



Chapter 2: Coaching Children

In this section we review the Children's Bill of Rights and the BKL Teaching Philosophy, and examine the roles of the Club Leader and caregivers/parents in implementing sound teaching practices. You will also be introduced to the guiding principles of BKL instruction which is learning by doing and centering instruction around the child's needs

Children's Bill Of Rights

- The right to participate in sports regardless of ability level
- The right to participate at a level appropriate to individual skill development
- The right to qualified guidance/leadership relating to present participation and future development
- The right to participate in a physically, psychologically, and emotionally safe environment
- The right to an equal opportunity to strive for success
- The right to play as a child not as an adult
- The right to proper preparation for an activity or sport
- The right to decide when and where they wish to participate
- The right to be treated with dignity by all involved
- The right to have FUN through sport

Bill Koch Youth Ski League Teaching Philosophy

The New England Bill Koch League Youth Ski League believes that children should have the opportunity to have fun while learning to cross country ski. The BKL believes in creating a safe and healthy environment where children can develop physically, psychologically, and socially. All BKL activities and competitions are designed to teach each young athlete to participate to the best of their respective abilities.

The coach-athlete relationship is a privileged one. The capacity for healthy growth and the potential for joy are enormous. However, it is also true that young people are vulnerable to disappointment, frustration, and feelings of inadequacy when participating in sports and thus children need to learn and perform in an welcoming, encouraging, and safe environment. Coaches and leaders should ensure that club practice and club activities are as welcoming, encouraging, and safe as possible so children can learn, grow, and have fun.

Learning by Doing: In the remainder of this section, and in forthcoming sections, you will be given a number of instructional guidelines to assist you in building your club program.



However, don't lose sight of the fact that the vast majority of children learn by doing and this should be your primary teaching style although you will need to make adjustments for children who learn differently.

Aptitudes, Skills, and Techniques: Aptitudes are talent areas. The development of aptitudes leads to the formation of skills. The aptitude areas involved in cross country skiing are balance, coordination, agility, imitation, flexibility, strength, and feel for the snow. Aptitudes are not developed and refined through teaching, they are learned, and they are learned by doing. In general, aptitudes are best learned and developed unconsciously through games.

Examples of skills and techniques involved in cross country skiing are herringbone/duckwalk, snowplow, double-pole, and step-turn, and are most effectively learned through imitation, self-application, and games that highlight a particular skill or technique. Actual instruction, such as point-by-point teaching, is the least effective way to teach a technique or skill and this is more true the younger and less experienced the child. Essentially, children who develop their aptitude areas through play and exposure to others who ski well will ski better than children who are "taught" to ski. The first group of children will intuitively grasp the rhythm and flow of the sport. When the time comes they will assimilate technique, and integrate it smoothly into their skiing style. The child who is "taught" to ski will tend to see the sport in terms of mastery of a repetitive series of wooden movements. They will tend to ski mechanically and robotically.

To conclude, the development of aptitudes is the primary mission of BKL instruction and the refinement of technique is of secondary importance.

The Role of the Teacher or Coach

There is no single method that will work for everyone who coaches and leads children, but effective coaches share some traits and skills such as:

- Knowledge of what they are teaching
- A fundamental empathy for all student levels
- Some understanding of what it takes to motivate people

Individualization: The best coaches recognize that every group is a heterogeneous collection of individuals. When possible, they modify methods of instruction and levels of expectation for each member of the group depending on their skills, talents, and personal goals. Ideally, each member of a group should have their own program. While this isn't always practical, the thinking behind it is critical.

Separation: A coach has to separate the child from the sport. There are no skiers at a BKL session; there are children who ski. Some serious young athletes need to be reminded of this



every day. If they aren't, their self-esteem can become tied up in what they do on skis, not who they are as people. Their path of reasoning could go from "I was no good in the game we played" to "I am no good." The coach must never stop sending the message that all children are winners just by participating

Safesport and Background Checks

Background Checks: Our mission at NENSA is to sustain a healthy cross country ski community in the East. We support our clubs who in turn work with the young people that are the future of our sport. Clubs range significantly in size with some fully or partially staffed and others run entirely by volunteers. As an umbrella organization for clubs, NENSA is not involved in the hiring and screening of every coach and volunteer. However, we do believe that screening candidates who come into contact with young athletes is of paramount importance. We strongly urge all of our clubs to implement background check procedures on a yearly basis for anyone coming into contact with children whether they are coaches who are at every practice or volunteers who help out every few weeks.

There are many affordable resources available for background checks through state agencies and private companies that search the National Center for Safety Initiatives (NCSI) database. If you need help finding the right place to look, please feel free to contact the NENSA staff (staff@nensa.net) or check this background check page on our website for links to your state's background checking service: <https://nensa.net/background-checks/>.

SafeSport: SafeSport is an online training module aimed at providing education to adults in positions of power in order to promote a safe and healthy environment for minor athletes. NENSA requires all of our staff, board members, and trip staff to complete SafeSport training and we urge all of our member clubs to require the same thing of their coaches and volunteers. The training can be accessed at <https://safesport.org/>.

Every NENSA member must report suspected violations of the SafeSport code (<https://uscenterforsafesport.org/response-and-resolution/safesport-code/>). If you suspect that a child is experiencing misconduct of a sexual nature, don't investigate the situation yourself. Call the SafeSport hotline and local child protection authorities (police or child welfare office) and report it to the experts who have the skills to investigate the matter. If you have a doubt on whether conduct is occurring, err on the side of reporting.

The Center for SafeSport provides 24-hour support by calling 866-200-0796.



“Education and awareness are the most critical components to creating safe and respectful sporting environments, free of abuse and harassment. Prevention starts with the leaders of the team- the coaches, the athletes, the trainers, the doctors and mentors. Even the parents.” - U.S. Center for Safesport, 2019

Coach - Athlete Relationships

Healthy relationships between coach and athlete should have a basis in friendship, trust, and mutual respect. Athletic performance and athletic outcomes should in no way affect the relationship; the most athletically-gifted child should receive no more time, respect, attention, or encouragement than the most athletically-challenged. Superior athletic skills are in no way correlated to superior character. The bottom line is that a coach cannot provide emotional or psychological rewards to an athlete based on talent or skill development.

Modifying Teaching Styles to Match Learning Styles: While “Learning by Doing” works well for most children most of the time, some children (and adults) will require more specific information, different examples, or more support to learn what is being taught. Watch for children who are confused and look to you for more help. Watch for children who are just going through the motions but don’t have a “feel” for the activity. And, of course, watch for children who just aren’t getting it. Whenever possible keep groups to **no more than 10 children** and have an assistant on hand who can give more direction or different examples to someone who isn’t mastering the lesson. You may also want to have the assistant work briefly with the whole group while you give one-on-one or small group instruction to children who are struggling to learn-by-doing.

Learning by Watching: Most children love to see themselves in videos. Video recording can be part of many learning activities, and can easily be done on smartphones. However, be wary of over-analyzing the children. Let them do the analysis once you’ve made your point and encourage them to ask questions.

Leadership Style: The best leader commands **and** empowers. To create a safe and effective teaching environment, boundaries must be set and standards of behavior must be established in a fair and consistent way. These messages must be sent firmly and clearly right from the start of your program. Express that when safety and proper behavior are observed, friendship and mutual respect can flourish. Children can provide their input on many matters, including leadership, and work together with leaders to create a supportive, safe, and nurturing learning environment.

In the remainder of this chapter, you will find three essays detailing coaching best practices and tips for caregivers/parents, leaders, and volunteers. `



Creating a Supportive BKL Team Culture

Adapted from "Adventure to Excellence" from Jamie Hannon, Professor of Adventure Education, Plymouth State University

We ask our BKL Athletes to face risks every time they ski, and these risks are mostly risks of a *social* nature (e.g., looking foolish, trying then failing publicly, falling down in front of friends, disappointing coaches or family members, etc). Physical risks are mostly minor, although are often used to mask the actual social risks.

Fear of these risks undermines athlete learning and prevents optimal performance. Brain-based learning theory suggests that a person learns best when in a relaxed and moderately stimulated state. Fear prevents this learning because the fear centers of the brain (mostly the amygdala) prevent the normal memory pathways from forming. This blockage occurs just as quickly in physical skills as in cognitive skills.

If we want our athletes to continue to learn new skills and to perform at their best then we need to minimize these social risks and create an environment where there is a community that supports healthy risk taking.

The key ingredients in promoting this supportive culture:

- Spend the time – especially at the beginning of group formation, but regularly throughout the season.
- Open the dialogue – openly discuss the notion of a team culture that supports growth, and prioritize it as a team goal
- Model the behaviors – praise risk taking and other compassionate/caring behaviors; also, regularly show yourself taking social risks (like acting goofy, or trying a skill that you truly might not be able to do).
- Names - make sure every athlete knows every other athlete's name; it is the foundation of group civility!
- Ice breakers – also known as deinhbitizers, these “games” break down social barriers, allow athletes to experiment with looking less-than-cool, and are a chance for the coach to assess each athlete's level of social comfort in the group (See the Games chapter on page 80).
- Trust and trustworthiness activities – a focus on how we demonstrate trustworthiness, and how we can critically assess another person's trustworthiness.
- Develop group norms – *this is a fundamentally important element*, basically a social contract that defines behaviors that the group wants to promote and others that it wants to leave behind. Sometimes called a “Full Value Contract.” Often comes in two stages: first is a simple top down set of rules from the coaches (e.g., the “Five Finger Contract”). Second, after the group has had a chance to work together for a little while, is a more in-depth discussion that produces a document, generated mostly by the athletes, that has more impact, credibility and longevity than the top-down norms.



- Activities and reflective discussion – intentional discussions in which the group processes how they are upholding their group norms. Can be based on everyday experiences, or can be used as a follow-up to classic experiential learning games/initiatives/activities.
- FUNN (Functional Understanding Not Necessary) – purely silly games, that are pretty much just for fun, but for the coach also provide an excellent barometer of the group culture, and of individual participants' comfort levels. The ability to act completely silly in front of one's peers is a good measure of the degree to which a person's social fears are managed.

Why take the time? What rationale is there for spending limited team or league training time on these practices?

- Faster development of physical skills – athletes learn best when their fears are managed; human neurobiology prevents learning when faced with unmanaged fear, and social fears are usually more real and more powerful than most physical fears.
- Better retention of athletes in the program – the single biggest predictor of retention in youth programming is *not* athletic success; it is the degree to which the athlete has developed a meaningful social network (feelings of connectedness, supportiveness, closeness/intimacy).
- Greater development of social and emotional intelligences, which are essential elements of personal and group leadership.
- Simply because it develops more thoughtful, compassionate, caring, and socially capable human beings!
- Because it will make the BKL experience, and the ski experience in general, more FUN!



Coaching Best Practices

Adapted from "Coaching Thoughts, Coaching Questions" by Michael Soules

Effective teaching boils down to:

- Making observations
- Interpreting those observations (making sound decisions based on motor development, motor learning information, and child feedback)
- Making decisions based upon one's interpretations

Best Practices and Things to Consider:

- Know the children's names. No excuses!
- Children can only take in so much information; young children take in even less.
- General feedback is good, but specific feedback is better. ("Good job" is nice, but "much better weight shift" is better.)
- Be prepared to give feedback right after giving feedback.
- Monitor the number of "tries" a child makes.
- Do you teach the way YOU learn? If so, what about the children who learn differently from you?
- Where does critical thinking on the children's part come into play? Are there things we know that we want them to discover?
- Are all the kids using the same kind of equipment? How do you know?
- Ask the children how a practice/lesson went: Well? Not so well? Why?
- Ask yourself if the lessons flow from one to another. Why or why not?
- Have an Emergency Medical Plan; bring other people in on it.
- There are times when, unfortunately, kids must be removed from class. Follow-up is important.
- End the day on a good note. Bring up behavior concerns at the beginning of a practice.

Do's and Don'ts for Working with Children

Do:

- Be flexible, patient, enthusiastic, supportive.
- Create a "safe" environment for children where their efforts are praised and where their failures are never ridiculed.
- Let children ski as much as possible at every practice.
- Keep variety/creativity at the heart of every practice.
- Explore new terrain and skiing sites.
- Make adjustments to plans during practice based on weather and child interest.
- Only provide **brief** verbal instruction.



- Look in the children's eyes. Their eyes will tell you when you are talking too long.
- Give positive feedback from the first moment to last moment of practice.
- Watch each child for signs of fatigue, chill, or injured feelings.
- Ask the child, what does it feel like to them?
- Encourage children to focus on their development and not on the progress of others.
- Encourage respect for the environment.
- Make it clear that good sportsmanship, respectful conduct, and appropriate language are necessary to be part of your group.
- Always focus on effort as the measure of success.
- Encourage each child to say something positive about themselves before, during, and especially after a practice or a race.

Don't

- Be sarcastic for any reason; there's always a more effective approach.
- Create a "stage" where one child is on display.
- Give long explanations.
- Let the children get cold.
- Force an unwilling child to participate.
- Allow children to treat each other in verbally, psychologically, or physically abusive ways.

Caregiver/Parent Involvement

Family involvement in cross country skiing is relatively and caregiver/parent participation is a cornerstone of the BKL. It is not a coincidence that the children who stick with cross country skiing are those whose caregivers/parents come to ski with them, or come to watch them ski or race. Without the cooperation and involvement of caregivers/parents on all levels, a BKL Club will struggle to succeed.

Responsibilities of Caregivers/Parents

- Transport children to and from club activities. Be part of a car-pooling team, if possible.
- Be sure children have the proper equipment, clothes, snacks, and water.
- Be supportive and encouraging.
- Participate in club activities as much as possible.
- Encourage the efforts and progress of all children, not just their own children.
- Assist the club leader and coach in encouraging, safe, and responsible behavior.
- Encourage respect for others and for the environment.

Caregiver's/Parent's Role in Club Activities

- Never force a child to race.
- Remember that children ski for their enjoyment— not for their caregiver's/parent's enjoyment.



- Encourage their children to measure their own progress and not to compare themselves to others.



Coaching Multi-Level, Multi-Age Teams and Clubs

by Fred Griffin

I hear it from both sides. I hear it from coaches frustrated working with athletes of varying ages in middle school/high school programs, or from BKL Leaders in despair over dealing with the even wider BKL age group, 4 – 13.

“Some want to race. Others just want to socialize. What do I do?”

“I can deal with the committed ones, but it’s so hard to motivate the others...”

I hear it from parents and kids alarmed by coaches who don’t run a program that meets their needs or their children’s needs.

“Suzy doesn’t want to race! She joined BKL because she loves to be outdoors with her friends and ski. She hates this...”

“I want to be the best skier I can be. I want to race in college. Coach is making us all do the same thing. It’s too easy. I need more! But he says it’s for the good of the team.”

What is sad is that everyone wants the same thing: kids to have fun in a rewarding sport they love. So how do we get there? How do we please Mom, Dad, coach, athlete? For many years I’ve been coaching clubs and schools with kids ranging in ages from 10 -19 in the sports of tennis, running, and cross country skiing. Quite honestly, we don’t have this problem. Below is my philosophy.

1. One Size Does Not Fit All.

A team is an aggregate of individuals. Each athlete has his or her needs. Maybe it is my years of teaching kids with disabilities, or maybe a lifetime of being an unrepentant misfit—but it is very clear to me that when it comes to sports, each athlete deserves to be on their own IEP: Individual Exercise Program. Shift your thinking and stop fitting the kids to the program— fit the program to the kids! I know this goes against “old school”, ball-sports theory, but do anything less and you are diminishing the chance for every child to succeed.

On our middle school/high school team we have kids who are loose-limbed bundles of tender growing plates, not ready for hard training physically or mentally. We have kids who show up tentative, who can’t look past just wanting to be more fit. Competition and hard workouts are a terrifying prospect unless and until they slowly transition into new bodies. We have kids who are highly motivated but who don’t report in shape. They have to be let off the leash gradually or



they will injure themselves in their zeal. And of course, we have kids who know the drill, who come in fit, hungry, ready to eat raw meat.

In BKL groups this translates into first year skiers tentatively checking out a new sport on borrowed fish scales, fit kids who have no interest in racing but can live in the woods, and children of current or former racers who arrive on top end gear looking for high-powered action. If every child is run through the same program it is either too hard or too easy for those on the other side a relatively narrow cross-section. The fit and motivated kids become bored and frustrated and act accordingly. The less fit are unable to keep up, and feel shame or dislike for themselves. They tend to be scorned or patronized on some level by their more fit teammates—that is, if they don't quit after two weeks. Meanwhile the coach is overwhelmed trying to see some kids don't slough off and trying to keep other kids in line. Clearly, one size fits all thinking creates unhealthy dynamics up and down the roster. The good news is that there is a way out of this mess. Read on.

2. Have the Kids Set Goals.

Goal-setting is at the heart of the coach/athlete relationship. The expectations that the process creates in both parties constitute an informal contract. The terms of that contract take form in athlete's training program and in the coach's part in implementing it. We make this a formal process on teams I coach. An interview follows. For BKL kids it is most often only an interview. I give older kids a deadline for return of the goal sheets. After that, no sheet, no practice. I make them focus on what they want to learn or to change—not on where they think they should finish, or who they should beat. We race with our teammates, not against them.

When I know what they want from the sport, the season, I know how to coach them. Where to push, where to pat. Practice time is too precious to spend forcing square pegs into round holes. It's also painful for the pegs. After all, I'm there for them—they aren't there for me. Right? And a team is an aggregate of individuals, right? I find the Success Chart we offer to Club Leaders (on page 77) is an excellent goal-setting template for BKL kids. It also provides a seasonal lesson plan with multiple tracks offered each day. It binds a club program with a sense of purpose as well.

3. Set-up Different Programs or “Pathways” for Each Practice.

From the goal sheets I learn how the team settles out and I correlate this to what I have seen of the kids fitness-wise. For this year's group of thirty kids ages 11 – 18, I started with five 5 groups. I posted a list of who was in what group and hung it on the wall. If anyone was unhappy we would have gone back to goals sheets and talked it out. No one was. Each day while the kids were dressing I posted the day's schedule on the blackboard thusly:



Everyone: warm-up, stretch, double pole lessons; afterwards by group

Wolverines: ski through the woods trail and double pole the two small hills on backside; total ski 30 minutes then you are on your time.

Jaguars: 15 minutes double pole only; ski 30 minutes more. Finish with 6 x 40 second double pole repeats superfast, on soccer field

Civet Cats: double pole 30 minutes; ski 30 more; 6 x 20 second double pole repeats on the hill beside the soccer field

Bobcats: 30 minute double pole, 10 min single stick, 35 minute ski afterwards; 10 x 20 second power pole on soccer field hill

Everyone: Game at 4:45pm on soccer field

For a BKL practice I prefer not to place kids in groups but instead to offer elective activities.

Everyone: warm-up, stretch, game; lesson on double pole

Activity #1: ski tour looking for animal tracks; remember to double pole on flats

Activity #2: double pole relay followed by free ski with lots of double-poling

Everyone: finish with game

I add in specific activities from the Success Chart. I expand on Success Chart offerings (see Success Chart on page 77).

4. Provide Freedom to Change Workout Groups.

This is the beauty of the program. Recovering from a cold? Drop down one group or two. Feeling energetic? Go up one and try it on for size. The only rule is you need the coach's approval. If a person is not performing to a chosen group level, I take the athlete aside and ask if their goals have changed. They move to an easier workout if they desire. This almost never happens. Movement is upward, just in the direction you as a coach want it to be. Wolverine Suzy will ask to be a Jaguar for a day, then another. Pretty soon Suzy is a Jaguar. Most years if I start with five groups, I end with three.

5. Performance-Focused Coaching.

Granted, this is an athlete-centered as opposed to a team-centered model, but year after year it produces a community, a tight-knit caring team, second to none. Because each athlete is judged by their own criteria, every child has respect for every other child who makes an honest effort. The program is performance-based, and not outcome-based. It's not what we do but how we do what we do that is the focus. As a coach of a performance-based team you are making it possible for each of your athletes to pursue personal excellence.

You are creating a nutrient-rich environment in which kids can grow. Team excellence follows organically. This may translate into one skiing 5k without stopping or it may result in another being state champion or making the Junior National Team. It may mean a BKL Club that



succeeds as a group because its skiers succeed as individuals. You have made room for both children and both visions—and the point is that there must be room for both.