



# CREATING POSITIVE SOCCER ENVIRONMENTS TOOLKIT



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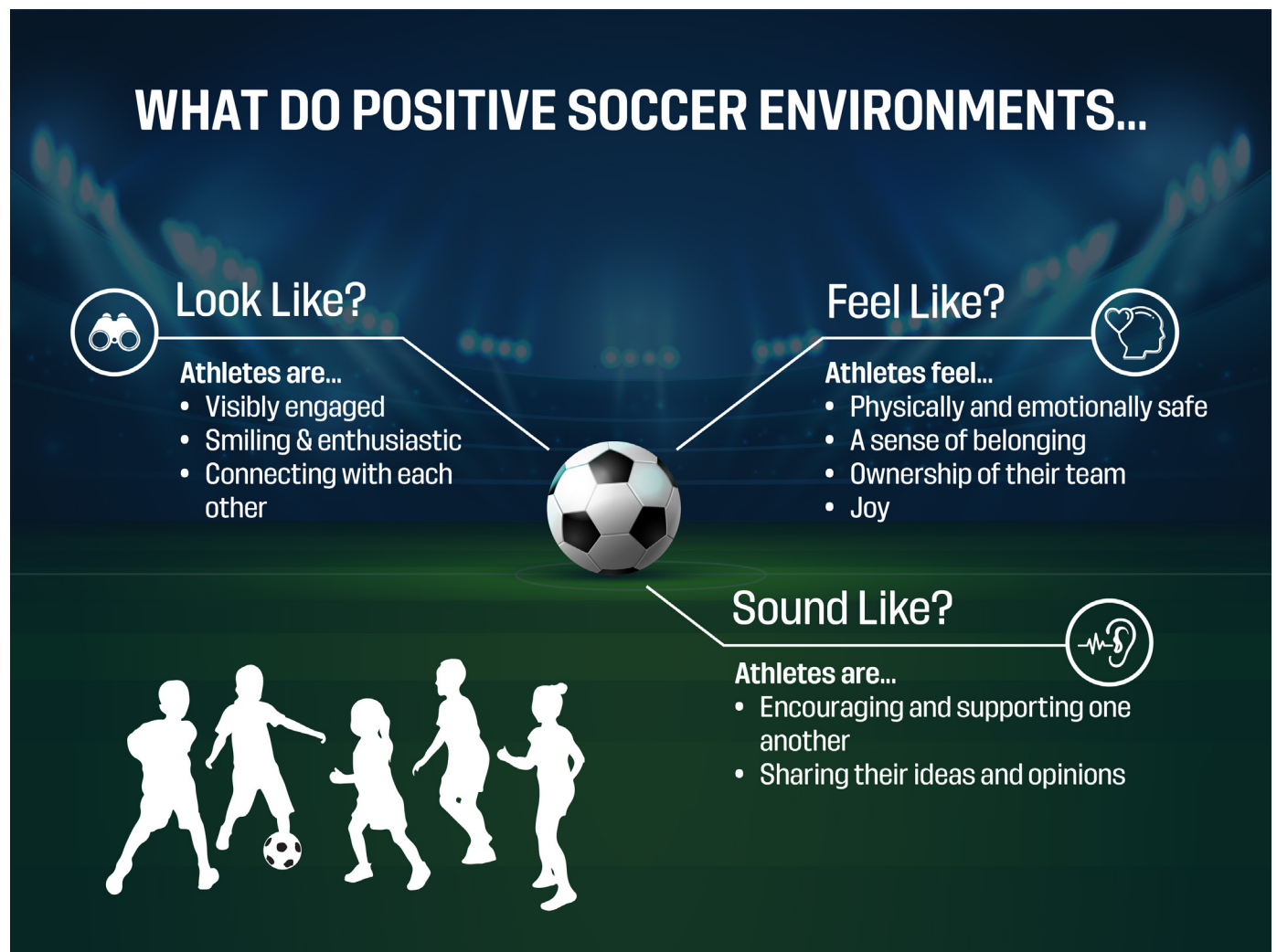
# CREATING POSITIVE SOCCER ENVIRONMENTS TOOLKIT

Soccer has the potential to offer many benefits to the athletes who participate. The adults within the soccer community play a pivotal role in these benefits being realized by intentionally implementing strategies that build a positive soccer environment and promote athlete development both on and off the field. This toolkit provides actionable examples which can equip individuals in various roles to build and support a positive soccer environment. Whether you are a coach, club leader, team manager, official, parent/caregiver or family member, this resource can support you in playing a part in the holistic development of all athletes.



# WHAT DO POSITIVE SOCCER ENVIRONMENTS LOOK, SOUND, AND FEEL LIKE

Coaches who intentionally create positive, supportive soccer environments can help facilitate learning, growth, and the overall well-being of all their athletes. By doing so, they can unlock the many benefits that sports can provide. What does a Positive Soccer Environment look, sound, and feel like?



# FOR COACHES

## RECOGNIZING OUR IMPACT ON OTHERS

Oftentimes our actions and words can have an impact on others. When we increase our awareness of how we impact others, it gives us the opportunity to adjust our approach and create safe and trusting connections with each individual athlete.

### ATTITUDE AND MINDSET

A positive, growth-oriented attitude and mindset can inspire others and contribute to a supportive atmosphere.

- Praise effort over results.
- Reframe mistakes as learning opportunities.
- Approach athlete interactions with joy and enthusiasm.

### EMPATHY AND UNDERSTANDING

Use empathy and seek to understand the experiences, challenges, and perspectives of others. This enables us to relate to athletes, other coaches, and caregivers, promoting cooperation and collaboration.

- Listen to understand someone else's perspective.
- Validate their thoughts and feelings.
- Appreciate them for sharing.

### COMMUNICATION AND LANGUAGE

Our experiences influence the way we communicate with others. Use inclusive language, provide constructive feedback, and offer encouragement to create a positive, supportive environment.

- Pay attention to body language and tone of voice.
- Recognize athletes as individuals and communicate in a way that works for them.
- Be aware of how nonverbal communication can impact athletes.

### LEADERSHIP AND ROLE MODELING

Our experiences shape our leadership approach and how we serve as role models for others. Leading by example, displaying positive behaviors, and inspiring others to follow suit can have a profound impact on the overall sports environment.

- Use a self-control routine, such as counting to five, or taking three deep breaths, to manage emotions when feeling reactive.
- Reflect to yourself on interactions with those involved in games/practices to celebrate successes and identify areas for growth.



# FOR COACHES

## HOW COACHES CAN BUILD SAFE, TRUSTING RELATIONSHIPS

Building safe, trusting relationships with and amongst your athletes is the foundation for creating a Positive Soccer Environment. These relationships have many benefits, including helping athletes...

- Make friends more easily
- Collaborate more effectively
- Perform at a higher level
- Experience improved mental wellness
- Feel safer
- Take on challenges without fear of failure
- Engage more fully in learning
- Increase their effort

## TO CREATE THESE SAFE AND TRUSTING RELATIONSHIPS WITH THEIR ATHLETES, COACHES CAN:

- **Learn names quickly** - ask athletes their preferred name and call them by that name.
- **Get to know each athlete as an individual** - be curious, ask open ended questions.
- **Use informal pre and post-practice time to connect** - move around the space to connect with all athletes.
- **Reflect on your own assumptions** when evaluating athletes' skills and areas for growth. Focus on behavior, technical skills, and process, versus the person.
- **Create empathetic connections** by listening to understand your athletes' experiences, versus listening to respond.
- **Give specific, positive, and information-based feedback** - research shows that the amount, type, content, and tone of coach feedback can alter how athletes will perform and develop, both physically and mentally.
- **Set clear, collaborative group expectations** about how athletes treat themselves, each other, coaches, opponents, and referees.
- **React quickly** to prevent put-downs, bullying, or cliques.
- **Observe constantly** and notice if any athletes are being excluded. Be proactive and create ways to include anyone feeling left out.
- **Play with them**, laugh and smile. Show athletes that you want to be there.



# FOR COACHES

## TO FORGE CONNECTIONS AMONGST TEAMMATES, COACHES CAN:

- **Begin a season, or a training session with an activity** that encourages interaction, finding common ground, and inclusion.
- **Run team building activities** that promote collaboration, communication, and trust.
- **Utilize personal check-ins** so your athletes know how their teammates are doing. For example, during the opening of practice ask your athletes to show a thumb up, sideways, or down to share how they are doing that day.
- **Use a Buddy System** by pairing up athletes, or by creating smaller groups. These buddies can provide support and encouragement.
- **Include relationship questions in your debriefing** of a practice or game. For example you could ask “Who saw a teammate trying hard?” Or “Who saw someone else improve today?”
- **Teach players how to give positive and information-based feedback** to each other by ensuring they identify the specific skill and recognize growth and effort.
- **Use positive team rituals** to build camaraderie and team unity.
- **Know when to get out of the way** and let athletes play with each other.



# FOR COACHES

## FILLING EMOTIONAL TANKS

No matter our role in a soccer environment, we can all contribute to uplifting athletes' emotional well-being. When we look at an athlete's emotional well-being as an 'emotional tank' that can be filled or drained based on their experiences and interactions, we can be more intentional about providing them the support they may need. Following are examples to fill the emotional tanks of individual athletes and of the team.

### EMOTIONAL TANK FILLERS FOR INDIVIDUALS

#### ATHLETE OF THE DAY

For the athlete who needs something extra: look for anything and everything positive you can say about them. Ignore everything that isn't good. Shower the athlete with positivity the entire practice and enjoy the improved performance. Don't let them know they are Athlete of the Day.

#### MAGIC RATIO - 5 EMOTIONAL TANK-FILLERS FOR EVERY CRITICISM

Recognize athletes for what they do right, encourage their efforts, thank them for their contributions, listen to them, and give nonverbal signals (eye contact, head nods, high-5's) at a 5-1 ratio. This strengthens relationships and helps athletes become more coachable.

#### FEED FORWARD

When providing instruction, instead of focusing on what already happened, give Feed-Forward information by adding "next time". For example: "Next time, play that pass with your left foot." This enables the athlete to focus on what's coming versus what happened in the past and can't be changed.

#### RECEIVABLE CRITICISM

Criticism is only valuable if it provides athletes with the information they need to grow and change. Here are some ways to make criticism more receivable.

- **Think about timing** – consider waiting until a player has had time to recover emotionally from making a mistake.
- **Sometimes it helps to ask permission** – "I noticed something that might improve your shooting. Are you open to hearing it?" If they say, "Yes," then great! If "No," honor that. Their curiosity may make them open to hearing it next time. This is not applicable for a situation requiring immediate intervention, such as bad sportsmanship or safety.





# FOR COACHES

## EMOTIONAL TANK FILLERS FOR TEAMS

### POSITIVE CHARTING

Write each athletes' name on a notebook with space to note the positive things they do in a practice or game. To the right of each name, write "Look-For" where you will note a specific thing you want each to work on during the game. For example, hustling back on defense. Try to note a similar number of positives for each athlete.

### WINNERS' CIRCLE

At the end of practices and games, gather your team in a circle and ask for athletes to recognize their teammates for the things they did that helped the team. As the coach, make sure every athlete gets some recognition even if it comes from you.

### MISTAKE RITUAL

A gesture and phrase, ideally chosen by the team, that athletes can use to transform the fear of making mistakes so they don't play timidly. Players can flush mistakes down the toilet ("Flush it!"), "No sweat!" (wipe hand across forehead), "Brush it off!" (brush dust off one's shoulder). This allows athletes to quickly "reset" for the next play without negative self-talk.



# FOR PARENTS/CAREGIVERS

## HOW PARENTS/CAREGIVERS CAN SUPPORT SAFE, TRUSTING RELATIONSHIPS IN A POSITIVE SOCCER ENVIRONMENT

A Positive Soccer Environment is not the sole responsibility of the coach. While they have a large role in building it, parents/caregivers can contribute by supporting safe, trusting relationships with their own athletes, the coach, and on the sideline.

### TO SUPPORT SAFE, TRUSTING RELATIONSHIPS WITH YOUR OWN ATHLETE, PARENTS/CAREGIVERS CAN:

- Encourage your athlete's full effort and celebrate their progress.
- Support your athlete in learning as much as they can through soccer and how to translate those learnings to other areas of their life.
- Remind your athlete that mistakes are part of learning. Support them to move past and learn from mistakes by helping them create a mistake ritual they can use to refocus.
- Ask questions that don't focus on scoreboard outcomes. Some examples are: 'Did you have fun today?', 'What did you learn?', 'What did you enjoy about playing today?', 'What are you finding challenging?'



### TO SUPPORT SAFE, TRUSTING RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE COACH, PARENTS/CAREGIVERS CAN:

- Ask the coach about their philosophy and support it.
- Do not coach from the sidelines, let the coach teach the athletes.
- Refrain from negative comments about the coach.
- Speak directly with the coach, or athletic director, if you have concerns about athlete well-being.

### TO SUPPORT A POSITIVE SOCCER ENVIRONMENT ON THE SIDELINES, PARENTS/CAREGIVERS CAN:

- Create a self-control routine to help manage your emotions. For example, take three deep breaths or count to ten. Share this idea with other parents.
- Provide positive encouragement for all the athletes and highlight effort.
- Utilize "No Directions Cheering" - only encouragement for the athletes.
- Behave respectfully towards the officials, if you don't agree with a call, remain silent.
- Speak up if you are concerned about athletes' well-being.

# FOR TEAM MANAGERS AND REFEREES

## HOW TEAM MANAGERS AND OFFICIALS CAN SUPPORT SAFE, TRUSTING RELATIONSHIPS IN A POSITIVE SOCCER ENVIRONMENT

A positive soccer environment is created with the support of all adults involved in the sport. Both team managers and referees have important roles to fill as they interact with athletes, coaches, and parents/caregivers.

The team manager can support safe and trusting relationships with the coach and amongst the families.

### TO SUPPORT SAFE, TRUSTING RELATIONSHIPS, TEAM MANAGERS CAN:

- **Support the coach** by offering to create team bonding events outside of practice.
- **Rally the other caregivers and supporters** to create a positive sideline during games.
- **Create opportunities for connection** between families to build community.
- **Handout a roster with numbers** so parents can encourage each athlete by name.
- **Serve as a central point of communication** between the coach and the families.
- **Prioritize emotional and physical safety**, which tells athletes their well-being is as important as results. Help coaches scan fields and equipment for safety. Contribute to emotional safety by encouraging all athletes on their effort and progress.



The referee plays a key role in creating a safe environment for the athletes.

### TO SUPPORT SAFE, TRUSTING RELATIONSHIPS, REFEREES CAN:

- **Introduce yourself** and encourage the coaches and captains to introduce themselves to each other.
- **Tell athletes before the game that you are there to call the game** to the best of your abilities and to help them stay safe.
- **Communicate respectfully** with athletes during the game to explain calls and ensure all athletes understand how to participate within the boundaries of the rules.
- **Proactively speak with coaches** and captains about concerns.
- **Call the game impartially** and to the best of your ability.

# FOR CLUB LEADERSHIP

## HOW CLUB LEADERSHIP CAN SUPPORT SAFE, TRUSTING RELATIONSHIPS IN A POSITIVE SOCCER ENVIRONMENT

Club leadership have the ability to set the stage for a positive soccer environment through policies, coach management, and intentional program design. Here are some examples that club leadership can use to create a Positive Soccer Environment:

### SET EXPECTATIONS

Host seasonal meetings with coaches, parents/caregivers, athletes, managers, and officials (if possible) to set the standard of creating a positive soccer environment. Highlight the importance of supportive and trusting relationships, set expectations on how to set and work towards team goals, provide clear guidelines on athlete development and playing time, and clarify behavioral expectations for everyone involved with the club. By collaborating with all involved, club leadership can create a jointly formed set of values that all members of the club have ownership of.

### RESOURCES AND TRAINING

Provide coaches, parents/caregivers, and athletes tools to support them in building safe and trusting relationships with a focus on athletes' overall development.

### CREATE A SENSE OF BELONGING

Create an environment where athletes, parents/caregivers, and coaches feel seen and valued, regardless of their cultural background. This fosters positive team and program dynamics and enhances overall well-being. A deeper understanding of the diverse cultural backgrounds, languages, and learning styles improves communication, builds trust, and facilitates effective collaboration strategies tailored to each individual's needs.

### ESTABLISH A FEEDBACK LOOP

Give everyone involved in the club an opportunity to share their thoughts on how things are going and how they can be improved. Utilize surveys and/or focus groups to gather feedback from athletes, parents/caregivers, and coaches.

### COACH DEVELOPMENT

Create positive connections with each of your coaches. Ask them how they are doing as individuals, in addition to how their team is developing. Observe coaches during practices and games. Utilize these observations to highlight successes and areas for growth.

### SUPPORT COACH SELF-CARE

Encourage coaches to prioritize themselves. Provide the time and tools so they can be the best they can be for their athletes.

