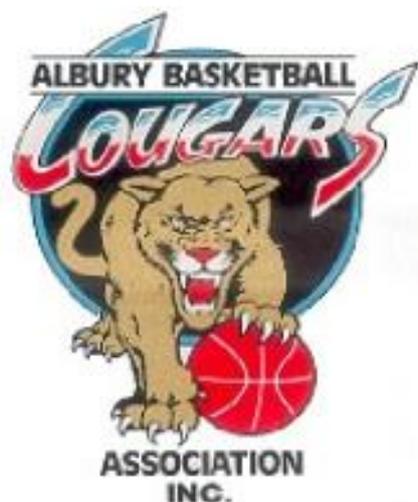


HOW TO COACH CHILDREN



Children's characteristics

Coaches of children should remember that:

- children's sport should be FUN!
- children need lots of opportunities for unstructured play, a broad range of activities, and the opportunity for creativity
- early sports specialisation is not recommended for young children
- the social aspects of sport are highly valued by children
- coaches should focus on skill development and individual improvement, rather than winning as the outcome
- all children deserve time and attention, not just the most talented

Children's social characteristics

- concerned with themselves
- learning social roles and skills
- learning how to cooperate
- come from different cultural and social backgrounds
- learning how to cope with winning and losing

Coaches should:

- promote cooperation, teamwork and fair play during activities
- reinforce the contribution all children make to the group
- provide a supportive environment and show sensitivity to individual differences

Children's level of understanding

- learning the best way to do things
- unable to process too much information
- do not do things automatically

Coaches should:

- use role models to demonstrate good performance
- introduce one thing at a time, keep instructions or questions short and simple
- allow time for children to absorb information and practise skills

Children's physical characteristics

- very active
- lack fine motor control
- develop at different rates
- have different levels of ability
- growing rapidly
- less tolerant of heat and cold
- children develop at different rates
- coaches may have both early and late developers in any group

Coaches should:

- plan a variety of activities
- allow time to learn skills
- cater for varying ability levels
- be aware that growth periods will alter the child's coordination and skills
- ensure children wear adequate clothing, drink enough fluids

Children's personality characteristics

- easily motivated
- wide range of reasons for playing sport
- sensitive to criticism and failure
- short attention span

Coaches should:

- listen to what the children say
- be positive, compliment effort and the parts of the skill that were performed correctly
- maintain interest with a variety of activities, maximum participation and limited talk

The ideal coaching session for young people will last between 45 to 75 minutes, depending on the age of the athletes.

How to motivate young people

Understanding what motivates people, especially young people, to be involved in sport will help the coach provide a fun, enjoyable and supportive training environment.

What motivates young people to play sport?

Young people are motivated to participate in sport for a variety of reasons. These include ego, pride, fear of failure, the challenge of competition, a desire and determination to succeed, the feeling of achievement from perfecting a skill and acknowledgement from peers, coaches and family.

Research has shown that young people highly value the intrinsic rewards gained from participating in sport. Rewards such as the of learning a new skill, or merely being involved in sport with their friends, mean more for young athletes than the extrinsic rewards of receiving trophies or prizes.

Ways to motivate

Recognise achievement

Recognition of effort, especially when it comes from someone such as a coach, parent or senior player, is a significant factor in motivation. Ensure that you recognise athletes' achievements in a variety of areas, not just performance (for example, recognise regular attendance at training). Strategies can range from a simple “well done” or a pat on the back to using incentive schemes.

Set goals

Success or failure should not be determined by the scoreboard, nor by the number of competitions won. Provide opportunities for all athletes to experience success by setting short and long term goals for the individual and the team. Examples of goals include trying to achieve a certain score in a game, or a personal best performance, or getting to training on time! Make sure you recognise when goals are achieved.

Provide leadership opportunities

Providing opportunities for leadership and expecting athletes to assume responsibilities are very important. The responsibilities should start off small and may increase over time. Acknowledging efforts through leadership motivates further success. Examples of leadership opportunities may include asking a player to demonstrate a skill, or being the team captain for the week.

Be consistent and enthusiastic

Young people are often heard to say 'I hope the coach is in a good mood today'. This indicates that the mood of the coach affects how young people enjoy their sport. The environment a coach creates, what they say and how they say it, should be consistent, caring and enthusiastic.

Provide challenges

Small sided games allow for maximum participation by young people and therefore provide greater enjoyment. Team composition may be regularly rotated to match ability and ensure competition is even.

Vary your practice programs

A variety of practice routines and activities will reduce the possibility of boredom. Challenging young participants to invent a game to practice a particular skill can also be very successful.

Be organised

A carefully planned session increases the coach's confidence and this effort will rub off and help motivate players. Make sure there is enough equipment available for the number of participants involved. Waiting in long lines, or watching the more talented athletes dominate the equipment can lead to boredom and disruptive behaviour.

Make practice fun

Most young people take part in sport for enjoyment and fun. Ensuring that they have fun encourages them to maintain their involvement. Try modifying the rules of your sport to ensure laughter – for example a game of touch football where the players can only walk, using the non-preferred hand, or dog paddle relays in a swim session. Don't ignore the contribution a few laughs can have on motivational levels.

Summary

A variety of factors motivate young people to play sport. Identifying these factors will assist you as a coach.

Remember to:

- recognise achievement
- set goals
- provide leadership opportunities
- be consistent and enthusiastic
- provide challenges
- vary your practice programs
- be organised, and
- make practice fun.

Tips for managing behaviour

- Ensure that participants, parents and administrators are aware of the expected codes behaviour and consequences that will be applied
- Deal with the problem by focusing on the behaviour – don't get personal. Do not publicly insult or embarrass the participant.
- Avoid punishing a group for the poor behaviour of one participant.
- Take a firm, fair consistent approach to managing behaviour. Apply consequences quickly and fairly. It may be necessary to exclude an individual from an activity. The exclusion should be brief and the coach should discuss the incident privately with the individual while they are excluded.
- Avoid punitive consequences. Instead, require the offender to compensate and/or retribute the situation caused by the poor behaviour.
- Avoid using punishments such as running laps or push-ups
- Use rewards, praise and acknowledgment to reinforce desired behaviours.

Strategies for dealing with inappropriate behaviour

Initially, quietly correct the child's behaviour:

- children, even young ones, know that there are rules of behaviour that are considered acceptable. Just drawing the child's attention to the fact that they have been noticed is usually enough to get them to change their behaviour
- do this as soon as possible after the inappropriate behaviour occurs
- alternatively, use non-verbal cues where possible — move closer, nod, frown slightly or stare
- join in and partner the problem child, without commenting
- divert their attention by asking a question: 'John, how is that shot coming along?', 'Sarah, can you organise this activity with your group, please?'
- praise a good aspect of their involvement
- ask them if they are having difficulty
- remind them of the group rules and appropriate behaviour (privately)
- address the behaviour, not the character, of the child - 'That's a silly thing to do, Matthew', not 'You are silly Matthew'
- find out why they are misbehaving and ask if it is helpful to the group (privately).

If the behaviour is not corrected, then relate the problem back to group rules:

- the coach might ask the child, 'What are you doing? Is this against our rules?' then ask what they should be doing
- politely ask the child to change their behaviour, reminding them of the consequence if they do not.

If the inappropriate behaviour continues:

- politely and calmly issue the consequence, or loss of privileges
- be respectful but firm and specific
- do not use punishment, blame, shame, pain, ignoring or sarcasm
- be consistent
- be brief — do not nag, lecture or interrogate
- remain calm — do not show anger, keep a 'cool head'
- forgive and forget

One way of dealing with inappropriate behaviour is to withdraw the child from the activity:

- place the child in 'time out' for a period before inviting them to rejoin the group. Rejoining the group occurs only if the child agrees to abide by the team rules
- the 'time out' area should be somewhere away from other children but still located close enough so that the coach is able to supervise the child
- on the child's return, find an early opportunity to praise them or involve them in leading a group
- be patient as some inappropriate behaviour may need time to correct.

Modified sport and appropriate training

Many sports have recognised that the needs and abilities of children are different from that of adults and have developed modified sports.

Successful modifications to sports include:

- size of equipment
- playing area and goals
- duration of games
- team sizes and interchanges.

These modified games use equipment that better suits the size and ability of the children, smaller playing areas, goals that are smaller or lower, smaller teams and/or more interchanges.

Working with parents

Sport participation should be enjoyable for all concerned. Sport leaders such as coaches, officials and managers should feel fulfilled and recognised for their contributions. Participants should enjoy ongoing challenge and fun with healthy interactions amongst peers and others in the sporting landscape. Parents / guardians should gain happiness and deep satisfaction as the major drivers and supporters of child and youth sport participation. However, the reality is not always this way.

For example, coaches regularly cite 'working with parents' as the most challenging aspect of their work. This is the case at all levels of sport (with the exception that player managers at the higher levels of professional sport)! Young people often mention parental behaviour as a major factor in their discontinuation in sport.

Of course, the exact nature of parental engagement varies widely amongst families and depending on the stage of youth participation. It is the middle years (13–18) where conflict can commonly arise between the parents and coach as transitions between sporting goals are negotiated. Typically, this is the phase where the young person begins to specialise and become more committed to training and competition. It is also often a time where parental support moves from early instruction and hands-on involvement to being more about transport and time management (with the coach taking over many skill development aspects).

Understanding and valuing the role each person plays in the development of the young person is necessary for effective communication and hence the relationships between interested parties.

Research suggests providing a rationale for coaching decisions makes them more meaningful for the listener (e.g. parent/athlete), subsequently increasing the likelihood that they will be taken on board. This approach can also help shift the focus to the goals of the activity rather than the outcomes (often a source of tension).

Possible actions

Set expectations

- There are many common sources of tension between parents and coaches such as 'game time' (i.e. the amount of time their child is part of the event compared with others on the team) and the allocation of roles / positions (e.g. striker in football, bowling and batting orders in cricket, center and midfield positions in basketball and AFL).
- In most cases, tension can be minimised or removed by coaches being explicit about how training and competitions will be run.
- Could you include parents in team addresses at the beginning of your time together so that everyone knows what is expected?
- Some coaches even have this as a regular feature at the start of each training session and game. Parents are then clear about what is expected.

Make use of parental resources

- Not all parents want to be involved (and of course this can be a source of frustration for coaches too).
- But for those who want to be involved, can you delegate meaningful tasks (not just trivial bits) to the parents of your players?
- Some coaches provide suitable parents with a framework or plan and let them run the warm-up.
- Parents might assist in managing equipment. Perhaps certain parents could take some statistics from the game that support your coaching approach (e.g. how many touches of the ball each player has, how long on the court a player is in a certain position, how many events each athlete competes in, how much of the session players are active vs listening vs waiting).

Inform yourself

- Do you know the guidelines and policy documents from your sport about the conduct of junior training and competitions?
- Perhaps you can talk to other coaches and parents regarding how you are going and what approaches others use?

Final thought

What should be kept in mind, is that almost universally, no matter what the extent of poor behaviour, parents want the best for their children. Troublingly, at times some parents do not have the right skills to constructively deal with any feelings of confusion, anger or embarrassment they may be experiencing in relation to their child's involvement in sport. This can lead to clashes and outbursts that impact greatly on coaches and most importantly, children. By being proactive and seeking positive engagements with parents there is a greater likelihood that everyone (coaches, parents, officials, and young people) will enjoy their time in sport.

Coaching your own children

Australian sport is founded on the goodwill of volunteers. As a result, adults often find themselves in situations where they have to make a choice - whether or not to coach their own child. Generously, many put up their hand to do this rather complex, challenging and often thankless job.

The good

Fortunately, it is possible to successfully coach your own child! And when done well, there are potential benefits for both the child and the adult.

Children who have been coached by their parent have reported that they enjoy improved closeness through increased praise (e.g. “she points out my good plays”), involvement in decisions about training and games (e.g. “he asks for my input”), and simply greater amounts of quality time spent together (e.g. “I get to hang out with her more”). Of course, there’s the added perk of never being late for training if your parent is the coach! For parents too, when things are going well there are tremendous positives such as increased levels of pride (e.g. “I get to watch my son grow”), improved social interactions (e.g. “I get to know all of the other children and parents”), and the notion of quality time together (e.g. “sport provides us with special time for her and I”).

The bad

Unfortunately, coaching your own child is also laden with potential traps and pitfalls. Children who have been coached by their parents have also reported times of conflict (e.g. “she doesn’t like it when I talk back”), unfair behaviour (e.g. “he treats me harsher than my teammates” OR “he goes easier on me and my teammates notice”), increased expectations (e.g. “she notices when I’m not doing my best”) and an overall lack of understanding (e.g. “he doesn’t listen to me”). Parents who coach their own child have spoken about difficulties in separating the roles of coach and parent (e.g. “I find myself carrying over coaching conversations to home life”), dealing with rebellious behaviour (e.g. “my daughter objects to everything I do at training”), time issues (e.g. “time pressure with work means I’m tired and grumpy by the end of the season”), and knowing that they treat their child differently (e.g. “I know I’m harder on my daughter but I want to avoid perceptions of favouritism”).

The balance

‘Balance’ appears to be key to whether or not the situation works!

First, be aware that you are wearing two hats – parent and coach. Both child and parent should be clear about what it means when the coaching hat is on

(e.g. the child will be treated like everyone else on the field) and when the parent hat comes back on (e.g. they are an important part of a loving family).

Second, be sensitive to favouring or harshly treating your child. Your child should have to earn their place but should not be made to work harder than anyone else to secure it. Getting feedback from your child, other team mates and parents about what is going well and what is not can be valuable in maintaining this balance.

Third, no matter what, you should have other shared interests. By having other family activities and special times together, parent-coaches can avoid sports overload with their child.

Questions you might ask yourself (and your child) prior to becoming their coach:

- What does my child think of me coaching them?
- How well can I separate the roles of parent and coach?
- In what ways might I treat my child differently to the other team members?
- How will others react to me coaching my child (e.g. team mates, parents)
- What are the other parts of my life that I spend quality time with my child?

Final thought

As a general rule, coaching your own child tends to work better when they are younger (and more open to parent feedback). Having said that, no family circumstance is the same so it is important for everyone to make up their own minds about the key issues in coaching your own child. No matter what, this time in your life will pass by very quickly so no matter your decision, enjoy the time spent in sport.