can be developed through sports in two different ways.

First, life skills can be developed based on how the sport is structured, including the rules, competition, and relationships developed with coaches and teammates [2]. In this **implicit approach**, coaches focus mainly on teaching sport-specific skills, like passing and shooting. They do not place any specific effort on discussing or practicing life skills. In cheerleading, kids can learn to communicate with their teammates during a routine. In golf, kids can learn to be respectful through the rules about respecting the course and one's opponents. In these examples, coaches are not doing anything specific to support the development of life skills. Essentially, if coaches use this implicit approach, they leave life skills learning in sports up to chance.

Second, life skills can also be developed explicitly [2]. This **explicit approach** occurs when coaches take specific steps to teach kids life skills. There are different ways for coaches to teach life skills through sports. Below, we give an example of Coach Jane using an explicit approach during a handball practice or competition. This approach has five steps. First, Jane picks one life skill to teach—leadership. The theme of the entire session is to learn how to be a leader. Second, Jane works with players to define that life skill. Together, they come up with a definition of what it means to be a leader in handball, at home, and at school. Third, Jane gives players opportunities to practice being leaders during the session, including asking them to lead the warm-up or to act as the team captain. Jane provides feedback while they practice being leaders. She asks players to consider if their way of leading includes all of their teammates. Fourth, Jane finishes the

### IMPLICIT APPROACH

An approach to teaching life skills in which coaches focus on teaching sport-specific skills, without placing any specific effort on teaching life skills or providing time to practice life skills.

### EXPLICIT APPROACH

An approach to teaching life skills that occurs when coaches take specific steps to teach kids life skills.

### Figure 1

We can imagine coaches who use implicit and explicit approaches as climbing a staircase. The first two steps represent the implicit approach, and the last two steps represent the explicit approach. Coaches need to climb the stairs in order to explicitly teach life skills. The stairs build on each other—to be on stair three, coaches need to also be using strategies from stairs one and two. This allows coaches to use a combination of implicit and explicit approaches for teaching life skills (Image credit: adapted from [3]).

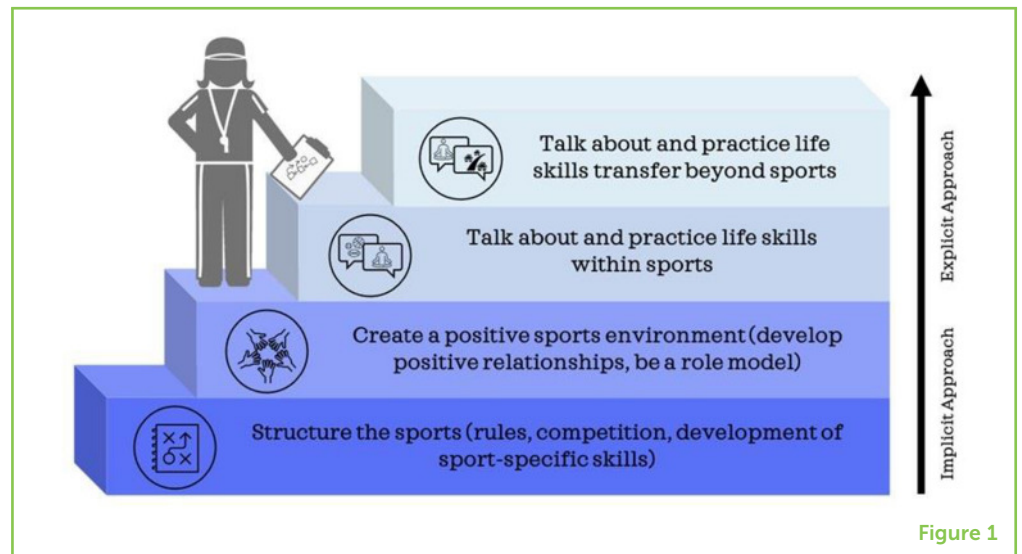


Figure 1

session by reviewing the chosen life skill. She asks players questions like, “What activities required you to be a leader in today’s session?” and “Where else can you be a leader beyond handball?” Together, Jane and the players talk about how they can be leaders at home, at school, and even at work as they get older. The point of these discussions is for players to develop connections between their sports experiences and their lives outside of sports. Finally, Jane can provide opportunities for players to practice the life skills learned in handball in other contexts. As mentioned earlier, this is called life skills transfer. For example, to practice transferring leadership, Jane arranges for the players to lead activities at a younger team’s practice. Jane also works with the players’ teachers and parents to encourage players to practice being leaders in school, at home, or in other extracurricular activities, like mentoring a classmate who is struggling with their math homework. Overall, Coach Jane *explicitly* supports players’ leadership skills, within and beyond handball.

Researchers have found that using a combination of implicit *and* explicit approaches is most useful for kids to learn life skills in sports (Figure 1) [4]. When coaches use both approaches, kids can have more opportunities to develop life skills based on how the sports environment is structured and what kinds of skills coaches choose to teach. Coach Jane supports her players’ leadership development by using the five steps outlined above (explicit approach), along with strategies like being a role model and setting clear rules about playing fairly (implicit approach). Research shows that using both approaches can help to increase kids’ awareness of how to transfer their life skills and strengthen their abilities for life skills transfer beyond sports, like at home and at school [5]. For example, if a player sees a classmate being bullied by a peer at school based on their gender identity or skin color, the player can transfer his or her leadership skills developed in sports by standing up for that classmate and leading the conversation toward kindness and inclusion rather than bullying.

## SO NOW YOU KNOW!

In this article, we talked about ways sports and coaches can help you develop important skills that you can use in life. These life skills, like respect, leadership, and honesty, can improve your ability to perform in sports, but they also go beyond sports. What is important to remember is that YOU, as the athlete, also play an important role in this learning process. First, think about the different skills you are learning in sports. What are they? Look for important connections between your sport and your life in school or at home. Second, take initiative and use your life skills without your coach having to ask you. Stand up for a teammate who is being bullied or try to focus while waiting to receive a serve in tennis. Third, keep these skills in mind as you grow up. As you go to high school or secondary school and work your first job, there may be different life skills that are useful for you to transfer from your sports experiences. So, next time you are about to give a big class presentation, think about what you did on the court or field to help you relax and prepare. Practicing these life skills in sports and life can help you be a good athlete *and* a good person, on whatever path you choose in life.

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## YOUNG REVIEWER



### AMELIE, AGE: 13

I have started practicing judo (I am a yellow-belt) and love playing squash with my friends and swimming. I am very interested in aviation and at school, my favorite subjects are physics, chemistry, and biology.

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Sara Kramers is a doctoral student in sport psychology within the School of Human Kinetics at the University of Ottawa, Canada. Her research aims to explore how to support youth sport coaches as they intentionally and explicitly support young athletes' life skills development and transfer through sport. Through her research and community service, Sara ultimately aims to promote the development of sport environments that are inclusive, equitable, and meaningful for those participating.