

Here are some thoughts about coaching youth soccer from a sport psychologist's perspective

1. Coaching matters for a number of reasons:
  - a. Coaches set the emotional tone of a team through the things they emphasize and the way they communicate with their players.
  - b. Young players look up to their coaches, whether coaches expect it or not.
  - c. Coaches' actions (e.g., assignment of playing positions and the type of feedback they give to each child) are an important source of information that players use to evaluate their own ability. This is especially true for the youngest athletes in our club.
2. Coaching matters most to children who are the least physically skilled and the least self-confident. To a certain extent, the most skilled athletes will do okay with any coach because they will have frequent experiences of success during practices and games. Less self-confident athletes and less skilled athletes may be more sensitive to how they are coached. Try to keep things positive and provide a supportive environment for the team. Look out for these kids because they have the most to gain from good coaching. They are the kids who can improve the most, and they can be the most satisfying to work with because of the changes you may see.
3. Children participate in youth sports for a variety of reasons. The motives for participation generally fit in the following categories:
  - Affiliation – they want to be part of a team.
  - Competence – they want to improve their skills and demonstrate their ability
  - Competition – they want to compete and to win (this motive increases with age)
  - Friendship – they want to spend time with friends
  - Action – being involved, performing skills well, and playing games are fun
  - Fitness – youth play as a way of gaining fitness (this motive also increases with age)

Most children play soccer for a variety of these reasons, so try to address all of the motives. Kids will enjoy playing soccer most when all of their motives for playing are satisfied. Try to keep all of your kids active throughout practices, minimize the amount of time they wait for their turn. Play games that challenge players and develop their abilities instead of doing 'drills' the purpose of which may not be clear to young players (I have found [soccerspecific.com](http://soccerspecific.com) quite useful). Become a better teacher by learning the key components of skills. Acknowledge that friendship is a reason kids come out to play: allow time for kids to socialize at the start of practices (and sign up for the Nathan Thomas tournament as it allows kids time to play together between games). Do things as a team and establish team rules.

4. Children change as they get older. For example, middle school-aged athletes may be less concerned with pleasing their coach than elementary school-aged athletes. Also, as players get older they also develop an increasingly sophisticated understanding of physical skill or ability. Our youngest players equate trying hard with being a good

player. Our older players, by contrast, understand that if they have to try harder than other athletes to perform equally well, they may demonstrate low ability relative to other players. Subsequently, older athletes may withhold effort because it may be better to appear unmotivated than unskilled. Try to understand how the children are changing (including physical changes) and adapt your coaching practices accordingly.

5. Developing strong perceptions of competence in athletes is important because kids who feel they lack ability will likely quit playing. Physical ability can be understood in two ways: (1) as a capacity which limits performance (e.g., no matter how hard I try I can only run so fast), and (2) an entity that can be developed (e.g., if I work on my form and train hard I should be able to run faster). Do things that emphasize the second way of viewing ability:
  - a. Provide process-oriented feedback to help players correct mistakes (i.e., point out where things went wrong)
  - b. Set process-oriented goals (e.g., “I want you to get your non-kicking foot close to the ball on each of your next 4 passes”)
  - c. Catch players getting processes right, even when outcomes are not great (e.g., “Nice job of getting back on defense, Johnny.”)
  - d. Point out improvement over time
6. Create a positive environment for your team. Providing much encouragement but be careful not to reward low skilled athletes for things that other players find very easy. Doing so may not make the rewarded players feel competent. Also, try to reward or encourage players in ways that convey competence information (e.g., “Wow! That was a great shot!”), not controlling (e.g., “Yeah Maggie, that’s where I want you to throw the ball”).
7. Soccer skills are complex physical movements and developing these skills takes much time and many trials. Players need many opportunities to master new skills and develop the “motor programs” they need to be effective players. Coaches often provide too much information to learners - so much information that the learners don’t know how to use it. Instead of pointing out all of the pieces necessary to drop kick the ball well, try providing a demonstration, focus on one component of the skill (e.g., holding the ball out at arms length) and allow the players to try it a few times. Then provide a second component of the skill (e.g., taking one step with the non-kicking foot) and allow another set of trials. Learners can become paralyzed by either receiving too much information at one time or by constant feedback after each trial. Try being more patient. Give the instruction (e.g., “I want you to focus on pointing your toe down on each of the next 8 drop kicks”), allow the learner a series of 8 trials and then provide some feedback.
8. As a coach, despite having three degrees in Exercise Science, I have been humbled by my inability to predict both the playing positions new players will excel at and which players will improve most quickly. In actuality, this is not at all surprising. Professional sports teams armed with endless hours of game tapes, results of physical testing, reports from players’ high school and college coaches, and even personality profiling (good grief what

is that all about), all evaluated by a group of highly qualified experts, routinely make bad decisions (see 1984 NBA draft). As a consequence of my inability to predict the future, I am pretty slow to limit players to specific playing positions and I do try to give all players the same amount of playing time. It only seems fair.

Please feel free to email me your sport psychology questions at [nchaumeton@comcast.net](mailto:nchaumeton@comcast.net) any time you think I might be able to help.

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