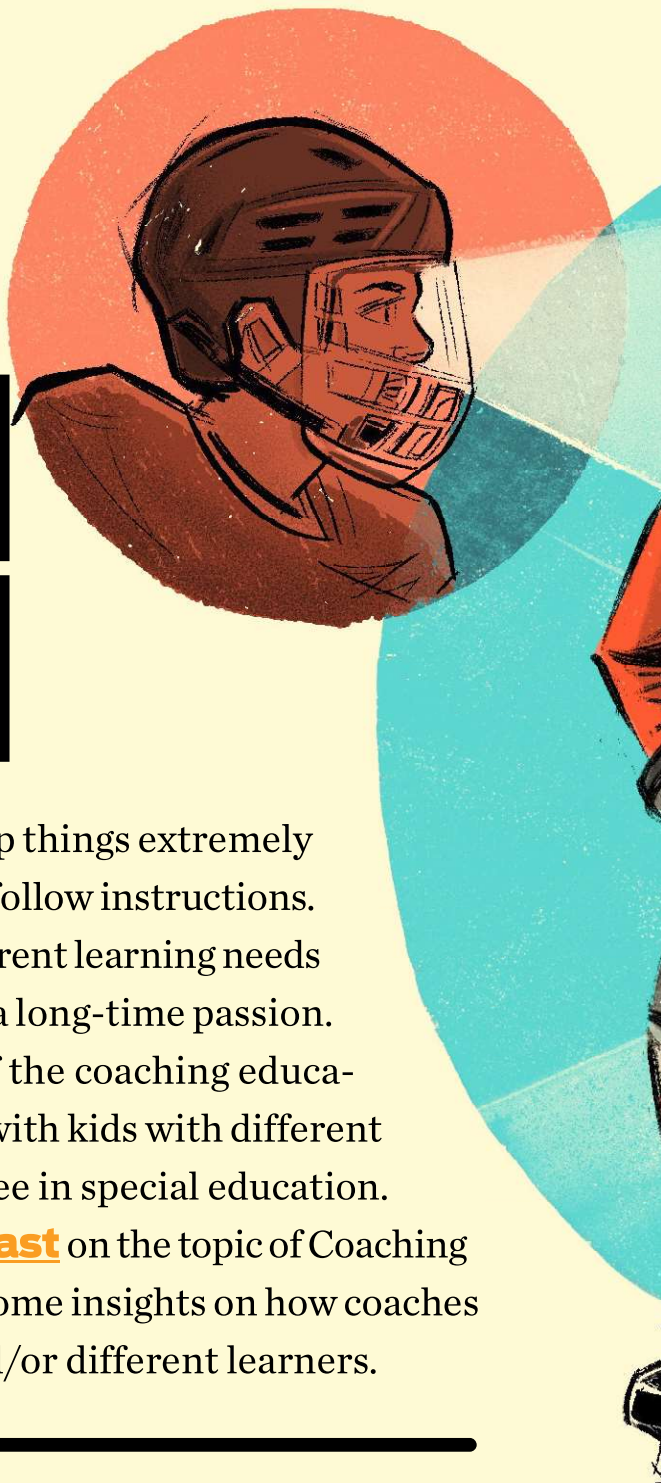


COACHING KIDS WITH DIFFERENT LEARNING NEEDS



All kids learn differently. Some, pick up things extremely quickly, while others might struggle to focus and follow instructions.

For Zack Nowak, working with youth with different learning needs and teaching coaches how to coach these kids is a long-time passion. Prior to joining USA Hockey as a coordinator of the coaching education, he was an intervention specialist, working with kids with different needs and learning disabilities, and holds a degree in special education.

Nowak recently hosted a [USA Hockey Podcast](#) on the topic of Coaching Kids with Different Learning Needs. He shares some insights on how coaches can work with kids with learning disabilities and/or different learners.



Getting Parents Involved

Getting parents involved is the top priority when learning about their players.

“Parents know their kids best,” Nowak said. “Some of the kids that have learning disabilities in schools will likely have education plans that best help these kids understand certain aspects of education.”

While it’s not appropriate to ask parents if a child has a learning disability, gaining parents’ input builds trust and opens lines of communication. Nowak suggests sending out a questionnaire for both parents and players,

so coaches can get a better understanding of their players.

“Asking questions like how can I best help you learn? What do you love about hockey? When you’re struggling, what do you think about? When you’re doing well, what do you think about? What are things you like outside of hockey?” Nowak said. “This is for the success of the kid, but also parents will feel like you as a coach are listening, you’re invested with the parent and kid.”

“From there, the amount of interventions that you do to help your kids be the best they can be will expand.”



CLICK HERE to listen to the The USA Hockey Podcast: A Youth Sports Conversation.



Multi-Modal Learning

Most people will probably say they have a preferred learning style, be it visual, auditory, read/write, and kinesthetic. But Nowak said providing instructions in a multitude of avenues works best.

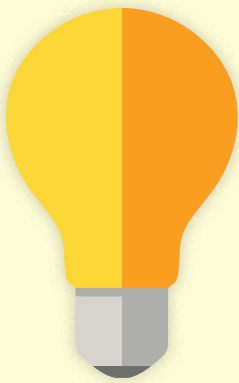
“They’ve found that providing all these options helps our learners best—letting our players, see it, hear it and then do it,” Nowak said. “So seeing you drawing it on the board, hearing you explain something, maybe even watching a coach demo the activity and then letting the kids go out and do it.”

Nowak also said that sending out a video explanation to parents before practice, so that kids who might have trouble picking up drills have a chance to review multiple times, can be extra beneficial for players with more learning needs.

COACHING KIDS WITH DIFFERENT LEARNING NEEDS



As a coach, it's really important you keep it to one or two things, because then the kids know what you expect out of them, everyone knows what we're working on and it directs what you are looking for as a coach as well." – ZACK NOWAK



Keep It Simple

Everyone knows that when working with youth, coaches only have their attention for a limited amount of time. This can be especially true for our younger skaters and those with learning disabilities. It's paramount to keep our explanations simple.

"At the end of your explanation, they should be able to repeat back to you what they need to go and do," Nowak said. "A lot of times, we stand at the board, talk for 3 minutes and you might ask them, what are you supposed to go out there and do? And they might be able to repeat one thing, but

there's no way they are able to repeat the 3-4 minutes you stood up there and talked."

Nowak said coaches should keep explanations to one or two key points of emphasis. This serves multiple purposes, including keeping the chalk talks brief.

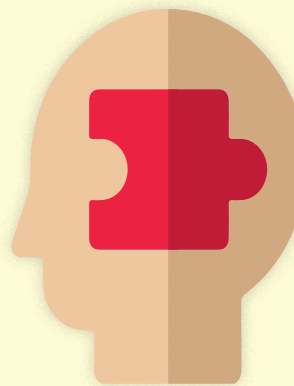
"As a coach, it's really important you keep it to one or two things, because then the kids know what you expect out of them, everyone knows what we're working on and it directs what you are looking for as a coach as well," Nowak said.

"If we talk to the kids about scanning and looking around and I explain it's looking over your shoulder to find the forechecker when retrieving a puck, the players know that's what I'm looking for, that's what they are looking to improve and now I can actually go out and watch that specific key point we're working on together."

Explanations and demonstration tend to be the biggest spots for errors when it comes to kids with different learning needs. It all stems from the idea of having a specific learning objective. So, if you say you are working on skating, that is very broad. Nowak says to identify something very specific—like working to making stronger pushes. As the coach, you now know what to explain and what you are looking for from players. Then when coaches go to give feedback, they are giving feedback to that learning objective.

Coaches of advanced players might want to have more complex drills. But a way to give players a better understanding is to break the drills down into more manageable chunks. In the podcast, Nowak gives the example of a starting a small-area game cross-ice 3-on-3, and then adding one rule at a time so that they can work on specific skills.

"Some kids might be able to, if you give them the whole drill right at once, they might be able to get it," Nowak said. "Let's give them time to learn the activity, learn the different rules to it. If we can break it down into smaller parts, that's going to allow all of our players to understand the activity."



Check for Understanding

USA Hockey emphasizes checking for understanding during its Coaching Education Program clinics. This means asking players to repeat the drill or activity back to them so they know at least one player understands.

"Oftentimes, traditionally, coaches explain the skill and then they ask the kids, you got it?" Nowak elaborates. "And the kids shake their head, uh-huh, and then it's

NASCAR to see who gets to the end of the line fastest because they don't want to go first because they don't understand."

By keeping things simple, you can check for understanding with more than one player on the fundamental pieces of the drill.

When you have a player who is not as quick of a learner, it's best not to alienate them in front of the whole team. Nowak says it's still crucial you check for understanding with them, just in a different way.

"After you check for understanding with the whole group, maybe it's checking in with our buddy, who tends to struggle understanding or processing in the larger group," Nowak explains. "I might go and

check-in and say, can you repeat back the rules to me just so I know you're ready to go? Maybe he didn't get it, there was too much going on and it was a little distracting, and now I can check in and say, 'Hey this is what we're going to do' and we're pulling him away from the group and I'm not isolating him or putting any pressure on him."

Pumping Tires

The final piece in working with different learners, and really all kids, is finding what motivates them and then rewarding that behavior. Nowak calls it pumping their tires. Really, it's incentivizing behaviors that coaches want to see, whether it is through stickers, verbal praise, or other team-related rewards.

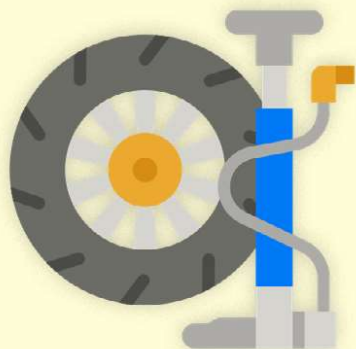
"Identify those incentives, identify the behaviors we want to change, then we get them working towards that goal,"

Nowak said. "Along the way when you see any sort of improvement it's, 'Awesome, love the way you were able to stay on task.' Label the behavior that you like to see."

It's important not to make the rewards based on attributes attainable for all such as hard work, team play or other positive behaviors, and not skill.

Coaches should also understand that every player is on a different learning journey and learns at different rates. Reward each kid as their individual self, but also include everyone in those things.

"Identify the behavior and understand what motivates them. Pump their tires, get them smiling. That's how we can create a positive team dynamic and positive team culture. Ultimately we can change behavior for the better in all our players," Nowak said. ☆



VIDEO Officiating 101: Match Penalty for Roughing



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- April 19-21 Phoenix, AZ
- May 17-19 Boise, ID
- May 24-26 Seattle, WA
- June 7-8 Duluth, MN
- June 10-13 Minneapolis, MN
- June 17-20 Northbrook, IL
- June 24-27 Glenview, IL
- June 30-July 3 Breckenridge, CO
with Jack Skille Hockey Academy
- July 8-12 Sun Valley, ID
with Elevated Hockey
- July 15-18 Denver, CO
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- July 29-August 2 Toronto, Canada
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– ZACK NOWAK