



# TEACHING

*Communication*



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*The USA Hockey Coaching Education  
Program is presented by*



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## OBJECTIVES

- To understand the principles appropriate to effectively communicate with players
- To understand that effective communication is both verbal and non-verbal
- To identify and practice listening techniques as one component of effective communication
- To understand the way in which the use of feedback contributes to effective communication with players

## PRINCIPLES OF EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

Good instruction is a result of clear, concise and meaningful communication. When you influence players, whether it be teaching skills, correcting errors, solving problems, or explaining a new drill, it is done through communication. That's why it is important for coaches to have good communication skills.

As a hockey coach, it will be necessary to communicate with your players as a large group, as a smaller sub-group (e.g. a small group practicing a particular skill) and as individuals. Regardless of the number of players you are communicating with at one time, the same principles apply to communicating effectively.

**Be enthusiastic** — Your enthusiasm as a coach will be contagious. Be the enthusiastic leader of your group. Your enthusiasm will affect your players' enjoyment of the game of hockey.

**Be positive** — Interact with your players in a positive manner. Set a good example of desired behavior. Give constructive criticism frequently and keep your voice at a reasonable and understandable level.

**Be demanding but considerate** — Clearly establish what is expected of the players. Your expectations of the players should be based on their abilities and experiences. Don't expect more than is reasonable and realistic.

**Be consistent in communicating with your players** — Communicate in a consistent manner from one

situation (explanation of a drill or teaching a new skill) to another and with all of your players (try to avoid playing favorites). Try to keep your temperament on an even keel; this will enable you to communicate more effectively and will enable the players to know what to expect from you.

**Treat all players as individuals** — It is important to be sensitive to individual needs and allow for individual differences, to show all players that you care for them as individuals. Make an effort to talk to all players individually at each session and get to know their first names as soon as possible.

**Communicate in the same manner with your child as with other players** — Parents who instruct their own children often put unrealistic expectations on them. If you instruct your children, remember to treat them as you do the other players and don't demand more of them than you do of the others.

**Be patient** — Particularly with the beginning players, the coach's best virtue will be patience. Remember that coordination is not yet fully developed and that the activities must be practiced over and over again to produce even the most minor of improvements. Give recognition and praise at every opportunity and your patience will pay off.

## NON-VERBAL AND VERBAL COMMUNICATION

Communication can be both verbal and non-verbal. "The coach is in a good mood today" or "The coach is angry because we didn't do the drill correctly." How did you communicate that? Coaches

communicate many messages to players by their actions, facial expressions, use of arms and hands, body position, posture, touching behaviors as well as voice characteristics. Effective communication, both verbal and non-verbal, with your players is affected by how well you use your voice and body.

### **Non-Verbal**

Your players often learn their most memorable lessons by watching what you do. The coach's non-verbal behavior should reflect what is verbally communicated to the players. Act in a way which shows that you are consistent with what you say. For example, if you ask that your players be punctual for sessions, then your behavior should reflect this request.

What you communicate non-verbally to your players can be as important as what you verbally communicate. A positive example of non-verbal communication is illustrated by a coach who acknowledges the successful completion of a skill drill with a smile and a pat on the back. It is important to be aware of the message you are sending to your players.

The following are suggestions for using your body effectively:

1. Make an effort to gain eye contact at an eye-to-eye level with all players you are addressing. This will add to the sincerity of your instructions and will help you to determine whether players hear and understand your instructions.
2. Move about your players when they are practicing a skill so that they feel you are spending time with each of them.
3. Use variations in facial expressions (smile often!), positions of the arms, legs and body to change the mood you are trying to convey. Be aware of what these movements and positions convey to your players.

### **Verbal**

Effective verbal communication, which should compliment and support your non-verbal communication, involves good use of your voice. The following are suggestions for your using your voice effectively:

1. Avoid lengthy and complicated explanations when demonstrating and explaining a skill or drill.
2. Use language that is easily understood by the age and skill level of the players you are instructing. Watch for reactions from the players that indicate whether or not they understand your explanations.
3. Use a voice that is only slightly louder than a normal speaking voice except for the few times it is necessary to project your voice a long distance, (e.g. in an arena). Speaking unnecessarily loud encourages players to make noise themselves and is hard on the nerves of all concerned. Many coaches are able to settle players down by lowering their voices so that close attention is required to hear. Try it!
4. Speak clearly and move your eyes about the group of players as you speak. Periodically, look carefully at those who are farthest away from you. Can you see clear indications that they can hear? If there is any doubt, ask them.
5. Use inflections or changes in the tone of your voice to communicate varying moods (e.g. energetic, patient, serious, concern).

It should now be obvious to you that the correct combination of verbal and non-verbal communication is the most effective method of getting your point across. There are all kinds of lessons being learned by your behavior, by your actions, by your gestures, by your facial expressions and by the way in which you use your voice—all the ways you communicate to your players. It is therefore very important to try to ensure that your words and actions are as consistent as possible. You can use your voice and body to gain the attention of your players by doing the following:

### **Gaining Attention**

- Have a regular spot or place where you usually begin.
- Use a signal (e.g. a raised hand, point to yourself, etc.) to indicate attention is needed.
- The whistle should normally be used only to signal for all players to stop what they are

doing and look to you for instructions. In the team teaching situation, only the head coach should use the whistle.

- Ask firmly but politely, “May I have your attention, please? We are ready to begin.”
- If all but one or two are paying attention, politely ask them for their attention by using their name(s).
- Once you have their attention without showing a lot of impatience or annoyance, say something like “thank you,” “that’s better” or “it is necessary to have your attention so that we can learn this.”
- In the extreme case where a player insists on being disruptive, try saying, “this is important Bill, you’ll have to pay attention ... (without sarcasm).” In some cases, you may have to add “if you do not pay attention, you will have to leave” or “I will not continue until everyone is paying attention.” In rare cases where this fails to work, have the individuals remove themselves from the group and talk to them later, privately.

- Be careful not to punish those who have been paying attention after dealing with those who have not been attentive. Continue in a pleasant and positive manner.
- Make sure you reward people when they do become attentive rather than just singling them out when they are inattentive.

### Re-gaining Attention

If at first players are attentive and then their attention begins to wander, first ask yourself:

- Am I talking too much?
- Have the players been in one position for too long?
- Am I communicating in a clear and direct manner?
- Can all players see and hear well?

### If the Problem Does Not Lie in the Above

- Stop talking, look directly at the inattentive person(s), and move closer to them if possible.

## FOR THE COACH

Using the following chart, assess how effectively you communicate with your players. For each statement, circle the letter which best describes you.

As a coach I:	Always	Often	Sometimes	Never
1. Show enthusiasm	A	O	S	N
2. Act in a positive manner	A	O	S	N
3. Am not too demanding	A	O	S	N
4. Communicate in a consistent manner	A	O	S	N
5. Listen well to my players	A	O	S	N
6. Provide effective feedback	A	O	S	N
7. Recognize the contribution of each player	A	O	S	N
8. Treat all players as individuals	A	O	S	N
9. Instruct my child the same as the other players	A	O	S	N
10. Know what messages my non-verbal behavior communicates	A	O	S	N
11. Ensure my body language and words communicate the same messages	A	O	S	N
12. Use my voice and body effectively	A	O	S	N

- If this doesn't work, politely but firmly ask for attention using the inattentive person(s) name.
- If several are causing a disruption, consider breaking up the group so they are not together.
- In the final analysis, the best way to keep players' attention is to keep them active.

### Effective Listening

One important component of effective communication is listening. How good a listener are you? How much of what your players say to you do you actually hear? Listening to players tells them that you are genuinely interested in their feelings, thoughts and suggestions.

Good listening is a difficult communication skill to learn well. Like all skills, it takes practice to be a good listener. The following techniques can be used to improve your listening skills:

**Attentive Listening** — Listening starts by the coach being attentive to the player. This is demonstrated by your facial expressions and gestures and by being quiet. Eye contact with the players, and at the same level, is important. These actions all indicate to players that you are ready to listen to what they have to say.

**Paraphrasing** — You repeat in your own words what it is you think the player said in order to determine if that is what the player meant. Paraphrasing allows you to see if you have a complete understanding of what the player said to you and provides the player with feedback as to whether the coach interpreted the meaning correctly. Any areas of misunderstanding can then be explained by the player.

**Active Listening** — You verbally indicate that you are following and understanding what the player is saying by the use of bridging words such as, "I see," "Yes" and "Okay."

**Restating** — The coach repeats the last phrase or few words of what the player said without changing anything.

**Inviting Clarification** — The coach requests that the player clarifies or expands on something that the

player has said. In seeking clarification, the coach words the question to ask about a specific comment made by the player that was not understood. Inviting clarification shows interest in the player by the coach.

After a session on the ice is a good time to spend a few minutes listening to your players. Get some feedback on areas that went well and areas that the players and/or coach need to work on.

### Questions That Could Be Asked

- What did you do today that you really enjoyed?
- What was one good thing that happened today?
- What is one thing you learned today?
- What did you think you did well?
- What is one thing you would like to do at the next session?
- What are you going to tell your parents you did today?



### Effective Feedback

Verbal feedback (talking to the players about how and what they are doing) gives information that can help them learn and develop in a positive and effective way.

Effective feedback is essential for your players' motivation, learning and self image. It is an important key to successful instruction, as your feedback can turn a player off or on.

## SIX ASPECTS OF EFFECTIVE FEEDBACK

1. Specific
2. Constructive
3. Sooner, Not Later
4. Checked for Clarity
5. Positive and Informative
6. Directed at Changeable Behavior

### Specific

Specific feedback contains precise information about what the player should try to do in order to solve or correct a problem.

#### Example:

##### **Specific (and effective):**

- “When you turn to your left, you seem to be out of control. Try to lean more toward the center of the turn and bend your inside leg more.”

##### **General (and ineffective):**

- “You are not turning correctly.”

### Constructive

Constructive feedback recognizes aspects of your players’ behavior and suggests positive steps for improvement. It should deal with observable behaviors. It should not deal with inferences about the player’s personal characteristic.

#### Example:

##### **Constructive (and effective):**

- “When you pass the puck, you are doing everything correctly, however, when you receive a pass, you are letting the puck hit your stick. As the puck arrives, try to draw your stick back a bit to cushion it.”

##### **Destructive (and ineffective):**

- “You pass the puck okay, but you can’t receive a pass worth a darn!”

### Sooner, Not Later

Effective feedback is given sooner not later. It is given as soon as possible after the player does something. Your player then has a clearer memory or “feeling” of

what has taken place and is in a better position to learn from your feedback.

#### Example:

If you want to encourage shooting the puck in a certain way, you should say something positive immediately after the individual performs the skill. And if your players can “try out” your constructive, corrective feedback immediately after you have given it, they are much more likely to be able to perform the skill correctly the next time they try.

### Checked for Clarity

To make sure that your feedback has been clearly understood, check it out with the player.

#### Example:

Ask your players to tell you what they think you said or what they think you want them to do. If they have it right you can reinforce the message (“Yes, that’s right”). If they have it wrong, you can clarify the message (“That’s not what I meant. What I meant was ...”).

### Positive and Informative

Effective feedback has two main components. It is generally positive and informative. It reassures the player. It also gives the information needed to correct a problem or error. Negative feedback in itself provides little, if any, precise information on how to correct a problem.

### Directed at Changeable Behavior

Feedback based on this principle helps the player focus on a change that is within reach. It does the player absolutely no good to be told by the coach that he or she is “too small” or not strong enough since this is something the player cannot usually change. Rather, the feedback must focus on some aspect of the skill being performed that can be improved.

## TO SUM UP

Effective feedback has three main messages. It tells the individual:

1. "You're OK as a player."
2. "Here's what you are doing well."
3. "Here's what you need to do to correct your error or improve your performance."

Effective feedback usually provides more information than does negative feedback and, if used over time, it also leads to better coach-player relations.

### **ACTIVITY – THE "PROBLEM" PLAYER**

Think of a poorly skilled or "problem" player that you either instructed or knew and determine what you can do (or could have done) in order to make the person feel better and perhaps improve his or her skill.

- What is (was) the problem as you see it?
- What is the cause of the problem?
- What new approach could you use to solve it? Using feedback?
- How would you know if you were successful?

### **SUMMARY**

1. An effective coach:
  - is enthusiastic

- is positive
  - is demanding but considerate
  - is consistent
  - treats all players as individuals
  - communicates in the same manner with his/her own child as with others
  - is patient
2. Non-verbal communication means how you say something and often means more than what you say.
  3. Effective use of your voice contributes to clear and effective instruction.
  4. Communication involves listening.
  5. Listening techniques include: attentive listening, paraphrasing, bridging, restating and inviting clarification.
  6. Feedback helps players when it is:
    - specific, not general
    - constructive, not destructive
    - sooner, not later
    - checked for clarity, not left misunderstood
    - positive and informative, not negative and useless
    - directed at behavior that is changeable