

“Dealing with Behavior Problems”

Excerpted from *The Double-Goal Coach* by Jim Thompson



Establishing a strong culture – a way of doing things on your team – will minimize misbehavior by your players. But even so, kids will misbehave from time to time. Three principles should form the basis of shaping the behavior of your team:

- 1 **Reinforce behavior you want;**
- 2 **Ignore behavior you don't want; and**
- 3 **When you can't ignore, intervene in a “least-attention” manner.**

1 Reinforce Behavior You Want: Attention, whether favorable or unfavorable, is reinforcing to many kids. Most people understand that when we give positive attention to a child (“Way to go!”), he tends to increase behavior that brought him the attention. What isn't well understood is that negative attention (“No, no, not like that!”) can also increase a behavior, especially for kids who don't believe they have the ability to get an adult's attention with good behavior.

Eleven of my 12 players come running at my signal, but Victor takes forever. Where does my attention go? I have 11 players gathering attentively around me as if I am the fount of all wisdom, but I ignore them and focus my attention on Victor, who is not doing what I want him to do. “Victor, how many times (voice rising!) do I have to tell you to come right away when you hear one long whistle?”

Often we ignore the players who do what we want, and lavish attention – albeit negative attention – on those not doing what we want. What we give attention to in children can increase the behavior, whether praising them or yelling at them.

I don't like to be yelled at. So I assume when I yell at Victor he doesn't like it either, and it will cause him to change. Often the exact opposite is the case. Giving attention, even if negative, to Victor for his bad behavior can increase it.

By focusing my attention on the laggard I am also punishing the players who came in right away. Instead I should reinforce them! “Hey, Jeremy, Ruben, Brent, I really appreciate the way you came running in right away at the whistle. That really helps us because we have a limited amount of time for practice. When you come right away, it means we can get more accomplished. Thanks.”

When kids learn that you give attention for appropriate behavior, they often compete to please you, for example, by trying to be the first to come running so you will notice and praise them. Which is good, but what about Victor?

2 Ignore Behavior You Don't Want: While Victor is not doing what I want him to, he ceases to exist as far as I am concerned. This technique is called “extinction.” Until Victor does what I want him to do, he is extinct. Instead I thank those who came right away and move on to the next task.

Now it can get really interesting if I truly am able to ignore Victor. If Victor sees that he is being ignored and others are getting your attention, he may finally come running saying, “Hey, Coach, How about me? I came in.”

Now I can say in a matter-of-fact way, “Victor, these guys came right away so I was thanking them. But if you come right away next time, I'll thank you as well. Now let's get going with the next drill.”

This tactic works like magic. Kids who misbehave are used to getting attention for misbehaving. Their parents and teachers are a daily source of attention available to them whenever they misbehave. And since often they don't believe they can get attention for doing something positive, they'll take it in the only way

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they think they can get it. So when you ignore their misbehavior, it is not to their liking. When they find out that they can very easily get your attention by doing what you want them to do, they tend to do it.

But that’s with kids. Does extinction also work with teenagers? PCA’s Tina Syer coached a 17-year-old field hockey player who never was ready when it was time to start warming up. The rest of the girls were ready to go, and she would still have one sock on. Before the next tournament Tina asked how much warm-up time was needed. The team agreed on 45 minutes. Forty-five minutes before the next game, the same player had only one shoe on. Tina said, “Let’s go” and the team took off, leaving the laggard behind, who quickly laced her shoes and ran to catch up. She was never late again. With no attention from coach or teammates, her behavior shriveled up like a plant receiving no water.

So extinction works. But what if you just can’t ignore inappropriate behavior?

- 3** _____ **When You Can’t Ignore:** Sometimes you can’t ignore a player’s behavior. Perhaps he is putting himself or others in danger (you aren’t really ignoring him; you’re keeping an eye on him without letting him know it). You need to stop him from hurting himself or others. When a player acts in a way that dishonors the game, it cannot be ignored. Finally, you can’t ignore misbehavior that disrupts your ability to work with your team. When you have to intervene, here’s how to do it in an effective way.

The “Least-Attention Manner”: Let’s say Ben is talking while you are speaking to the team. You calmly call Ben aside. “Ben, I need you to stand over here until you can obey the rules that we all agreed on – that is to not talk while I’m talking. When you are ready to follow the rules, come back and join us.”

Sometimes that’s all it will take. But Ben may try to play you like a “yo-yo.” He immediately bounces back and disrupts things again. You calmly intervene again but this time you add a check-in. “Ben, you weren’t ready to rejoin the team just now, so I want you to think about what you need to do to rejoin us. I’ll be back soon to see if you’re ready to follow the rules. Sit here and think about how you want to behave until I come back.”

Now is the time to do a fun activity – a shooting drill for basketball, soccer or lacrosse, a hitting drill for baseball or softball – so Ben is missing something he would enjoy. Don’t do a conditioning drill at this time!

Now check in with Ben. “Ben, can you tell me why I had you stand apart from the rest of the team?” You want hear: “I was talking while you were talking.” If he isn’t able to do this, prompt him: “Was it because you were talking while I was talking?” Don’t let him rejoin the team until he acknowledges it.

But you’re not done yet. You want him to commit to follow the rules when he rejoins the team. “What do you need to do when you rejoin the team?” Again, if he can’t articulate the desired behavior, you can prompt him. “When you rejoin us, you need to listen while I’m talking. Do you think you can do that now?” Again, he has to agree, at least with a head nod.

Now you’ve intervened to stop Ben’s misbehavior from ruining the practice for everyone else, and in a way that helps him learn to control himself. You’ve told him how he can be part of the team and you’ve done it with a minimum amount of disruption of the rest of the team.

The Discipline of the Three C’s

Many coaches think it is a sign of strength to get angry with players but it is the opposite. Becoming negative or visibly angry with players is a sign of weakness and lack of self-discipline. When you communicate expectations clearly, and have a plan for dealing with misbehavior, you are in a position of strength. You can gently enforce rules without raising your voice. You don’t have to get upset. You can be calm because there is a consequence that you administer in a consistent manner. That’s what we call the Three C’s: Calmness, Consequences and Consistency.

Player of the Day



If we are honest we will admit that we all have had players that we didn't relate well to. Some kids just push our buttons. When you have a player like this, make him Player of the Day. Don't tell the player this but make sure to get your co-coaches on the same page. "Today, Doug is Player of the Day. Every time he does anything the least bit positive, we reinforce him for it. Okay?"

If he runs hard for half a drill, say, "Doug, great hustle at the beginning!" All your attention goes to things he is doing well. Ignore the things he is not doing well.

This tool can make a huge difference with kids who regularly have low E-Tanks. Many kids have problems at home, in school or with friends and they come to your practice with a chip on their shoulder. When you make a player like this Player of the Day, you do two important things.

You fill his tank in a way he is not used to and which he cannot ignore. Even for disturbed, behavior-problem kids (and I have worked extensively with them), this kind of tank filling makes them feel better about themselves.

The other thing that happens is that you begin to see the player in a better light. Cognitive dissonance happens when our behavior and our thoughts are not aligned, and that is uncomfortable. We don't like acting in ways that are different from our feelings and thoughts, so we change one or the other. When you treat Doug as Player of the Day, your attitude toward him becomes more positive as well. And having a coach who becomes more positive toward him is a very good thing for him!