# 7 Ways to Develop the Team Triangle

I am very engaged in the online world of coaching youth sports and I have been reading a number of articles each week about the relationships within the game. Increasingly, there are more and more pieces being written about inappropriate parental behavior and how the adults involved are ruining youth sports. There seems to be this general issue of conflict, or potential conflict, within a team community.

As we all know, communication is the key to any relationship. Without it, relationships simply break down and cease to function properly. I am going to put forward the notion of the "Team Triangle". This is the relationship triangle between three crucial parties in an athletic community: coaches, parents and players. All three need to be on the same page in order to have a healthy and productive learning and growing environment within which young athletes can thrive.

As a coach, here are some easy ways to foster this "triangle", much of which is predicated on transparent communication of what you value and what you are trying to accomplish:

1. Communicate effectively what your goals are for the team. I would suggest that fun, learning, improving, becoming better people, friendship, etc. are all good starting points in this discussion.
2. Make sure players and parents understand how you are going to distribute playing time to all your players. And I would suggest that this looks a lot like equal playing time for the bulk of the season in youth sports.
3. Little things like regular distribution of schedules are really important. Nothing worse than an upset parent who drags their athlete to a game that has been changed without clear notice.
4. I like to over-communicate with parents with regards to what we are learning in practice and what the key pieces we are focusing on in games. This helps in two ways. First, parents can see improvement or not when you are "asking" them to look for a few things that are important (e.g. making a good first pass, hitting the cutoff man, boxing out, etc.). Second, parents can help reinforce your "lesson plan" in the car on the way home and at the dinner table. In fact, I encourage parents to help to support and emphasize what we are teaching at practice and in games. One of those pieces is for parents to ask their athletes three things they learned in practice each day.
5. Make sure you have an "open door" policy with regards to having one on one conversation. Parents and players need to feel comfortable about approaching you as the coach to discuss issues that might arise during the season. One important point: when a parent asks for a meeting with me as a coach, I always encourage them to bring their athlete with them to the meeting as well. Typically, but not always, I would have nothing to say to parents that I wouldn't feel comfortable saying to a player as well.
6. One of my strategies to creating community on a team is to connect with every player each day we are together. It can be a quick "hello" or a "How's is going today?" but I try to connect with everyone. I also make it a point to always say hello to the parents who I encounter at the rink. I make sure I just don't pass them in the lobby and not make eye contact. As coach, say hello, chit chat about the drive, talk about the weather - this will all help to strengthen the "triangle".
7. Finally, engage some of your parents occasionally about how the season is going. Ask questions like "How is your son/daughter enjoying the season so far?", "Does he/she have any concerns or worries?", "Has he/she made any friends on the team?". You will often be surprised at what the answers might be.

So, take time to build the "team triangle". Communication is the key to all relationships and your player’s growth will often depend on you to foster these relationships with your group.