

Building the Value of Sports

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Bree King used information she learned through NYSCA's free Bullying Prevention training program to help a youngster who was being bullied so relentlessly that she was contemplating suicide.

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On deck: Geoff Miller

The mental skills coach of the Atlanta Braves provides valuable insight to help young athletes excel on Game Day

The mental side of youth sports can be just as challenging as the physical side, as young players encounter slumps, deal with concentration lapses and struggle to maintain their confidence.

SportingKid checked in with Geoff Miller, the mental skills coach for the Atlanta Braves, to get his insights on what coaches and parents can do to make sure that a young player's season isn't derailed by any issues related to the mental side of competing.

SK: Looking at the mental side of the game, what's the most common problem that occurs among young players – and is there anything coaches can do to help?

GEOFF: I wouldn't limit this to young players, but if I could teach any player one thing early on, it would be to stay focused on developing skills instead of on results. We all want to get hits and we all want our statistics to look good, but learning the game is more important than hitting .600 in Little League or even in high school. I've seen high school kids hit over .600 in their senior seasons, get drafted, go to Rookie Ball and hit .250 and be devastated. But hitting .250 at the age of 18 in your first professional summer is really hard to do! I try to help the professional players I work with let go of their results and focus on the lessons they need to learn to become big leaguers. The same should be true whether your players are 8, 10 or 14 years old. They should be thinking about improving fundamentals so they'll be able to take their skills to the next level as they get older.

SK: Sometimes when kids have a bad game or commit an error that costs their team the game they tend to dwell on it and it affects future outings. How can coaches help kids shake it off, forget about it and focus on the next game?

GEOFF: I take the opposite approach to forgetting about it! I want kids to think about the mistakes they make so they can learn from them. I have an exercise I recommend that I call "movie editing." The concept is that when a movie is made, the actors make lots of mistakes. When a mistake is made, they start the scene over and film it again and they use as many takes as necessary until they get it right. Then they go to the editing room and cut out all the bad takes, string together the good ones, and they create the finished product.

When a player has a bad game or makes an error or gives up a run-scoring double that turns out to be the deciding moment of the game, etc., my advice is to spend some time after the game thinking about what happened. Let's say you got in a hurry to throw the runner out and didn't give yourself enough time to field the ball cleanly and the end result of the play was an error.

During your review process, picture the play happening the way it should have if you'd done it correctly. See yourself setting your feet, keeping your hands down, looking



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– Geoff Miller

the ball into your glove, then quickly stepping and throwing to first, getting the runner by a step. This way, you get to see yourself completing the play successfully and you learn from the mistake you made. The memory of the poor play then gets "cut" and goes on the editing room floor.

SK: Some kids are so afraid to strike out or make a throwing error that it handcuffs their ability to perform. How do coaches remedy this problem?

GEOFF: This gets back to focusing on results instead of developing skills. If kids are afraid to strike out, get them to start rating themselves on simple parts of hitting that they know they can accomplish every time at bat. Get them to start valuing swinging hard or seeing the ball well or recognizing what pitch is being thrown. As kids get older, they should be developing an approach at the plate. By the time a player goes to high school he or she should be thinking about looking for a pitch to drive, rather than just make contact.

You can also rate kids on being aggressive and tell them that striking out swinging is okay as long as they think they can put the bat on the ball. Same idea for playing defense – rate your players on how well they step and throw or how ready they are to field the ball. When they focus on the parts of the game instead of the end results, the pressure will go down and they won't worry so much when they make a mistake. 

Geoff Miller is a founding partner of Winning Mind and the author of Intangibles: Big-League Stories and Strategies for Winning the Mental Game—in Baseball and in Life. He can be reached at miller@thewinningmind.com; and followed on Twitter: @winningmindGEM.