

This is Part 2 in a two-part series dealing with the psychology of coaching children. Part 1 dealt with understanding why children participate in soccer.

Know the Factors That May be Stressful for Youth Players

Coaches and parents can do a great service to children by helping each athlete develop self-confidence, a sense of personal worth and mastery, and a constructive attitude toward failure and adversity. Behavior that adults view as encouraging can often be perceived by athletes as stress producing and pressure-filled. Kids will freely choose to participate in activities that they view as worthwhile, enjoyable and fun. The challenge for adults is to maximize the inherent joy of what Pele calls "the beautiful game of soccer" and minimize experiences that increase children's anxiety and likelihood of burnout.

Practical suggestions for coaches:

Avoid a "win at all cost" attitude.

Transform parental pressure into parental interest, support and encouragement.

Avoid over training, long, repetitive practices and excessive time and travel demands.

Avoid using perfection as the standard for judging an athlete's performance.

Don't associate a player's worth or value as a person with their performance and ability on the soccer field (i.e. winning or a great performance means that I like you more).

Make sure that your non-verbal behaviors are congruent with your words and that the coaching is consistent across situations (i.e. sulking after a loss even though the team played well or being happy following a poor performance by a winning team).

Realize That Effective Feedback is the Breakfast of Champions

The familiar coaching adage that "what you do speaks so loudly that no one can hear what your saying" is especially important to remember when dealing with athletes. Players benefit most from coaches whose actions reflect both their implied and stated values. The ability to observe, analyze and communicate are three of a coaches most valuable assets. A word of caution, however, is that the beneficial effects of verbal instruction decrease in direct proportion to the amount given. Remember: Keep it Short and Simple. Take time to videotape yourself coaching, not only at practice but also in games. Observe yourself as others see you. Frequently there is significant difference between how coaches think they are talking, acting and communicating and what athletes perceive.

Practical suggestions for coaches:

Give specific, performance-contingent feedback to athletes rather than general comments lacking performance-related information.

Be liberal with praise. Most athletes prefer coaches who shout praise and whisper criticism rather than visa versa.

Tell athletes what improvements need to be made, why and most importantly, how to make those corrections successfully and consistently.

Observe and provide meaningful feedback to every athlete at least once each training session and game.

Combine verbal praise with consistent non-verbal forms of encouragement (i.e. a pat on the back, smile, a high five, etc.).

Maintain your credibility as a coach by being accurate and sincere in your feedback and praise. Ignoring errors, giving excessive praise for mediocre performance or excessive praise for performance on simple tasks conveys to the athlete that either you don't know what you're talking about or else you have very low expectations of them as performers.

Correct performance errors in non-threatening and non-punitive ways. Finding problems is the role of a critic not a competent soccer coach. Good coaching requires the ability to not only recognize problems but also to solve them through effective, practical and successful solutions.

Reward effort as much as outcome. Repeated effort, especially in the face of failure and adversity, is one of the most important ingredients for future success.

Use the "feedback sandwich" when correcting youngsters. Find something the player did well and praise it. Next tell the athlete what they did incorrectly, what they need to do to improve and why. Finish with a positive, encouraging or motivational statement.

Foster an environment that allows for trying new skills, approaches and strategies without the fear of reprimand and punishment. Mistakes are integral to sport improvement. Ridicule, sarcasm and fear are

impediments to both immediate and future performance successes.

Putting it All Together

Athletes learn the game of soccer not only through the directed learning experiences that coaches provide in practice and game play but also through indirect means by observation and imitation. As a sport leader, you are a powerful and lasting role model for athletes by your thought, word and deed. Parents and coaches can serve as a player's greatest ally or worst nightmare depending on the attitude, behavior and motivation adopted for sport involvement. Remember, the game is for the kids. It is not for the ego or bragging rights of adults. Our role, as coaches, is to provide an opportunity for participation for all interested youngsters, access to appropriate and safe environments for instruction and competition, exposure to caring and competent leaders, holistic consideration of the child's entire development (physical, cognitive, social and psychological) and an unwavering belief in the worth and ability of children to succeed at their own unique level of accomplishment. When coaches expect every athlete to succeed, it's amazing how many of them really do.

Rather than measuring success in terms of numbers in the win/loss columns, perhaps the ultimate standard of our success as coaches should be judged by our ability to teach children to love and enjoy the game of soccer, to feel more confident and self-assured in their abilities and knowledge of the game, to experience mutual respect from both teammates and coaches, and most importantly, to feel appreciation and pride in the opportunity they had to play a sport they love under your direction as their coach.

Perhaps the most appropriate summary can be found in the "Bill of Rights for Young Athletes" (NASPE, 1977) written by medical, physical education and recreation experts in the hope of creating guidelines to maximize the beneficial effects of athletic participation for all.

Bill of Rights for Young Athletes

Right of the opportunity to participate in sport regardless of ability level

Right to participate at a level that is commensurate with each child's developmental level

Right to have qualified adult leadership

Right to participate in safe and healthy environments

Right of each child to share the leadership and decision-making of their sport participation

Right to play as a child, not as an adult

Right to proper preparation

Right to equal opportunity to strive for success

Right to be treated with dignity by all involved

Right to have fun through sport