Chances are when you hear the term “discipline” applied to youth athletes, one of the first things that comes to mind is a screaming coach with a whistle. But positive discipline takes a different spin from the strategies some coaches apply with punishment. By developing a positive behavioral climate, you can teach athletes the value of being motivated and dedicated to athletic success.

“Positive discipline uses many proactive approaches to encourage the behaviors,” said Sarah Carson, assistant professor at the department of kinesiology at James Madison University in Harrisonburg, Va. “There are consequences when misbehavior occurs, but the focus is on setting up an environment where people want to be motivated with clear expectations.”

As such, you won’t run the risk of developing negative team dynamics. Positive discipline is an alternate approach to simply using punishment, which is often the easier thing for coaches to do. With positive discipline, “You can reduce your workload because you have people who are less likely to misbehave or go off task,” Carson said.

Carson provided the following tips for instilling positive discipline.

- **Model the behavior.** “It’s important for coaches to model the positive behavior they want athletes to uphold,” Carson said. “Positive discipline is often viewed as somewhat counterculture because coaches may resort to punishment because that’s what has been modeled for them.” Provide clear rules and expectations. Show your athletes how positive discipline can benefit the program.

- **Get coaches on board.** Find the coaching role models who have used positive discipline approaches. Coaches known for developing quality student-athletes and building a program of success create strong buy-in. For example, legendary UCLA basketball coach John Wooden was known for instilling a system of positive discipline. “Every detail counted with him,” Carson said. “At the beginning of every season, he insisted on team discipline because that’s what will translate into success. Using those examples will help coaches see that the methods have been successful with others.”

- **Build relationships, rapport.** The environment for athletes should be positive if you want them to buy in and do the hard work needed for success. “You need to be disciplined as the athletics administrator as well,” Carson said. “It’s important to establish rapport with the athletes beyond the playing field.”

- **Develop team rules.** Team rules should underscore the positive discipline approach. “Coaches should solicit input from student-athletes about the rules they want,” Carson said. “That ensures the athletes will buy into the rules because they may be more likely to abide if they had a hand in it.” Determine the behaviors you want on the team, and get the athletes’ input. Make sure the rules are realistic and enforceable.

- **Enforce consequences.** The athletes should be governed by a set of team rules. When a rule is broken, the consequence should promote life lessons that maintain positive rapport. “The athletes will see the consequences as practical and logical and not that the coach doesn’t like them,” Carson said.

- **Ensure parent buy-in.** It can be difficult to apply positive discipline midstream because it needs a preparation period. Bring parents in, and make sure everybody is onboard. “Talk about the positive discipline philosophy during pre-season meetings with parents,” Carson said. “Ask parents to exhibit the positive discipline behaviors to help the student-athletes adopt the attitudes.”

- **Avoid negative discipline.** At times, it can seem easier to revert to negative discipline, such as having students run laps for infractions, which may be what the coaches experienced when they were students. Punishment is often a reactive strategy to something negative that occurs. “However, a negative punishment climate may send the message that the coach is angry at the student-athlete rather than supporting the behavior the coach wants,” Carson said. “It can break down the relationship between the coach and the athlete. Also, if athletes are required to run laps or do extra exercise as punishment, it may impair performance in the long run because you’re not focusing on developing specific skills.” Punishment can also create a negative attitude for the athletes toward fitness and conditioning.

Email Carson at carsonsa@jmu.edu.