

THE ART OF RESPONSIBLE CRITICISM

Five Tips to Delivering Positive Criticism

The Magic Ratio: 5 praises to 1 criticism. It's a model that the experts at Positive Coaching Alliance have shared with us to help us stay focused on filling kids' emotional tanks as they learn the skills (and joys!) of sports. Oftentimes we, as parents and coaches, have the Magic Ratio in mind because we need to deliver that one criticism. But we're looking for how to deliver that one piece of criticism, in addition to those five praises, to ensure that our athletes hear and understand. If you're like us, it's one of the toughest things that we as Responsible Sport Parents and Responsible Coaches have to tackle.

So this month we've once again turned to our friends at Positive Coaching Alliance to help us focus on the keys to delivering that one criticism in a positive way to ensure that kids truly learn and improve.

1. **Avoid Obvious Criticism**

Most times, kids (and adults!) know when they've made a mistake. If anything, we're our own worst critics. So simply telling a youth athlete what he or she already knows – the obvious – doesn't necessarily move them forward or help them learn from the mistake. Sometimes just acknowledging the shared understanding is enough. "Brush it off. You'll remember to get that glove down next time."

2. **Deliver Criticism In Private**

No one likes to be embarrassed, especially in front of others. It's much easier to receive criticism when it comes one-on-one and not in front of fellow teammates, opposing players or parents in the stands. Granted, sometimes this is tough to do when you are in the middle of a game. But watch coaches like Doc Rivers (an upcoming Responsible Sports podcast interviewee), who has one-on-one conversations with his players before and after they check out of the game.

3. **Ask Permission**

Jim Thompson, Founder and Executive Director of PCA, oftentimes talks about 'changing the dynamic' by asking players if they are open to receiving constructive criticism before delivering the message. When asked, kids oftentimes say "sure" – and when they do, they naturally have opened themselves up to listening and hearing a bit better. Jim reminds us, though, that if a kid says "no," then we need to respect that and look for another opportunity. "Okay, let me know if you change your mind" can sometimes pique their curiosity to come back to you some other time and ask for you to begin the conversation.

4. **Information versus Control**

How often in our adult lives have we heard someone say to us: 'it's not what you say, but how you say it'? This could not be more true for delivering constructive criticism. When we as Responsible Sport Parents or Responsible Coaches can

deliver information in a way that doesn't feel like we're trying to control, we'll find a more receptive audience. The experts at PCA talk about creating "if-then" statements as a way to stress that information component. Instead of saying "you need to release the ball sooner" (controlling), you could say "If you release the ball sooner, then you'll give our offense a great advantage with a quick transition." It's subtle, but powerful, and begins to make it clear why you're seeking change.

5. **Try Creating a Criticism Sand-wish**

The analogy is an easy one to understand – sandwich a criticism in the middle of two positive things. "Your checks look great. Now you need to release the ball sooner. Keep up the great work sticking to your opponent on D!" The wish part? Try rephrasing your criticism into a wish. "I wish you would release the ball sooner" When you do this, you're not only delivering the criticism, but you're also filling your kids' emotional tanks by demonstrating that you're interested in their improvement and not just controlling them or the outcome.

Just like we remind our kids: practice makes perfect. These aren't easy to do. But over time, they do become easier. Your efforts will be rewarded with youth athletes who will continue to enjoy the game they love to play as they improve and grow both on the field and in the game of life.