

Teaching Psychological Skills for the Ages

Mama...I'm retiring

My little nephew loved to run on the field and he would jump with glee every time he saw a soccer ball. He would play until nightfall with his friends, but after his first year of organized practice he returned home and boldly stated that, "Practice sucks and I'm retiring." Tough talk and a tragic loss for any child. He was six.

Why children quit

The role of sport in our society is enormous. More than one third of our youth are involved in some form of sport. That accounts for more than 20 million children. Every year children leave sport in equally staggering numbers. Why such a high drop out rate? One-third of all participants drop out of the game because of the following factors:

- lack of family finances,
- don't inherently enjoy soccer and leave to play another sport ,
- constant criticism, disapproval, or over-competitive emphasis from adults ,
- little playing time,
- poor communication by the coach,
- dominating coaches who create an environment of fear or provide inappropriate full game structure, or
- the soccer experience was unpleasant.

What children want

Children want to have fun when they play. To our children this means achieving, improving and learning new skills while having positive social relationships. In a sport setting these positive relationships can be with teammates, coaches and other children. When the environment is set up correctly young students can experience the feeling of flow and playing in the zone. This means feeling good about the game itself and having a balance of both enough challenges and successes so the sport experience becomes internally rewarding.

When the conditions of flow are set up, kids refer to touching the ball the ball as "feeling good when they run" and breathing hard as "cool" feelings they enjoy. For some children, they experience some degree of independence and self-control for the first time. This is a great learning experience and a situation worth repeating for everyone involved. When children are "having fun" there is less probability of problems occurring that invariably make children leave the game.

The beautiful game

Making new friends, keeping old friends, becoming skilled, having fun, becoming fit and experiencing excitement are all factors in children having a great experience in youth sport. Winning never appears on the list given by children of what makes soccer fun. Because of this, we as adults often experience philosophical problems organizing our coaching education plans and structuring the playing environment. Many young players would rather play on a losing side rather than win and ride the pine. The internal rewards of enjoyment fun, fitness are important than winning, beating opponents or other extrinsic rewards.

Let's be clear...the contributors for dropping out were lack of fun, lack of playing time, overemphasis on winning, and boredom or dislike for the coach. The last few scenarios are a concern for all of us. Experiences for youngsters should contribute to growth, teach control, provide positive influences, and teach our youth the lessons of the beautiful game.

What do the experts say?

All of the world's leading training experts agree that training demands should fit the athlete. The experts agree, the coach must ascertain athlete readiness, development structure, plan for variation, and prescribe appropriate demands implemented in a holistic fashion. Let's look specifically at demands for healthy psychological development for the different age groups.

Developmental Stages

6 year olds and under:

The key issue for children under six is positive self-esteem. Children will play the game longer, try harder and overcome obstacles if the environment is conducive to building self esteem. The concept of "self" is learned, not by winning games, but by facing progressively difficult challenges. Earning success promotes higher levels of self-awareness, stronger self-image and self-confidence. The child up to the age of 6 is focused primary upon developing the self.

At this stage all experiences should allow the child to fully engage the physical domain within the child. It would be destructive to make tactical demands on a six year old when they don't have the cognitive ability to comprehend the concepts. "The make believe" ability of the child's mind is dominant at this stage. Most interactions of the make believe world can be unitized successfully in the very small sided game. Every touch can be a resounding success. Youngsters have very short attention spans and can't stand hearing verbal descriptions of observations from a coach. Too much verbiage and the moment is lost. Players like to move and require constant opportunity to be successful.

The under six player is developing a central nervous system that requires general movement with little refined skill. It's not a problem if a six year old cannot bend a ball at 40 yards. It's not in their abilities to master such a demand. If we try to teach this demand we waste time and destroy the child's motivation.

The world of a six year old revolves around the imaginary victories they create in their realities. This is a normal phase and should be encouraged with corrections and criticisms held to a minimum. Given the correct environment the children will find a way to play. When levels of demand are too abstract in the full 11 v 11 game (tactics) or the physical demands too challenging the result is anger, helplessness and ultimately dropout.

The 7-12 year olds

The next phase in development is the cognitive period of operational thought. At this stage, age 7-12, the child is moving away from self-centeredness and becomes aware of others in the world. The larger sided games that require more complex variations and tactics can start to be introduced. We have to be aware that there is a very small progression from the previous stage and that a sudden transition to a formal full game with 11 v 11 tactics will destroy confidence if introduced at this stage. Therefore, the progression should move gradually to a larger sided game. The simple progression from a 6 v 6 to a 7 v 7 game is warranted here.

A longer attention span and the ability to understand cooperation will contribute to playing small side tactics. The ability to understand rule formation is beginning in this stage and therefore the coach can begin to describe simple logic. Again, a word of caution; a full sided game is beyond the comprehension of a nine year old. I often hear of parents that indicate that a child at age nine is already competently playing full sided games with older children. Playing and understanding the game are different ideas. It is necessary to both understand and be successful to achieve higher levels of enjoyment. One of the quickest ways to lose a child joy is to make the demands of the game too difficult and to lose contact with their friends.

At this stage the person's self-concept is forming along the lines of how they compare to other people. While this comparison is inevitable within the context of society we must emphasize the needs of the child. Soccer by its nature can indicate a winner and loser very quickly and can initiate gross feelings of guilt and inferiority if the focus on winning is stressed, rather than development.

The Teenager

The next stage of development occurs during adolescence. The changes generally begin earlier for girls at approximately age twelve and at age 14 for boys. This stage is characterized by a major shift in the endocrine system that brings on adult characteristics. Psychologically, this developmental stage of adult thinking is called formal operational thought. The adolescent can link two abstract thoughts together to form concepts. This is where we can begin to teach tactics that involve more sophisticated principles.

For example, you would be correct in teaching a 16 year old girl defensive positional play by instructing her to block a passing lane even if the ball does not get played in her direction. She is still aware of her contribution of pressure and support. She is motivated by understanding that defensive posture is directly related to creating turnovers, that lead to counters, that in turn, lead to scoring. If you were to teach a five year old boy or a 9 year old girl, the left side lock, which is the system that Germany used in the 1990 World Cup, you would completely devastate the young player.

First off, they don't care about a German team that played before they were born and they don't have the ability to link difficult multiple abstract thoughts together. The result would be confusion, not having fun and we then have inadvertently created the pathway for children to drop out. The lesson here is to always look at the developmental stage of the people you are coaching and prescribe appropriate activities that encourage growth, development and passion for the game.

The Solution

Using the professional sport model in youth sport is problematic because the professional model wastes a great deal of talent and minimizes growth. The issue for US Soccer is high quality education for coaches. The leaders in sport are adults and have a huge responsibility to structure learning opportunities where children can develop and have their needs met. This implies that we understand why youngsters participate in the first place. The following are guidelines for designing appropriate demands for young athletes:

Opportunities for skill development: Skill development is consistently at the top of the list of children's needs for fun. Planned, organized practices that allow for participation, success and positive communication are the hallmarks of skill development.

Opportunity for fun: Children are not little pro's. Shorter attention spans, developing self-images and immature physiology indicate the need for scaled down demands. The demands must fit the age appropriate cognitive abilities for improvement to occur. Youngsters are happiest when moving; not being lectured to or sitting on the bench.

Playing in the Zone: You have all been the in zone before. Perhaps you were driving and you forgot

the last twenty miles you just traveled. Or you were in the zone while gardening, forgetting about your knees hurting while you planted that azalea. Young players need to play in the zone. It's fun to have a challenge that's appropriate to your level. If the game is too complex the child becomes afraid and anxious. If the game is too simple, the result is boredom leads to apathy or misbehavior. As children's mental and physical abilities change the demands of the game must also change

Time for team bonding: Let's be truthful. Most people think it's really cool to get to wear all the team gear and be part of the game. Adults understand this and also feel this way. However children have a much more dramatic lift to self-esteem when they put on the jersey and head to the field with their



teammates. The social aspect of the game is more important than the technical aspect. The ritual of warming-up with the team and eating brownies at the end are often as important as the game itself.

Teaching achievement behavior: It's important to recognize we live in a society that rewards high achievement. The honor roll at school, the pressure of getting into a good college and the mystical athletic scholarship provide expectations that can hurt development and growth. Now let's not be naïve. We currently reward success and should continue. However, the solution is to define a clear picture of what success is. If the needs of the youth player are improvement, fun, team affiliation and mastery, then let's train and reward these aspects of the game.

Play On!

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