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# ACE



# focus

NEWS FROM AROUND THE COUNTY TO HELP THE ACE DIRECTOR.

## Cross-Ice

Written by: James Van Buskirk

“The coaches always gave me latitude to be creative.”  
-Wayne Gretzky

What is cross-ice hockey? Simply stated, it is a game reduced in size that allows players to practice their hockey skills. Cross-ice hockey actually has been around for as long as the game has been played. When we played on the pond did we shovel the ice 100' x 200'? We certainly did not. We played in a small area that developed and honed our skills without the logistics of off-sides, icing, penalties, face-offs, etc. Somehow we have moved away from the idea of playing in a loosely structured environment. Many of the greatest hockey players to ever play the game will attribute their success to growing up playing on the ponds!

Massachusetts Hockey is committed to bringing this theory of downsizing the playing surface to a reality. Massachusetts has distributed 55 sets of cross-ice dividers to local organizations funded by the Boston Bruins license plate program. This accounts for 35% of the rinks in Massachusetts. A percentage of the proceeds from people registering their car with a Boston Bruins license plate go directly to Massachusetts Hockey. In turn, Massachusetts puts the entire amount into purchasing cross-ice dividers.

Consider this, when the playing surface is reduced in size, we are now correctly preparing our young players for the speed and quickness they will encounter as they grow older. Can you imagine a t-ball game played at Yankee Stadium or an eight and under child playing basketball using a ten foot rim? Cross-ice develops a positive environment, increases puck touches, teaches puck protection by forcing players to play in confined areas.

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## ACE focus Newsletter

We would like to extend best wishes and happy healthy New Year to all our District Ace Administrators and local association ACE Directors. We have formed four sub-committees to deal with the following topics: National ACE Newsletter, Chair Kevin Connelie, Southeast; Long Range Planning, Chair Tom Kehr, Michigan; Parent Awareness, Chair Dr. Adam Naylor, Massachusetts; and re-writing the ACE Handbook, Chair Chuck Gridley, New York. All four committees are active with Parent Awareness and Long Range Planning to be rolled out shortly. The completion of the Ace Handbook is underway, and will be completed by the beginning of the 2006-07 season. We urge all ACE Directors to stay in touch with their District ACE Administrators and offer feedback and suggestions to improve the ACE director program.

*Jim Cooney, National ACE Director, USA Hockey*

# Working with First-Time Players Part-2

By Chuck Gridley

Before you attempt to teach/coach young children it's important to try to understand how they learn. A child's ability to learn is dictated by where they are in their own development. Development is defined as a process of change in an individual over time. The four areas of development are physical, social, emotional, and cognitive and they are all closely related. (Morrison, 2001) You do not need to be an expert in the field of child development in order to be a successful hockey coach, but some knowledge of the basic principles will be helpful to you. Here are three basic facts to consider:

- There are stages, or steps in the development of a child, and they do not vary from child to child.
- There is no such thing as skipping a stage – all children go through each stage.
- All children progress through the stages of development in the same order, regardless of their own individual differences. The rate of development however, may vary from child to child. (Bentzen, 1997)

You are asking yourself, "What does this have to do with coaching hockey?" Let's look at a concrete example. You want to design an activity to work on forward skating and controlled turns. You decide to use a relay race to accomplish this. Simple enough, it works on the skills you are teaching, it's a "game", it's competitive and it's fun! What could possibly be wrong with using this activity? Let's start with the basics – the main objective of a relay race is to work together as a team to try to WIN the race. In an effort to win, the individual team members will work hard, thus accelerating their skill development. This is a simple, effective and fun activity for most children seven years of age and older. The problem that you will encounter in trying to use this activity with most four year olds is that: 1) They do not completely understand the concept of winning, and 2) They do not understand the concept of working together as a team. The simplicity of this activity will be lost on these little guys because they are not developmentally equipped to understand the basic concepts that the activity is built on. You can probably get through the ordeal, hold them in line, get them to go when it's their turn, skate around the cone, come back to the end of the line, etc. The question is, are there more developmentally appropriate activities that you can use to accomplish the same objectives? Some other things to keep in mind:

- Children need to be active participants in the learning process, so involve them as much as possible.
- Children learn best in an environment in which they feel secure. It is important to be aware of each child's comfort level, and try to create an environment in which all of your players are having fun and feeling secure.
- "Play" is an important vehicle for development and learning. Try to make a variety of equipment (balls of different sizes, pucks, cones, etc.) available, and set aside some time every practice for free play.
- Development requires opportunities for children to practice their newly acquired skills.
- Development advances when children are given new challenges that are slightly above their current level of mastery.
- Keep in mind that development happens at varying rates from child to child, and that different children learn in different ways. It is important to know your players, and to take an "individualistic" approach to coaching them.
- Most children are not developmentally ready for games with rules until the age of seven. Keep this in mind when structuring your practices. (Morrison, 2001)



In general, you want to try to create an environment that matches the development level of the children that you are coaching. This will maximize learning and help your players have a positive introduction to the sport of ice hockey.

Send to Chuck Gridley [maxe88@aol.com](mailto:maxe88@aol.com) .

# Building Strong Hockey Communities: ACE's Opportunity to Lead Parent Education

By Adam Naylor, Ed.D.

The youth hockey team has three essential groups of personnel – it begins with the athletes, is educated and led by coaches, and is supported by parents. USA Hockey and its districts/affiliates do an excellent job at educating coaches, who in turn mentor and teach athletes. Currently sport parent education is occasional at best and more often than not, they are left out of the educational loop. Mothers and fathers are left to navigating the complex world of youth sports often without expert and ethical guidance. Consequently, parents are left to be labeled “problems,” rather than being coached to be play their important role of foundations for excellent athletic accomplishments. Without family education and positive parental participation hockey communities are unable to fulfill their optimal potential (i.e. participation, perseverance, fun, and player development).

ACE Directors around the country are in the unique position to provide credible information and education to hockey parents in their communities and local associations. While this might seem like an overwhelming task, the District ACE Directors in cooperation with the Boston University Athletic Enhancement Center have designed a comprehensive and user-friendly approach to hockey parent education. With strong leadership from District ACE Directors and a little effort from local hockey programs, parents of 8 and under (mites) to 18 and under (midgets) can be empowered to make good decisions at the rink. Optimal parent education takes a triadic approach to building positive parent behaviors: 1) Education, 2) Behavioral Contracts, and 3) Awareness/Message Reinforcement.

**Education:** Often parents display more anxiety than their kids throughout the youth sport experience. Much of this stems from the intense emotions they feel towards their child and their child's well-being. There are certainly great desires to be able to provide the “right” opportunities for their child, yet knowing what is “right” can be a great challenge. Without guidance, adults often treat youth sports as an adult enterprise failing to make modifications because children are involved rather than adults. Therefore they behave as if they were at NHL games rather than youth sporting events. At a NHL game big hits and fights are often seen as entertainment, playing through significant injuries are signs of courage, heckling the officials is a favorite American pastime, and success is measured by the box score (i.e. goals, +/-, assists, and saves = success). Not only are all of these perspectives unhealthy in a youth sport setting, but they also inhibit athletes' abilities to develop optimally as hockey players and as citizens.

The USA Hockey Parent Education presentation addresses these sentiments. It is important during the education of parents to remind them of why kids participate, enjoy and thrive in youth sports: to have fun, to learn new skills, and to hang out with friends. It is equally important to share with adults “how” to create optimal youth sport environments. In essence, what are the actions of optimal hockey parenting? The actions can be separated into three phases: 1) preparing to play - i.e. encourage support of teammates, coaches and officials, check equipment with your child before leaving the house, and say, “Have fun!”; 2) game/practice-time behaviors - support all participants in the game, reinforce effort and attitude in our language (i.e. say, ‘good work,’ ‘way to communicate,’ ‘nice pass.’), have only positive things to say at the rink; 3) Conversation for the ride home - discussing the process of hockey rather than the outcome and focusing on enjoyment and positive memories. Lastly, the USA Hockey Coaching Education Program discusses the coach-parent relationship and adult roles at youth hockey games. Ultimately, parent education should create a common philosophy and language that can be shared by parents, coaches, and administrators throughout the season.



**Behavioral Contracts:** The second step in formalizing a community's commitment to developing optimal youth hockey environments is sharing USA Hockey's Code of Conduct. This is done by asking all adults to read and sign a code of conduct. The code not only reinforces the USA hockey parent education message, but also, much like a post-game handshake, is an important symbol of commitment to the lessons learned in sports that extend beyond the playing field. The USA Hockey Parent Code of Conduct builds off of the basic principals of positive youth sport environments.

## USA Hockey - Parents Code of Conduct

- Do not force your children to participate in sports, but support their desires to play their chosen sport. Children are involved in organized sports for their enjoyment. Make it fun.
- Encourage your child to play by the rules. Remember, children learn best by example, so applaud the good plays of both teams.
- Do not embarrass your child by yelling at players, coaches or officials. By showing a positive attitude toward the game and all of its participants, your child will benefit.
- Emphasize skill development and practices and how they benefit your young athlete. De-emphasize games and competition in the lower age groups
- Know and study the rules of the game, and support the officials on and off the ice. This approach will help in the development and support of the game. Any criticism of the officials only hurts the game.
- Applaud a good effort in both victory and defeat, and enforce the positive points of the game. Never yell or physically abuse your child after a game or practice – it is destructive. Work toward removing the physical and verbal abuse in youth sports.
- Recognize the importance of volunteer coaches and association officials. They are important to the development of your child and the sport. Communicate with them and support them.
- If you enjoy the game, learn all you can about hockey and volunteer.

**Awareness/Message Reinforcement:** Even the best educational messages fail to thrive if they are not reinforced regularly. This concept is highlighted by NHL players practicing skills as simple as passing and skating throughout the season. While these are skills that were mastered a long time ago, if they are not practiced their quality will be diminished as time goes by. The messages of the parental education presentations and behavioral contracts can be reinforced daily by items such as the “Relax It’s Just a Game” posters and public service announcements and the “Zero Tolerance” posters. By having these messages in every rink and available on hockey program websites, parents are regularly reminded of the concepts that make hockey a great learning environment for youth. Parents spend a great deal of time sitting in rinks drinking hot coffee and waiting for the action to begin. If facilities are outfitted with posters and informational brochures (such as USA Hockey’s Parent’s Introduction to Youth Hockey) parents will pass the time reading them and being reminded of the educational message. Increasing awareness is at the heart of long term behavioral change.

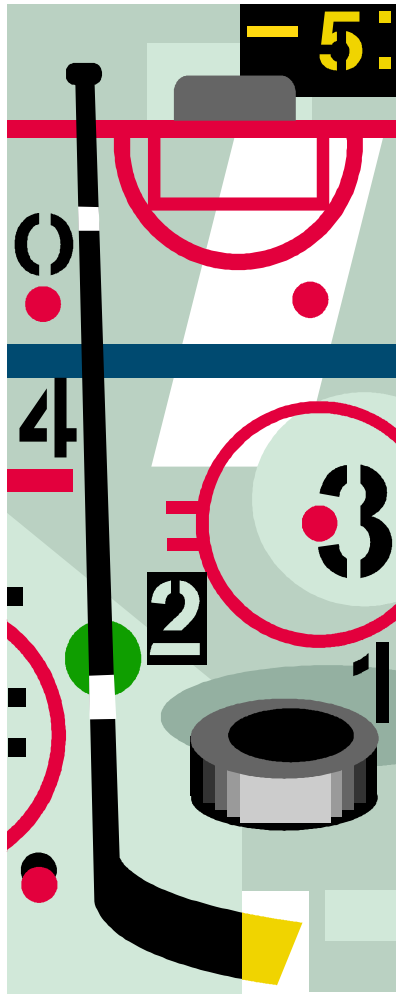
ACE Directors are in the unique position to be able to begin the parental education process in associations around the country. ACE Directors should familiarize themselves with all of the materials previously mentioned. They have been designed to be both educationally sound and simple to use. Remember, parental education is an imperfect process, but with a little effort and a good plan communication between parents and coaches is improved, majority of parents fulfill their potential as valuable supporters, and most importantly, kids play, enjoy, and improve.

For a copy of the USA Hockey/ACE Parent Education presentation and supporting materials, e-mail Dan Brennan at [danb@usahockey.org](mailto:danb@usahockey.org).

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# Assistant Coaches

By Mark Brooks



The role of the assistant coach is defined clearly on pages 7 and 8 of the USA Hockey Coaching Education Program Level II Manual. The assistant coach has to juggle many responsibilities to help the head coach prepare for games and practices throughout the season. Everyone has their own concepts and management styles. If you are asked to be an assistant, what is it about you that the head coach is looking at? What are the considerations you should have for being an assistant coach? While there are many skill levels of hockey being played *across the country*, every head coach has their own concepts about assistant coaches. While we realize this is a position that is largely defined by a variety of situations, overall it seemed that the temperament of the head coach played a pivotal role.

Everyone knows that assistant coaches are a valuable asset. First question: Is the head coach utilizing the assistant coaches to their full potential? Assistants can make the head coach job more successful and enjoyable and provide better overall coaching for your players. During practices they can provide pre-practice explanations, conduct the warm-up, teach actively in all drills, supervise the physical conditioning program, direct special teams, and work with players on individual skills and tactics. In fact, assistants should be groomed to be able to conduct effective practices in the absence of head coaches.

During games, assistants can analyze the action and make suggestions on team strategy, give feedback and encouragement to individual players, record statistics, act as a liaison between the head coach and the players, assist the manager when traveling, and monitor any treatment or care given to injured players. It is important that coaches establish strong, two-way communication with assistants and function as a coaching team.

Basketball coach Pat Riley wrote a book titled **THE WINNER WITHIN, A Life Plan for Team Players** in which he relates that before becoming a head coach, he spent eighteen years coming up through the ranks. As a player, he was a bench warmer and a role player. He returned to Phoenix as a color announcer and was even a traveling secretary to the team. The reason he became an assistant coach was to gain more knowledge so he could convey them in more

depth during a broadcast. First he was an interim assistant coach, then an assistant coach, and then as interim head coach, and finally coach. That is when a whole new role descended on him. The stroll down his career path taught him some very valuable lessons.

- **First, never demean the time you spend in the trenches.** If you pay attention to what you're doing, you can learn an awful lot about how an organization behaves, and that can be very useful later on.
- **Second, use any time when you aren't on center stage to strengthen your powers of perception.** Even being on the bench or working around the periphery for the Lakers was like attending a master class in professional basketball. It's strictly attitude that lets you learn.
- **Third, keep reminding yourself that attitude is the mother of luck.**

Head coaches are looking for you *to be* able to use your skills to convey their concepts to teach the players. When you and a head coach are discussing the possibility of you working as an assistant, does that coach convey in clear terms what your role/responsibilities are? If he/she can't communicate his/her expectations of you in relationship to the team, you should be wary.

Why does the head coach want you to be an assistant? The coach will be gauging your commitment level to the team --- is it as high as *their own*? Hopefully, you and the head coach hold relatively similar beliefs and philosophies (strategy/discipline) about the game? Head coaches are looking at you to be flexible in your approach to the game, to have solid basic principles in approaching the task they assign to you. Head coaches are looking to select assistants *that are* strong in areas they are not, in order to compliment their abilities. *This way* both can learn from one another and have expertise in all phases of game.

In a book titled **Coaching & Motivation (A Practical Guide to Maximum Athletic Performance)** by William Warren there is a section about what a head coach needs to do regarding their relationship with assistant coaches. This section can also help assistant coaches to see *what is required of them* regarding their relationship with the head coach. It outlines for the head coach the following:

- ***Permit them to contribute in a meaningful way.***
- ***Set a good example for them.***
- ***Set high expectations for them.***
- ***Communicate with them.***
- ***Include your assistants in your strategy sessions and the decision-making process, whether as contributors or as learners.***
- ***Don't blame your assistant coaches for defeats.***
- ***Share the credit for victories.***
- ***Try to avoid criticizing your assistant coaches in public, or correcting them in front of the players.***
- ***Back up decisions made by your assistant coaches. Don't take the player's side in confrontations.***

### **Cross-Ice Continued...**

The key benefits of cross ice are as follows: to promote creativity, create an environment for self-learning "shinny hockey", increase player participation, accelerate the learning process, maximize skill acquisition, create a positive environment "passion to play", increase tempo "eliminate whistles", and enhance decision making skills "read and react quickly".

Many leagues in Massachusetts have started to incorporate cross-ice in league play at the 8 and under (mite) and 10 and under (squirt) level. One cross-ice game can have the development benefits of 10 -12 full ice games. There were 128 shots on net in a cross-ice 10 and under (squirt) Greater Boston League game. The father that recorded this stat was also proud to tell me that his son had an 84% save percentage. At the beginning of season, he thought cross-ice was a waste of time but before long, he could see the benefits it had and how quickly his son was improving. He also stated that many of the parents by the end of the season thought cross-ice was a good experience for their players; in fact, they enjoyed watching the cross-ice games.