



## **DEVELOPING CHAMPIONS FOR LIFE!**

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### **Coaching “Problem” Players**

Coaching a team at the Recreation or Grassroots level often means working with players of varying abilities. This could be in the form of size, athleticism, skill, or passion. Every player’s development path is different, which makes coaching a young group of varying abilities all the more challenging.

Coaches are likely to encounter players of varying interest and focus levels, including at least one “problem” player. This player lacks interest in the game, or lacks focus in listening, following directions, or adhering to the rules. This player disrupts practice by distracting his teammates; acting silly; or may act out physically toward them (pushing, shoving, etc.).

They may be considered a “problem” because they require more attention from the coach than the other players, which is unfair to those players who are focused in training.

This player is often labeled a “problem” player because they cause problems. That’s a false characterization. This child is not a problem – often times they’re just lacking in their maturity. We have to remember that children are not finished products, or mini adults. They are growing in their physical, mental, and emotional abilities, and need to be treated as such.

The “problem” at hand for coaches: how do we reach, connect, and improve this challenging player?

Let’s start with the following steps:

#### **Step 1: Recognize they are Individuals**

Coaches set rules and expectation for their team to follow. These are standards to meet for all team members. This helps develop the culture within the team. However, not every player will be able to reach these standards, because they may not be fully equipped to do so.

It’s up to each coach to recognize the individuality of the players on their team. While most players may be able to follow simple instructions, others may need additional attention or direction.



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Strive to develop a separate, specific relationship with each player on the team. Your relationship (including how you communicate) with one player may be different than the next, and that's OK, as long as that relationship doesn't produce bias or favoritism.

### **Step 2: Discuss the issue with the Player's Parents**

If a child is misbehaving in soccer, chances are that behavior occurs in other domains: at home, in school, in other activities, etc. Bring the misbehavior to the child's parent's attention, and ask them if they've experienced similar outbursts.

If this happens often, ask parents what steps (rules, tools, expressions, etc.) are used by others to help address this behavior. That will reduce the learning curve when you implement it within your team (see below), since the child will already be familiar with it.

Parents may also have some insight to their child. Some children may have specific learning disabilities, and the parent can provide you with strategies to help reach their child. You can also use the internet to research the condition, and effective teaching methods.

Lastly, it's important for the parent to know this behavior is occurring, so that they are part of the solution, and can help reinforce your message in soccer at home.

### **Step 3: Create a Plan**

A plan to address and correct misbehavior is needed. It should be clear but also reasonable and fair. Remember the individual you're working with, and cater to their needs.

A simple yet effective plan may be a 3-Warning system:

**Warning 1: verbal warning.** Address what the behavior is, why it's inappropriate, and inform them if it happens again they'll need to sit out.

**Warning 2: 5-minute break.** Instruct the player to go sit out, and designate the area they need to be. This should not be with their parents unless the child is having a meltdown and needs to be helped. It should be away so they can reflect on what they did.

To help reinforce the message, you may tell them to sit out, but return to you when they're ready to play again. More often than not, they'll return within a minute. You as



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the coach can reinforce the severity of their actions by responding “No, I don’t think you’re ready, go back and sit down.”

As you begin the next activity with your team and get them active, you can then return your attention to the misbehaving player. Ask them why they were told to sit out – they likely will know the reason. If they cannot determine why, ask them guided questions (“what did you do to Timmy? Was that appropriate? Why?”... “Do you remember when I warned you earlier in practice? What did we talk about then?”)

It’s important that the player recognizes what they did, and it’s more powerful if they reach the conclusion instead of being spoon-fed the answer.

Once they’ve realized both the action and why it’s inappropriate, inform them if this talk occurs again they’ll have to sit out the rest of practice.

**Warning 3: sit out the end of practice.** The player is removed from the rest of the activities. A parent should be present to sit with them when this occurs. The player should not leave practice – they should be there as part of their commitment and to reinforce that bad behavior doesn’t mean they go home early.

Extreme misbehavior (offensive, inappropriate language, physical actions like pushing, kicking, etc.) can escalate directly to Warning 3.

If a child reaches multiple Warning 3s, reduction in playing time on Saturdays can be enforced.

When a child reaches Warning 2 or Warning 3, be sure to inform the child’s parent that day, so they can address the behavior too, and reinforce the expectation.

### **Step 4: Enforce the Plan and Hold them Accountable**

It’s easy to outline a plan. It’s much harder to enforce it. Coaches must remain steadfast – if you give the player wiggle room, the plan loses its teeth. Children may not like boundaries and rules, but they understand them, and the ability to follow them helps develop discipline that will benefit them later in life.

Once it’s enforced, players will typically fall into line, as they recognize there are consequences for their actions.



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### **Step 5: Catch them being Good!**

Although it's important to enforce the plan to address the misbehavior, we shouldn't rely on the fear of consequences for a misbehaving player to fall into line.

When they do correct their actions – actively listening to your instructions, focusing on the activity and not distracting their teammates, etc. – it's important we shower them with praise. Be sure to share this with their parents, so they too can reward the player for positive behavior.

This positive reinforcement often carries more weight than negative reinforcement such as being removed from practice, so be sure to praise them – catch them being good!

### **Review:**

It's important to recognize that this method is merely a suggestion – it is one manner that may be effective for a lot of young athletes, and easily used by many volunteer, Grassroots coaches.

Whatever method you use, be sure to keep it player-centric, recognizing that players develop at different rates. “Old School” methods – go run a lap, drop and give me 20 – are often ineffective for a number of reasons (it associates physical activity with punishment, it assumes a player knows what they did was unacceptable when the child may not know, etc.).

The key is being able to reach the “problem” player as an individual. While that may require more work for you as the coach, the result – the moment that player fixes the misbehavior, or the “thank you” note that player sends you 10 years later – is all the more rewarding for you.