

## **5 Keys to Character Development in Hockey**

When Jim Thompson is meeting hockey parents for the first time, he asks them a somewhat unfair question.

Thompson is the founder of Positive Coaching Alliance, a national non-profit dedicated to building ‘better athletes, better people’ by helping create positive, character-building youth sports experiences across the country. PCA wants youth and high school coaches to be ‘double-goal’ coaches, meaning that they emphasize both success on the field of play and building better people.

When he asks parents if they should be ‘double-goal’ parents, Thompson knows what the majority will say.

“I’ll ask, ‘should parents be double-goal parents?’ and everybody says yes, and it’s kind of mean of me to say, ‘no, no, the first goal belongs to who?’ and they get it right away,” Thompson said. “It’s the coaches, not the parents. The parents should be second-goal parents. They should be focused on the life lessons, the character piece.”

### **Clarify Your Responsibilities**

Thompson’s message is that hockey parents are not responsible for what happens on the ice. They are, however, responsible for how their player grows throughout his or her time at the rink.

“We ask parents to focus on the character lessons that they want their kids to take away, and look for that,” Thompson said. “It’s really hard, because if your kid is playing hockey and he scores a goal, you go nuts, which is fine, but ultimately scoring that goal doesn’t really have much connection with what kind of a person that hockey player is going to be. It’s the effort they put into getting better; it’s the support they give to their teammates.”

### **Manage Your Emotions**

It’s not easy, of course. Every time your child steps on the ice, he or she is subject to questionable calls and questionable results. Things only intensify as your hockey player ages, as well.

The important thing is to remember why your child is actually playing the sport, and how your actions in the stands, in the lobby or in the car after the game can impact his or her development.

How can you keep your cool during an action-packed hockey game? Thompson has tips for before, during and after the game.

Before you arrive at the rink, have a game plan for how you're going to handle those questionable plays or frustrating situations. Thompson reminds parents that bad calls happen at every level – even the NHL – so it's worthwhile to prepare.

“If you're the kind of person who is really bothered [by bad calls], and you have trouble controlling yourself, you need to develop what we call a self-control routine,” Thompson said. “When there's a bad call, or something happens on the ice that you don't like, you have a go-to routine that you practice. Maybe you turn away from the ice, you take two or three deep breaths, or you count backwards from 100, but you do something to keep yourself from embarrassing yourself and embarrassing your child.

“Believe me, kids are embarrassed by their parents when their parents act like idiots in the stands. Even if they don't say it or don't dare tell their parents they are embarrassed, they are embarrassed.”

### **Culture Keepers**

Thompson recommends that coaches meet with the parents to begin each season and remind them that the bench boss is the one responsible for dealing with referees and opponents. After setting forth a team philosophy on the subject, teams can choose 'culture keepers' – parents tasked with keeping those around them in check during games.

“If you and I are parents and our sons are playing on a team, and there's no culture established, and I'm being a jerk and you say to me, 'Hey Jim, stop being a jerk,' that's not an easy conversation to have,” Thompson said. “I'm not likely to respond very positively to it. On the other hand, if the coach has said, 'I want us to be a team that honors the game, I want you to be quiet, to not yell if the official makes a bad call against our team, and to help us remember us, Sally and Bill, they've agreed to be our culture keepers.' If things get kind of hot, and you're feeling like it's a really bad call, they might remind you that that's their job, and you won't get mad at them.”

### **Beware the Distorted Perception**

Thompson acknowledges that it is difficult to watch things go astray when it comes to something you care about – especially your child's athletic endeavors. He says it relates back to the psychology concept called 'distorted perception.'

“When we really want something badly, it can distort our perception,” Thompson said. “I may be on a diet, but wow, look at that cake...you know, I've been pretty good in my diet, I can have a piece of that. When I'm not confronted with the cake, I can say, 'Oh I'm not going to have any cake, I'm not going to have any sugar,' but as we get tempted with it, it distorts our perception, and we say it's not really a violation to my diet to have one piece of cake.

“So distorted perceptions as parents in our kids’ sporting events, it really comes down to this. I really want our team to win, I really want my child to do well, so if the official makes a bad call that goes against the other team and in our favor, we don’t even think about that, we don’t say, ‘Oh man, that was a bad call.’ We tend to see officials’ actions with a bias. We tend to see the officials’ actions through that bias.”

### **Stay Focused on Development**

That’s why parents need to stay focused on what is most important: their child’s development. How you approach a situation, and how you help your child approach the same situation, leads to character traits that will last a lifetime.

“If a kid scores a goal, everyone is going to cheer, and that’s great,” Thompson said. “You can cheer too. But look for the glue actions. Look for the things that glue a team together. If a kid makes a mistake, your son or daughter can skate up to the player and say, ‘don’t worry, we’ll get it back,’ and they can pat them on the back. Look for the things that will make the player a better person. If the puck is stolen, instead of hanging your head, you hustle back to try to get the puck back. You’re supporting your teammates when they make mistakes. You have the mental toughness when you made a mistake that you didn’t hang your head, you hung in there.

“You have those kinds of conversations with your kids where you’re looking as a second-goal parent, you’re watching the game to see the things that your kids do that helps the team get better and the kind of qualities that make you a better person.”

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