

The art of being an adult

John Allpress - The FA, England

Soccer is a learned activity - therefore the more you play the more you learn.

Currently youth soccer seems to have a very narrow concept of learning. It tends to still measure success by match results favoring content over process and over-coaching before self-discovery.

Many attempts to create a player development culture within youth soccer based on strong learning principles are compromised by a tacit acceptance of this point of view.

We as developers should be more open to the needs of the player rather than the needs of the club, coach, school, parent or agent.

There are certain things youth coaches must accept if we are to make learning rather than performance the focus of our young players' development years.

Learning through direct, open-minded immersion in the experience - the natural learning process of the brain - remains the best way to learn how to play the game. As youth coaches we must recognize that fact and support it when working on techniques, skills and game understanding by creating activities and learning environments that are FUN, varied, challenging and realistic. This also allow players to make decisions, solve problems, take ownership and responsibility and be trusted to do so.

Young players do not want the answers - what they may need are clues to what the answer may be. Too much detail, explanation or demonstration by the coach can be counterproductive as it can leave players little room to experiment with their own thoughts and ideas - they can end up simply copying to please the coach. Yes, the coach can affect the players' performance in the short-term, but how much have they really learnt? The art of self-discovery is a central pillar to effective long-term learning.

Players need the opportunity to work things out for themselves. Sometimes progress in some areas will be swift and other times slow. But the message must be that the coach trusts the player to try out new things and it's OK not to be able to do it today.

Effective learning is impossible without resilience - the ability to tolerate a degree of strangeness and to stay engaged when things may not be going so well. Without the willingness to take the risk of 'not knowing how to do something', in other words working outside our sphere of confident understanding and control, we tend to revert to a defensive mode - a way of playing that maintains our security but does not increase our mastery of techniques, skills or game understanding.

Stressing the risk factor too often discourages youngsters who may wish to try moving outside their comfort zone. This is doubly difficult without support and encouragement from the adults in the process (coaches, parents or teachers) and if winning becomes the sole focus of the event.

When you are LEARNING SOMETHING NEW you don't really know what you are doing. Some days you feel strong and can take on the world and other days you feel fragile and unable to take the risks and face the possible ridicule of not being able to do something

new or perform at the top of your game. Sometimes this confidence, or lack of it, can change from activity to activity within the same training session. It is up to the coaches to understand these processes and have the right strategies to hand to cope with them.

The less fearful your young players are the more likely they are to take up the challenge of 'not knowing how to do something' and move out of their comfort zone, to actually try out the new things you have been working on with them. It will also encourage them to solve problems more effectively and come up with clever imaginative techniques, skills and solutions and take us, their coaches, to places we did not think they were ready to go.

If encouraged to do so by the coach and parents, young, developing players are well able to handle this degree of uncertainty and very soon their learning environment becomes a 'can do' world rather than a 'can't risk' one. This enables the players to move forward and fulfill whatever potential they may have.

Learning involves the learner in taking risks. It involves things going wrong. It involves winning and losing soccer matches. None of this is a problem for the development of young players. But it can be more of a problem for us - the adults.

We, the adults in youth soccer, set the tone by how we behave. If we act like adults our behaviour will be rational and logical. We will see the activities and matches for what they are - opportunities for youngsters to learn more about playing soccer.

We can only be of use to the youngsters when we act like adults in the process, being objective and not too emotional. If we are to help them when they need it, we need to be thinking clearly and precisely, not concerned with things that are out of our control.

Youngsters in particular observe others a great deal of the time. When they do this they notice what people do and how they do it, what they say and how they say it. They notice how other people respond to what is said and done, and they observe the consequences of other peoples' behaviour. Therefore, the coach or parent behaving like an adult is a vital part of the player development process.

We can all point to times when we have seen others not behaving particularly well in this regard. But we are not responsible for their behaviour, only our own. The aim of the development coach should be to get the players to the event happy (in a positive frame of mind), purposeful (knowing what the objectives are as individuals and a group) and ready to play (fit & healthy).

Player development looks at things from the players' point of view, not the adults. What are the needs of the youngster? When the youngsters start to relax, smile and laugh you know you are truly winning because the environment is right.

This does not mean they will not be focused in training, strive to win their matches or be disappointed when they lose, but it does mean that you know how to manage their success and disappointment to their advantage and that they are free of fear and ready to LEARN.

John Allpress

The Soccer Association - England

