

COACHING YOUNG PEOPLE IN FOOTBALL



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Reading through this chapter will help you to:

- Introduce the concept of child development as it pertains to the playing of sport and, in particular, Association Football
- Consider aspects related to effective and safe football coaching sessions for a variety of ages and abilities, covering the breadth of the sport at this level
- Provide guidance on the promotion of safe practice and the prevention of overuse injuries

Physical Development and Young Players

Children grow at different rates and, in a group of 12-year-olds, some players might be significantly taller or heavier than others. Such differences will influence each child's capability to develop football techniques and skills.

For example, the onset of puberty in boys and girls aged between 11 and 13 might create coordination difficulties as their arms and legs grow disproportionately long. As a consequence, some young players appear to become clumsy and ungainly.

The differences in physical maturity can vary by as much as four years within children of the same age. These differences are particularly noticeable in football because of the emphasis on age groupings (eg under-10s, under-12s) and the reliance on fixed dates to determine age-group eligibility.

Wherever possible, coaches should organise groups and practices to take account of ability and size differences among young players of similar ages. For some practices, young players might be grouped by ability (eg when developing turning and dribbling techniques), whereas tackling and heading practices might be better grouped by size.

Physical Development Characteristics Among Young Players

When coaching children between the ages of 6 and 12, coaches might notice that:

- Growth spurts bring increases in height and weight, and changes in body shape
- In boys, the growth spurt can begin as early as 12, though it normally reaches a peak at the age of 14
- In girls, the growth spurt can start earlier (10–11) and normally peaks at the age of 12
- Between the ages of 6 and 10, boys and girls show gradual increases in height and weight, and there is little physical difference between them - though boys might tend to be taller
- Children who mature early have a greater proportion of fat in their bodies than those who mature more slowly
- Early maturers often show initial advances in performance, but this might not continue, as later maturers catch up during adolescence
- Taller and heavier children in the 9–12 age range (early maturers) tend to stop growing earlier and are likely to become shorter, more heavily built adults
- Children who mature later and have a leaner build become taller, thinner adults

Before puberty, boys and girls can play together effectively and safely, but as boys reach physical maturity, their bulk and strength might give them a considerable physical advantage over most girls of the same age or size.

Strength and Flexibility

Because of the immaturity of the skeleton, nervous system and muscles, young players who have not reached adolescence (6–12) should not be subjected to intensive or maximal strength training. Using bodyweight exercises (eg sit-ups, press-ups) with 10–12 year-olds might help to improve blood supply to the developing muscles, but technical development is still the primary consideration for these players. Under no circumstances should weight-training equipment be used with these young players.

In growing children, the growth areas at the end of long bones (such as those in the upper and lower leg) and around joints can be damaged by excessive stress and strain, and growth can be impaired.

The evidence (that children can demonstrate a range of movement beyond the capability of most adults) shows that flexibility needs to be maintained as they grow older. After the age of 10, children begin to lose flexibility. Used in warm-up and cool-down periods, stretching and mobility exercises can help maintain this flexibility. These stretching exercises should be slow and under the control of the young player.

Before undertaking stretching exercises to develop or maintain flexibility, it is important for the muscles to be warm - general body-mobility activities are useful to prepare for stretching. While flexibility is defined as the range of movement around a joint (eg the shoulder or hips), mobility is concerned with a player's general ability to coordinate forward, backward and sideways body movements.

For example, arm circles are mobility, rather than flexibility, exercises, whereas upper-leg stretches should promote better flexibility around the hip joint. Increases in flexibility around the hips should improve a player's general mobility in that part of the body, allowing her to twist and turn more effectively.

Stretching

Regular stretching with young players will maintain and improve their flexibility and help to prevent injuries.

To improve flexibility through stretching, football coaches should ensure players:

- Undertake a general body warm-up and mobility exercises before starting a stretching routine
- Take particular care to stretch the muscles that are involved in football (eg around the back and hips, upper and lower legs, knees and ankles)
- Use static, not ballistic (bouncy), stretching (ie ease into each stretch to a point of mild tension and then hold for 15 seconds) - pain is a sign of overstretching
- Keep stretching within their own control - no external forces should be applied (ie by other players or the coach)

Static or dynamic stretching is the key to improved flexibility in young players. Static stretching involves a slow, sustained movement, in which a muscle is lengthened and then held in position for 15-20 seconds. Each stretch should be repeated 2-3 times, and stretching should form part of a regular warm-up and cool-down routine.

Players might use the same stretches for their warm-up and cool-down, but should hold stretches for longer during the cool-down (as long as the muscle is not damaged or torn).

Young Players and Exercise

As children start to play football and other sports, their need for energy grows. To meet this need, oxygen supply to the blood and blood supply to the muscles must improve.

Children breathe more quickly but less deeply than adults, and extract oxygen less effectively. Because of this, young children (6-12 years) must work harder than adolescents or adults to provide the oxygen their muscles require when playing football.

Physical Training

Aerobic energy is the term used when oxygen is the main energy source for the body. For example, marathon runners need a highly developed aerobic energy system. In football, all players rely on oxygen as a major source of energy, as it enables them to maintain constant activity. Before adolescence, children get a higher proportion of their energy from the aerobic energy system than adults.

Moderate continuous exercise (eg small-sided games) can improve young players' aerobic energy systems and enable them to sustain longer periods of activity before fatigue sets in.

However, this improvement is governed by each child's physiological maturity; only after puberty will children become more efficient in their use of aerobic energy. After puberty, boys normally have a higher aerobic capacity than girls.

Coaching sessions should last between 45 and 60 minutes for children below the age of 12, and approximately 90 minutes with older children (12-15 years). Within sessions, periods of long physical activity (eg small-sided games) should last no longer than 25-35 minutes and should still allow sufficient time for drinks and recovery periods.

Below the age of 12, players should play and practise for no more than three football sessions per week (eg two practice sessions and one game), with the emphasis on personal development, not team success.

Young Players and Exercise

Football coaches should remember that:

- Children do not tolerate exercise as well as adults and are less aware of their limitations
- Because children breathe more often than adults, they lose more water through their breath
- Children are more susceptible to heat loss and gain
- Before puberty, children get a higher proportion of energy from the aerobic energy system, but less efficiently than adults
- Until the age of 10-12, boys and girls do not differ significantly in aerobic efficiency
- After puberty, boys generally have a higher aerobic capacity than girls
- Young children (6-10 years) work better at low intensity continuous exercise (up to 30-40 minutes' duration)

For young female players, the onset of puberty normally occurs in advance of boys, between the ages of 11 and 13, and incorporates the onset of the menstrual cycle (see Chapter 10). The menses phase (menstruation) might cause abdominal pains, general discomfort and tiredness, but should not have any negative effect on exercise capability. The psychological impact of the menses phase might be more significant, causing increased shyness and embarrassment, noticeable mood changes and self-conscious behaviours (eg covering the body with more clothing).

Coaches need to be sensitive to the onset of pubertal changes in boys and girls, and seek to be supportive and avoid confrontation or treating the consequences light-heartedly. It is a serious period of life for young people, who are coming to terms with rapid physical, emotional and social developments.

Overplaying and Overuse Injuries

Overplaying is a constant problem facing the more able young players who might be involved with football in schools, junior clubs, district and county squads, Centres of Excellence or academies. Examples of overplaying are common. For instance, it was recently disclosed that a 27-year-old Premier League and England international player retired through recurrent injury caused by playing over 160 games per year as a teenager.

An audit of Centres of Excellence by

The FA's Medical Division in 1992 revealed that 70% of 12-13-year-old footballers in the centres were involved in 15-34 practice sessions or games during one month. As a coach, you can make an important contribution by asking players to record their weekly involvement in football, and adjust your demands to take account of this involvement.

Overuse Injuries

An overuse injury is caused by repetitive demands being made on a muscle, joint or tendon, without sufficient time being allowed for the body part to recover or repair itself. Young players, particularly the most talented, are being asked to play or train with increasing regularity and intensity, and this places a strain on the developing body, leading to overuse injuries.

The term 'growing pain' is often used to describe symptoms of overuse injuries to the lower back, knee, hip, shin and ankle/heel. These are sites where bone growth and maturity are often ahead of the development of tendons, ligaments and muscles, and this causes stress to the joints or skeletal attachments. This imbalance is particularly evident during the major growth spurt between 11 and 15 years of age, when young players are most susceptible to injury and more likely to experience increased physical involvement in football activities.

Recognition of Overuse Injury - Signs and Symptoms

- Problem usually comes on gradually and continues while the player continues to train and play
- Main symptoms are aching, discomfort or pain in the area of the problem
- Pain when particular movement is performed
- No history of 'direct' injury
- Player may complain of stiffness/aching during or after training or competition
- It takes several hours/days for player to become 'pain-free' following training/match
- Player may demonstrate tenderness to touch or pressure in the affected area
- Visible swelling may be present in the case of overuse injury affecting the knee or heel area
- Player shows history of missing training sessions or matches due to injury
- Problem does not go away. It will get progressively worse with continued activity

If a young player shows some of the signs and symptoms of an overuse injury, you should guide her to seek medical advice and then check at a later date to see what action has been taken.

Psychological Development and Young Players

There are two key aspects of a young player's development that relate to how psychological processes change during childhood. The first concerns a player's social development alongside other players, and the second involves her effectiveness at processing information and making decisions.

Adult coaches often assume that football helps children to learn to work together and develop positive attitudes to fair play. However, young players might perceive things differently. For some, football might provide the opportunity to play with friends; for others, it provides a form of competition where they can compare themselves with other children. A major challenge for coaches of young players (6-12 years) is to find out what they want from football and to blend the need to satisfy these demands with skill development.

Expectations and Motivations of Young Players

As children grow older, they develop a more sophisticated picture of themselves, as well as of others. Younger children (6-9 years) think of themselves as the centre of attention, whereas adolescents are concerned with the opinions of others and are prepared to devote more time to other people around them.

6-9 years

At 6-9 years, children are self-centred and their physical characteristics or capabilities (eg small, big, fast, strong) initially define how they feel about themselves. How often have you heard a young player exclaim 'I can do that, watch me' after one successful attempt at a new technique?

Such a one-off performance is seen as evidence of competence by a 6-9 year old player. Trying hard is also an indication of success. Only when they get older (10-12 years) are young players able to compare their ability with that of other players.

During these early years, children will have a small circle of close friends, though other children will become more significant as they begin to compare their performances to see 'who is best'. The notion of being better than someone else is usually built around external results and approval (eg 'I scored more goals than you did!').

Age is a significant reference point at 6-9 years, as young players are likely to be influenced by how old other players are. For instance, if you are under-8, it is a big deal to play with the under-9s or against someone who is a year older. In addition, children at this age indulge in make-believe and act out a role (eg association with a favourite footballer - 'I'll be Ryan Giggs today').

10–12 years

The influence of other children becomes stronger as players grow older. At 10–12 years, young players build a wider circle of social contacts and might take part in a sport because their friends do it. For boys, in particular, being involved in, or good at, football is an important way of gaining social acceptance with their peers.

Players at 10–12 years are less self-centred and more able to work together. They are also able to distinguish between effort and ability, realising that trying harder might not always lead to success and that some players don't have to try as hard as others to succeed at a particular task.

These distinctions are an indication that young players are able to make more independent judgements, based on perceptions of their own competence (rather than on external standards, such as goals scored). They are becoming more self-critical, and they gain or lose self-confidence through these changing perceptions.

Decision Making and Young Players

As children grow older, they are able to make better use of information they receive from a wide range of sources. When playing football, players of all ages are bombarded with information from the changing positions of other players, their own position on the field, calls from coaches, teammates and opponents, the feel of the playing surface, and their own body's feelings and emotions.

Developing skill in football is not a product of learning a range of techniques, but occurs when these techniques are used in the right place at the right time. Deciding which information to use and which is irrelevant is an important feature of skill learning.

6–7 years

You have read that 6-7-year-old players are very self-centred and this can be observed when they play football. At this age, they focus their attention on a small number of cues, which is evident when they tend to follow the ball around the pitch and want to keep possession whenever they get hold of the ball. Making a deliberate decision to pass the ball is a rarity, and when their team is not in possession of the ball, they will stand and watch, or run after it.

This reluctance to pass the ball is natural and you should help them to gain only a basic understanding of attack and defence, perhaps through activities that involve invading or defending territories.

Small-sided games and fun-based technical practice are important for these players, but don't expect them to be able to tell you why they decided when to shoot, run with, dribble or pass the ball.

With 6-7-year-olds, coaches should provide a varied range of activities and help young players identify parts of the body that are most important to use. For example, a turn or dribble can be developed by referring to the use of 'big toes' and 'little toes' in manipulating the ball.

8–10 years

The 8–10 year old players try to attend to too many sources of information at any one time and have only a limited store of previous experience to help decide which information is relevant or irrelevant. The players will still tend to focus on the ball and seek to run with the ball towards the opponent's goal or territory.

With this age group, coaches should help young players by guiding their attention towards the most important cues and organise small-sided games that restrict the range of information available. By reducing the number of players, changing the size of the pitch and setting a specific task, the young players are helped to select the relevant information.

Coaches of 8-10-year-old players should provide practices that begin to encourage more cooperation between players and develop the concepts of attacking and defending as a small-sided team. When not in possession, teammates will go to help the player with the ball and opponents will kick the ball away or retreat to defend a goal or territory.

Using the whole-part-whole approach will help players to integrate isolated technical work into a game-related situation. This is a good age to promote running with the ball, turning and dribbling techniques, and to encourage their use in small-sided games (3 v 3, 4 v 4).

11–14 years

At 11–14, young players are capable of using previous experiences to make decisions about which information is relevant (eg when to run, dribble or pass). Games involving 11–14-year-old players can take more shape in attack and defence, and concepts such as depth and width are better understood.

They are more effective at switching attention from one relevant source to another (eg watching the movement of players, not always looking at the ball). However, this selective attention is still basic and coaches should continue to guide players by providing problem-solving practices (eg 3 v 2).

When in possession, players are more comfortable with controlling the ball at their feet and can explain their decision making more clearly (eg 'What prompted you to shoot, rather than to pass?'). The use of space improves so, when not in possession, teammates will move away from the ball and be prepared to pass backwards and sideways to exploit other spaces. Opponents will seek to win possession in a challenge and intercept and block with more consistency.

The use of 5 v 5 and 6 v 6 small-sided games promotes more advanced decision making, and the refinement of passing, control and shooting techniques should be encouraged. Heading should be introduced and goalkeepers should begin to communicate with other players more effectively.

Adapting the Game

The use of small-sided games and the whole-part-whole approach are to be encouraged with 6–12 year old players. These forms of activity will enable young players to develop an understanding of the skills of the game of football, but at a level that is appropriate for them. The FA recommends that 11 v 11 games are not introduced until players are over the age of 12.

The use of 2 v 2, 3 v 3 and 4 v 4 games encourages active participation and is valuable in helping young players to develop decision-making skills. This decision making can be made more or less demanding by altering the:

- Number of players involved
- Size of the playing area
- Nature of the game (eg restriction to three touches per player)

Larger playing areas with fewer players encourage the development of techniques such as dribbling, running with the ball and long passing. In smaller spaces (eg 20m x 20m), a 3 v 3 game might be used to develop turning, close control or screening.

Ball sizes three and four should be used with 6–8 and 9–10-year-olds respectively, and progression to size five should be made by age 12. However, smaller players at the older ages might still benefit from playing with a smaller-sized ball. Sponge balls can be used to introduce heading.

Summary

This chapter has introduced you to developmental processes in young players that influence how they respond to exercise, and how they learn football skills and techniques. In addition, you should now be able to:

- Identify mental and social changes in growing children, and how these changes influence the development of football skills
- Adapt football activities to meet the capabilities and needs of young players (6–14 years) and avoid overuse injuries

Further Reading

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