



# Beyond Performance: Guidelines to Create Holistic Talent Development Environments

Intellectual Output 2 of Erasmus+ Project: ICOACHKIDS+

## Authors:

Barnaby Sargent Megicks  
Prof. Sergio Lara-Bercial  
Prof. Kevin Till  
Dr Fieke Rongen



Co-funded by the  
Erasmus+ Programme  
of the European Union



## Project Partners:



ICOACHKIDS.ORG



ICOACHKIDSWORLD



@ICOACHKIDSWORLD



ICOACHKIDSWORLD



/ICOACHKIDSWORLD

© 2023 ICOACHKIDS

# Contents

<b>Executive Summary</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>The Talent Landscape</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Principles of Good Practice</b>	<b>6</b>
A Holistic Philosophy of Athlete Development	8
Stakeholder Alignment and Support	10
A Climate of Care	14
A Long-Term Learning and Development Focus	17
Appropriate Challenge	19
Integrated Life Skill Development	22
<b>Conclusions</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>References and Further Reading</b>	<b>26</b>



# Executive Summary

Modern day high-performance sport is arguably more competitive than ever before. National teams, clubs and sport programmes therefore focus on identifying talented athletes and developing them into the sporting superstars of tomorrow through structured talent systems and tailored talent development environments (TDEs).

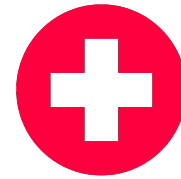
Recently, however, concerns have been raised over the short and long-term physical, psychological and social impact on young athletes participating in the talent development process.

## There are two main areas of concern...



### Developmental Sacrifice

Talent development is time exhaustive and may result in a sacrifice of social and/or educational experiences ordinarily experienced by young people.



### Negative Health Impact

Talent development is physically, psychologically and socially demanding and may impact on the health and wellbeing of young athletes as they progress towards elite levels.

For this reason, the International Olympic Committee have put forth a consensus statement that promotes the safe and balanced development of all young athletes.

**“The goal is clear: develop healthy, capable and resilient young athletes, while attaining widespread, inclusive, sustainable and enjoyable participation and success for all levels of individual athletic achievement” – Bergeron et al. (2015)**

This executive summary presents the findings of two studies conducted as part of ICK+ to examine good practice in TDEs across Europe, and explores in detail how they create the conditions for holistic development.

## What is Holistic Talent Development?

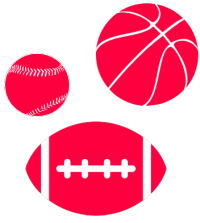
There is a lack of consensus around what holistic development is. We examined existing research and policy documents and arrived at the below definition:

**Holistic development is an overarching philosophical approach to athletic talent development that aims to develop young athletes in three interrelated domains:**

**Athletic Skills**

**Health and Wellbeing**

**Life Readiness**



## Athletic Skills

The development of the skills and characteristics (i.e., technical, tactical, physical, psychosocial) needed to progress towards higher levels of athletic performance and competition.



## Health and Wellbeing

The promotion, development, safeguarding and maintenance of physical, mental and social health and wellbeing.



## Life Readiness

The development and application of attitudes and skills required to succeed in and outside of sport, now and in the future.

## 6 Principles of Holistic Development in TDEs

Using the definition above as a reference point, we researched exemplar TDEs and developed 6 good practice principles that contribute to holistic development. These principles are optimal and aspirational 'ways of working' for coaches and staff to adopt or adapt into their current environment.

### #1 A holistic philosophy of athlete development



Adopt a person-first philosophy.  
(Re)Define 'success' holistically.  
Champion individuality and inclusion.

### #2 Stakeholder alignment and support



Proactively and positively engage everyone involved.  
Create an interdisciplinary culture.

### #3 A climate of care



Promote and support positive mental health.  
Amplify the athlete's voice.

### #4 A long-term learning and development focus



Conduct long-term planning.  
Collaborate on goal setting.

### #5 Appropriate challenge



Create stretch points consistently.  
Foster striving, surviving and thriving competences.  
Provide individualised and timely support.

### #6 Integrated life skill development



Facilitate interpersonal growth.  
Foster life skill transfer.

Holistic development is an overarching approach to talent development that optimises athletic skills, health and wellbeing, and life skills for the long-term sporting and life success of young athletes in TDEs and beyond.

The guidelines provide practical direction to create holistic TDEs. Ultimately, the success of applying the 6 principles relies on the deliberate and collaborative pursuit of holistic development by all stakeholders in the TDE.

## Recommendations

Considering the research findings, there are some practical recommendations stakeholders can follow to ensure everyone works towards the same holistic development goal.

### Federations and NGBs

Implement and promote a holistic development philosophy into talent development policy.

Evaluate TDEs and coaches/support staff effectiveness based on holistic development not just athletic skill development.

Provide coach/support staff professional development opportunities in holistic development.

### Clubs and Schools

Promote holistic development in coach expectations/standards.

Champion positive physical, mental and social health across the club at all levels.

Allow coaches and support staff to regularly collaborate and learn from each other.

Promote positive interactions amongst all club stakeholders.

### Coaches and Support Staff

Align planning and daily practice with a holistic development philosophy.

Use planned and unplanned opportunities to promote life skills and health and wellbeing when coaching.

Proactively work with parents as a valued relationship and as an asset to athlete development.

### Parents

See athlete development as a long-term process that requires balance across an athlete's life.

Work with coaches and support staff positively as a team to support your child.

See competition as one part of learning in the long-term development process.

## Where to next?

If you wish to know more about how to create holistic TDEs, we would love you to complete our brand new FREE e-learning course "Developing Effective Talent Development Environments". Click [HERE](#) to access our e-learning platform.



ICOACHKIDS+ is an Erasmus+ Sport co-funded project part of the overall activities of the ICOACHKIDS Global Movement. It aims to enhance sport participation and maximise sport's health enhancing properties for children aged 13-18.

**Disclaimer:** The European Commission support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents, which reflect the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use, which may be made of the information contained therein.

# INTRODUCTION

## The ICOACHKIDS Global Movement and ICOACHKIDS+

ICOACHKIDS is a non-profit global movement which champions sport education, policy and practice that PUTS KIDS FIRST.

The movement was born out of the success of the original ICOACHKIDS Erasmus+ project (2016- 2019). This initiative was an international, collaborative, multi-agency effort aiming to support the development of a Specialist Youth Sport Coaching Workforce across the European Union. The ultimate goal was to make sure all youth sport participants are inspired to stay in sport for life through positive experiences led by suitably trained coaches.

The success of the original project attracted attention and interest from non-EU nations, International Sports Federations and Global players in health and industry. ICOACHKIDS continues to harness this global interest and momentum for the development of a global sport system that provides a safe and supportive environment for children everywhere.

ICOACHKIDS originally focused on children from 5 to 12 years of age. However, it soon became clear that coaches and organisations were also eager to receive information and resources related to young sportspeople of 13 to 18 years. ICOACHKIDS+ responds to this need for a greater understanding around the key issues relevant to sport during the teenage years.

A three-year (2020-2022) Erasmus+ co-funded project, ICOACHKIDS+ focuses on two key issues in youth sport – dropout and talent development – and aims to achieve the following objectives:

- Enhance participation in sport and decrease dropout for children aged 13-18 (especially in girls).
- Maximise the health enhancing properties of sport participation.
- Take full advantage of the potential of sport as tool for positive youth development.

In order to achieve these objectives, ICOACHKIDS+ is conducting the following project activities:

- Research adolescent sport participation trends across Europe .
- Research motivations and barriers for sport engagement in European adolescents .
- Review talent identification and development literature to enhance our understanding of what holistic and effective talent development environments look like.
- Research exemplary youth sport environments across Europe to identify best practices and create guidelines to support coaches, clubs and governing bodies of sport promote personal and social development through sport.
- Develop two Massive Online Open Courses (MOOCs) and accompanying study guides and infographics for coaches on the topics of dropout and talent development.
- Create the ICOACHKIDS+ Online Platform to host the MOOCs and serve as a hub and repository of information for the European community of youth sport coaches.

## ICOACHKIDS+ Research on Holistic Talent Development Environments

This report presents the findings of a systematic literature review and two empirical studies examining TDEs in Europe conducted as a part of ICOACHKIDS+. In the first study (Sargent Megicks et al., 2023) over 1,400 athletes, parents and coaches across five countries and twenty seven sports responded to the Talent Development Environment Questionnaire (TDEQ-5; Li et al., 2015). This study, the largest study of TDEs to date, examined the perceived quality of these environments by the different stakeholders. The second study explored holistic development practice in six exemplary TDEs. Twenty-three interviews with managers, directors, coaches and multi-disciplinary support staff were carried out. These clubs and programmes were nationally and internationally recognised TDEs with a proven track record of applying a holistic development approach to talent development. These projects have been used to inform the six good practice principles that are described in this report.

This report is written as a guide for those working in talent development education, policy and practice such as National Governing Bodies, Federations, Directors, Managers, Coach Educators, and Coaches in TDEs. It is designed to provide readers with information about how TDEs can be designed and/or adapted to create holistic development outcomes. The report may be used to inform policy, as a tool to guide evaluations of good practice, or as a formative resource for those in TDEs.

We hope you find it useful. Best of luck supporting young athletes along their journey.

The ICK+ Partners  
©ICOACHKIDS 2023

Report authored by:

Barnaby Sargent Megicks  
Prof. Sergio Lara-Bercial  
Prof. Kevin Till  
Dr Fieke Rongen

## THE TALENT LANDSCAPE

Modern-day high-performance sport is arguably more competitive than ever before. National teams, clubs and sport programmes therefore often focus on identifying talented young athletes and developing them into the sporting superstars of tomorrow through purpose-built talent systems. These systems house talent development environments (TDEs), which provide enhanced resources and expertise to selected young athletes.

The talent development process is a high-stakes endeavour, requiring large commitment by young athletes, their families and those working in TDEs. Yet, few athletes will make it to the highest levels of their sport. To progress through the talent system, young athletes need to actively engage in training and development processes, often over a sustained period of time to meet the required performance levels in their sport and this can be physically, psychologically and socially demanding. Many young athletes will enter the TDE and leave (or be de-selected) after a certain period. A few will continue to progress and make it to the next level. All of them will have committed a great deal of time, effort and resource.

A talent development environment is a live and evolving physical and social ecosystem, made up of a network of people (e.g., coaches, parents, peers) and resources, policies and practices which interact with an athlete's current ability and potential, to impact their future development.

For all young athletes, there are two main concerns with participating in the talent development process:

1. **Developmental Sacrifice - Talent development is time exhaustive and may result in a sacrifice of social and/or educational experiences ordinarily experienced by all other young people.**
2. **Negative Health Impact - Talent development is physically, psychologically and socially demanding and may impact on the health and wellbeing of young athletes as they progress towards elite levels.**

Recognising the current talent landscape, the International Olympic Committee adopted a holistic development agenda in their athlete development recommendations advocating for environments that promote developing youth athletes' personal as well as sporting goals.







*The goal is clear: Develop healthy, capable and resilient young athletes, while attaining widespread, inclusive, sustainable and enjoyable participation and success for all levels of individual athletic achievement. (p.1).*

*Allow for a wider definition of sport success, as indicated by healthy, meaningful and varied life-forming experiences, which is centred on the whole athlete and development of the person. (p.8).*

Bergeron et al. (2015)



Adopting a holistic development approach is therefore fast becoming a priority across talent systems. The TDE is the centre of the talent development process, where tangible progress can be made by TDE leaders and coaches. This is where the six good practice principles for holistic development are focused.

#1	<b>A holistic philosophy of athlete development</b> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adopt a person-first philosophy.</li> <li>• (Re)Define 'success' holistically.</li> <li>• Champion individuality and inclusion.</li> </ul>
#2	<b>Stakeholder Alignment and Support</b> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Proactively and positively engage everyone involved.</li> <li>• Create an interdisciplinary culture.</li> </ul>
#3	<b>A Climate of Care</b> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Promote and support positive mental health.</li> <li>• Amplify the athlete's voice.</li> </ul>
#4	<b>A long-term learning and development focus</b> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conduct long-term planning.</li> <li>• Collaborate on goal setting.</li> </ul>
#5	<b>Appropriate Challenge</b> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create stretch points consistently.</li> <li>• Foster striving, surviving, and thriving competences.</li> <li>• Provide individualised and timely support.</li> </ul>
#6	<b>Integrated Life Skill Development</b> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Facilitate interpersonal growth.</li> <li>• Foster life skill transfer.</li> </ul>

# PRINCIPLE 1: A HOLISTIC PHILOSOPHY OF ATHLETE DEVELOPMENT

Creating a holistic talent development environment starts with an explicit person-first philosophy that sets out a long-term vision of athlete/person development in the TDE. This philosophy acts as a blueprint for stakeholders to work towards in their everyday actions. **The philosophy might illustrate the WHY and HOW people develop, the purpose of the environment and common stakeholder working practices.**

This philosophy could be integrated into the ‘talent development framework’ or other policy documents that are shared to guide practice in TDEs. It should be 1) explicitly visible and promoted across the TDE; 2) agreed by all stakeholders as a unified ‘way of doing things’; and 3) integrated into everyday practices by all.

Of utmost importance to a clear philosophy is an articulation of how athletes should develop in the TDE. This might reflect sporting traditions, national and regional national governing body policy, cultural norms and stakeholder values and beliefs. It will be unique to each TDE. However, a starting point to ensuring it is holistic is underpinning it with a definition of holistic development that spells out the interaction of performance and personal development as mutually beneficial of each other.

## **(Re)Defining ‘Success’ Holistically**

A holistic development approach (re)defines success in TDEs by valuing equally personal care and development and athletic growth and performance. Therefore, it is vital that TDEs are clear on how they define success as this definition guides practice, as well how the TDE might be evaluated.

Traditional TDE success may be viewed as outcome determined, wherein a successful TDE is one that produces athletes who can compete at the elite level. From this perspective, a successful TDE could still impact negatively on athletes’ health, including those who ‘make it’ and those that don’t. For example, the TDE may not prioritise the long-term success of athletes, their post-career transition to ‘regular’ life, or their mental health, yet still be deemed ‘successful’ as athletes are able to perform at the elite level for a period of time (Feddersen et al., 2021). Holistic development is a more inclusive, integrated, process-driven way to conceptualise talent development.

**A holistic TDE may thus be defined as an environment where the goal is to make a positive impact on the life of young athletes through the realisation of their athletic potential, the promotion and safeguarding of their health, and the enhancement of their preparedness for life beyond sport.**

From this perspective, those in the TDE need to be driven and held to account by the definition of success that is underpinned by holistic development. This approach must be discussed and agreed between TDE leaders, the coaching team, and all other stakeholders such as athletes, parents, and support staff.

## **Champion Individuality and Inclusion.**

Every athlete follows their own development journey and is the job of the TDE to support each athlete’s idiosyncratic pathway. Whilst it is important to have a clear philosophy to direct athlete development across the TDE, there should be flexibility to meet each athlete’s development needs. **Talent development is highly individualised, no athlete is the same as they each have their own**

**characteristics and background, which reflects what they need to continue to progress (Lara-Bercial and McKenna, 2022).** For holistic development to occur, each athlete will require the development of a blend of athletic skills, health and wellbeing and life readiness. The focus and priorities in these three domains may change at different moments in their time in the TDE according to the athletes' needs and developmental stage. Furthermore, athletes should be afforded the choice and opportunity to become the individual they want to be, within the frame of the talent system. Individuality requires not only personalised practice, but also ownership and autonomy.

Therefore, it is important that coaches know athletes as individuals and avoid treating them as a homogenous group. Fostering an individual athlete's understanding may be supported by adequate athlete-coach/staff ratios in sessions, coach/staff access to individual development plans, time before and after sessions to socialise, and even the nomination of an allocated coach in the TDE in a 'personal tutor' liaison role who could be the primary parent and school contact. All this may contribute to a TDE which is able to tend to individual needs.

Moreover, it is also important to create an atmosphere that supports autonomy and independence, empowering athletes to shape their own journeys. Investing in this as a priority early in an athlete's journey will mean they will have the psycho-social skills to capitalise on it later in their journey. Valuing player autonomy can be supported through talking to athletes about their development and progress, informally with conversations about what they want to work on and getting them to explain why, but also formally through meetings and input to their development plan. Autonomy-supportive coaching is not about giving athletes total control of their training programme, but rather about establishing a coach-athlete relationship which values athletes views and power in a collaborative way. Some practices may include: giving athletes the opportunity to shape their training/development sessions through reciprocal athlete-coach feedback and provision of choice; allowing athletes to explore different ways of doing things to learn from and using open questioning to bring about athlete self-reflection (Martindale et al., 2005).

**Finally, underpinning individuality is an environment where inclusive practice is valued, this is about creating a TDE that welcomes everyone, actively celebrates diversity and recognises and seeks to address hidden cultural biases.** This is certainly an important matter that should be prioritised at a system level (e.g., governing body or club) but there are steps TDEs can take too. Physically, psychologically and socially healthy development will also emerge when athletes feel accepted, valued and safe. Considering the potential influence a TDE can have on an athlete's life, the environment also has a societal responsibility to promote inclusivity as an important human value.

Coaches and staff can be role models for inclusivity by demonstrating, reinforcing and holding to account positive social behaviours like acceptance, respect, sensitivity and cooperation among other coaches, staff and athletes (Strachan et al., 2011). In addition to this, creating an authentic sense of belonging and mattering to the TDE may further create a culture of acceptance, this could be promoted by facilitating athlete social connections in sporting and non-sporting contexts (e.g., bonding social events) and joint goals (e.g., team targets) along with promoting autonomy (see above).

## PRINCIPLE 2: STAKEHOLDER ALIGNMENT AND SUPPORT

### Proactively and Positively Engage Everyone Involved

TDEs contain a lot of moving parts, not least the large amount of different people that work within them and their varied roles in the environment. The success of TDEs relies on the global, positive, and synergistic contribution of all these stakeholders, based on fully aligned knowledge, perceptions and behaviours (Taylor and Collins, 2021). Everyone should be working towards the same goals. Importantly, alignment of stakeholders should be not considered a passive process. TDE leaders and staff should proactively pursue it as part of their responsibilities. Alignment amongst the so-called ‘athletic triad’ (athlete, parents and coaches) is perhaps the starting point.

#### Coaches

Coaches obviously play a significant role in TDEs. Without coaches supporting athletes through the TDE, it is likely that less learning and development will occur (Lara-Bercial & McKenna, 2018). **Coaches should see their role as architects of the TDE to shape and mould it to be as conducive to holistic development as possible.** Côté and Gilbert (2009, pp. 316) offer a useful definition of coaching effectiveness relevant for coaches working in holistic talent development environments.

*The consistent application of integrated professional, interpersonal, and intrapersonal knowledge to improve athletes’ competence, confidence, connection, and character in specific coaching contexts.*

**Côté and Gilbert (2009, p. 316)**

This definition presents both a framework for coaches’ practice as well as coach assessment and evaluation towards continuous development. This definition can also help drive stakeholder alignment. For example, if promoted amongst coaches in the TDE, it provides clarity and expectation as to what their job entails thus driving consistency towards holistic development and helping coaches prioritise athletes’ needs and goals. Importantly, TDEs could – probably should - take this definition of coaching effectiveness and contextualise to the culture, traditions, and specific circumstances of their TDEs.

Let’s briefly expand on the contents of Côté and Gilbert’s definition.

1. **Coaches’ Knowledge** – Coaches require 3 types of related knowledge:
  - Professional - Academic knowledge: sport science, child development, sport-specific knowledge, or pedagogy.
  - Interpersonal - Individual and group interaction knowledge: communication and empathy.
  - Intrapersonal - Understanding of self-knowledge: introspection and reflection.
2. **Coaching Context** - Coaches must be able to consider and adapt their coaching to the context they working in. This context applies at two levels:
  - Type of activity – recreational sport or competitive/performance

- Type of athlete – age or stage of development.

**3. Athlete Outcomes** - Four universal athlete outcomes that coaches should work towards:

- Competence – ‘Sport-specific technical and tactical skills, performance skills, improved health and fitness, and healthy training habits’.
- Confidence – ‘Internal sense of overall positive self-worth’.
- Connection – ‘Positive bonds and social relationships with people inside and outside of sport’
- Character – ‘Respect for the sport and others (morality), integrity, empathy, and responsibility’.

**Côté and Gilbert (2009, p. 314)**

## Parents

Parents and wider family members are typically very invested in the development of their children as well as (naturally!) concerned for their health, wellbeing and long-term success. Sporting families invest a lot in an athlete’s development and, therefore, it can feel like there is a lot riding on it. Athletes can feel that pressure too. As such, parents can be significant enablers or disablers of holistic development. TDEs should proactively work with and support parents to reach optimal levels of alignment. This will contribute to the development of agreement between stakeholders, creating optimal boundaries of responsibility, and the sharing of congruent messages with the young athlete.

Working together productively starts with a good coach-parent relationship, and this begins with social interaction. Coaches could plan time to chat with parents informally, such as on the side-line of a game to develop rapport, learn about them and learn about their child. Acknowledging a parent’s contribution and effort towards their child’s development may demonstrate a shared purpose between them and coaches/staff. Parents may appreciate the opportunity to interact and socialise with other parents in the TDE informally with session viewing times, or even organised social events, to develop peer relationships and share experiences leading to a sense of belonging to the TDE.

TDEs should aim to develop trust in parents that what they are doing is right for their child. In the case of holistic development, the TDE should be prepared to offer a rationale for why this approach is appropriate to encourage ‘buy-in’, especially for factors not directly associated with what parents might typically believe is good practice. This process could be done in various ways such as introduction sessions at the start of the year or season, sharing of TDE policy documents, workshops or informal chats. It may help to provide positive case studies of athletes who have been successful through the TDE or pathway as tangible evidence. It may also be of value for coaches/staff to share about themselves to parents, for example, their coaching philosophy, so parents can begin to understand what the coaches aim to do and why, from a personal perspective.

**To further promote alignment, consistent messages from the TDE to the parents are important to clarify to the athlete what they should be doing or working on (Martindale et al., 2005).** Mixed messages from different stakeholders can lead to all sorts of problems, and ultimately confusion for the athlete. Take for example the TDE delivering a psychologically challenging experience to the child, like playing up an age group or having two players mark them during a game. The child may find this challenging, turning to their parents for emotional support. If the parents are not sure why the TDE did this, they risk that the experience is undermined rather than optimised (Taylor and Collins, 2021). Clear communication channels can help promote consistent messages. For example, coaches/staff

may be appointed the liaison for specific parents, and they represent the TDE, creating a sole point of contact. Alternatively, the TDE can specifically set out which staff are responsible for certain areas of the TDE, and which parents should contact accordingly. Communication agreements between the TDE and parents are useful to set boundaries, these might set out matters such as who to contact, by what means and at what times. Such structures may help consistency in the long term.

## Working as an Interdisciplinary Team

It is very common for TDE to employ lots of different staff. Talent development is very much a multidisciplinary endeavour, as it requires specialised staff to contribute expert knowledge and services. These staff might include: managers, directors, physiotherapists, psychologists, strength and conditioning coaches, nutritionists, performance lifestyle advisors, education managers, welfare officers, mental skills coaches, player care managers, etc. Bringing all these staff together to contribute towards holistic development will optimise the TDE and experience for the athletes.

**Taking an interdisciplinary approach means that all staff are responsible for developing the athlete across all three holistic development outcomes, as a shared purpose.** Adopting an interdisciplinary approach starts with staff receiving clear guidelines about their role responsibilities, boundaries and employment specification. Expert staff should lead on their discipline area but all staff should work collaboratively to create a synergistic approach to their practice and further benefit the athlete.

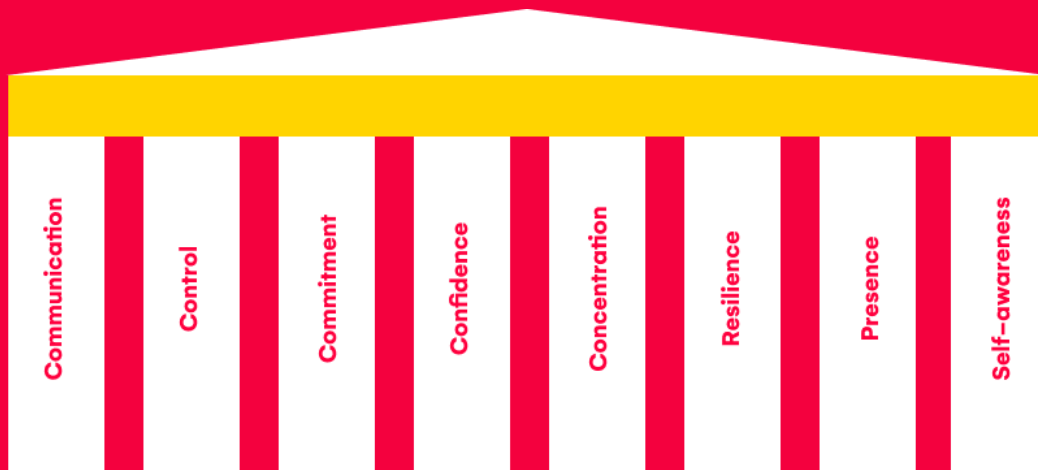
Some practices for interdisciplinary working include:

- Staff from one discipline regularly visit and contribute to athlete sessions delivered by other staff as a planned activity (e.g., sport psychologist regularly visits technical training and discusses psycho-social development matters with athletes during the session).
- Staff proactively support development across the three outcomes in their discipline sessions (e.g., a physiotherapist is aware that an athlete is working on their punctuality across the TDE and addresses this with them when they attend for treatment).
- Staff run workshops to educate other disciplinary staff about common challenges and agreed practices, so those staff are able to bring back some of that knowledge into their sessions.
- Staff have a shared social space to ‘cross-pollinate’ ideas and practices.

### Example of good practice: The Eight Pillars

Mitchell et al (2022) recently published an article where they describe the real-life adoption of an interdisciplinary psycho-social skills programme within an football club academy. The programme takes an innovative approach and demonstrates how psycho-social skills can be taught across multiple disciplines in the TDE in an integrated fashion.

A coach-researcher planned the teaching of 8 key psycho-social skills, termed the 'eight pillars'. These were the skills deemed important for the TDE and the athletes within. Each month over an eight-month period, athletes were delivered workshops on one of the skills where they discussed what it is, why it is important, and examples of how to demonstrate it. At the same time, the coaching staff also adopted the same skill as their focus of the month, planning and delivering technical and tactical sessions where the players had to practice the psycho-social skills in football sessions.



The all TDE staff and parents were aware of the programme. As a result, these months become enriched with learning opportunities for the skills, across the TDE. The coach-researcher attended training sessions and the coaches attended the workshops, helping clarity of message. The overlap provided opportunities for coaches to make links what was delivered in workshops to what was delivered in coaching sessions.

To help with the coherency of the application and reinforcement of the skills by the coach-researcher and coaching team, they met discussed the skills prior including what the psycho-social skill was defined as and what were associated observable behaviours. These observable behaviours were age and stage specific.

## PRINCIPLE 3: CREATING A CLIMATE OF CARE

Care and talent development are not binary concepts. It is sometimes perceived that talent development must be a harsh and uncaring process for young athletes to experience because this is what is required for development. Talent development is a CHALLENGING process, however, the process should be done in a caring way that safeguards athletes' present and future health and wellbeing. Creating a climate of care will not make the TDE less effective at creating elite athletes, the opposite may be the case! (Lara-Bercial and Mallet, 2016; Mallett & Lara-Bercial, in press).

It is useful to view care on two levels: caring ABOUT, and caring FOR (Noddings 2013). First, coaches/staff could care ABOUT an athlete and other coaches/staff. Caring about is a passive emotional concern for someone. Caring FOR is a proactive process which is done by one person to another and involves three factors:

1. **Engrossment:** ...'a form of attention that is committed, empathetic and genuinely open to discovering the experiences, feelings and perspective of the cared for individual.'
2. **Motivational Displacement:** '...a commitment to partition one's own needs and to act in the interests of the cared for...'
3. **Reciprocity:** '...the 'cared for' contributes to the relationship and to the carer...actions acknowledge the care offered by a carer and confirm that it has been received by the cared for.'

(Cronin et al., 2018, pp. 18-19)

**A climate of care is created when multiple people care about and for other people, and teach and reinforce caring behaviours to others.** This moves care beyond a passive emotion to something that is explicitly valued and fostered by coaches/staff to athletes, so the TDE becomes a place where athletes can access care from both coaches/staff and peers (Cronin et al., 2020). Holistic development care could be said to involve caring ABOUT and FOR the athletic skills, health and wellbeing, and life readiness of athletes.

### Promote and Support Mental Health

Holistic TDEs are those that protect athletes' mental health now and in the future. Mental health malnourishment – the reduction in health, is suggested to be highly prevalent in sport. Poor mental health significantly jeopardises athlete holistic development. The TDE has a major responsibility in reducing risk factors and promoting protective and promotive factors (Hill et al., 2016).

#### Mental Health Definition

'Mental health is a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community.'

WHO (2022)



As per the WHO definition, mental health is more than the absence of illness. Mental health should not be seen as something which can be added or taken away – you are not either healthy or not healthy but have varying levels of ‘healthiness’. In this way, mental health is relevant to everyone. The TDE should embrace its responsibility in nourishing mental health and recognise that actions or experiences in the TDE can malnourish mental health too. However, this perspective provides the opportunity for the TDE to be proactive in creating a positive climate – this is where the environment can be shaped in a way which may foster mental health.

It is important to note that mental health can be related to serious clinical issues – in these cases, expert professional staff should be utilised or consulted. TDEs should invest and see mental health care as a priority. Providing access to those who specialise in supporting athletes through mental health difficulties is not a cost-cut to athletic development but a moral and ethical responsibility, and a ‘conditio-sine-qua-non’ for holistic development. A staff member should be appropriately trained and appointed as a mental health lead to oversee and coordinate mental health promotion and support in the TDE. Coaches could also be given basic mental health first aid training.

**There is clear evidence to show that TDEs can impact aspects related to mental health, demonstrating the importance of how environments are designed and operated.** TDEs that are perceived to be high quality have been associated with better wellbeing, lower stress and lower burnout (Ivarsson et al., 2015; Thomas et al., 2020). A long-term development focus, preparation for life outside the TDE, and clear coach-athlete communication are environment characteristics which have been associated with basic needs satisfaction, which positively impacts wellbeing (Deci and Ryan, 2000; Li et al., 2017).

### **Amplify the Athlete’s Voice**

Listening to and considering the athlete voice is an important component of creating a climate of care, it is also a right as stated in Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child<sup>1</sup>. **For athletes, being heard creates a sense of control and ownership over their development and the TDE, it is also an important feedback resource for coaches to be able to improve the TDE.**

Lundy (2007) has argued that to ensure that the voices are authentically considered it is not enough to just listen but rather young children/young people need to be given:

- 1. Space: Children must be given the opportunity and information to form a view.**
- 2. Voice: Children must be facilitated to express their views.**
- 3. Audience: The view must be listened to.**
- 4. Influence: The view must be acted upon, as appropriate.**

(Lundy, 2007, pp. 933)

ICOACHKIDS+ research has shown how different stakeholders may perceive TDEs differently. When comparing TDE perceptions between athletes, coaches and parents – coaches perceived their environment significantly more positively than athletes (Sargent Megicks et al., 2023). Understanding how athletes perceive the TDE is critical to aid complex decision-making, as there are many nuanced problems to work through as a coach. This creates an even more compelling case to take athlete input on board as part of the daily practices in the TDE.

---

<sup>1</sup> In the UN Convention, children are those aged 0-18 years of age.

Therefore, coaches and staff need to make a conscious effort to receive and respond to the athletes' voice. There are formal or informal ways to do this - particular events or everyday practices. In everyday interactions, the athlete voice can be considered using open divergent questioning by coaches, which encourages discussion or provides them choice in sessions and programmes. More formally, athletes could be given the chance to express opinions anonymously, or as a group panel in a feedback session. An athlete having input to their own individual development plan would also integrate their voice into their long-term development journey.

## PRINCIPLE 4: OPERATING WITH THE LONG-TERM IN MIND

Elite athletes are not developed overnight. Indeed, that is why talent systems exist, to systematically identify and support young athletes over time. It has become increasingly clear that it takes a considerable amount of time, experience, and training to be competitive at the highest levels of sport (Bloom, 1985; Martindale and Mortimer, 2011). Therefore, for young athletes, the focus should be on learning and development for the future, with less of an emphasis on being a performing ‘mini adult’.

### Conduct Long-Term Planning

Planning frameworks can be a useful tool to help coaches link day-to-day activities with long-term goals and avoid being distracted by short-term issues. One example of this is using ‘nested’ Macro-Meso-Micro planning cycles (Abraham et al., 2014). The aim is to deliver coaching sessions that reflect short (micro – e.g., weekly ), medium (meso – e.g., 3 months ) and long (macro – e.g., season) term goals for athlete development.

Planning this way can be useful to prevent coaches from getting caught up in the moments in front of them, like competitions or short-term pressures (e.g. selection deadlines), or as a reference point for when they need to adapt to dynamic situations. Head team coaches could develop these plans before the season starts, mapping out the whole year’s macro-objectives (or multiple years) and the first set of meso and micro-objectives. This could be shared with the rest of the coaching team, and even the athletes themselves. The head coach could set a review date to reflect on progress made and set out the next meso objectives.

### Collaborate on Goal Setting

Goal Setting is a useful process to support athletes to develop in the long term by getting them to focus on what they need to do to achieve their development objectives. For athletes, goal setting can be done through development plans, often called individual development plans or personal/athlete development plans. These plans are formalised goal setting tools which set out athlete goals over a set period of time (e.g., 1, 6 & 12 months). These plans can reflect the athlete development philosophy adopted by the TDE as well as the wider talent system framework, for example, the national governing body philosophy on athlete development.

**To ensure there is a holistic development focus, development goals could be modelled around the three holistic development outcomes. Structuring goals this way is a clear opportunity to set a focus on holistic development in a visible and tangible way for athletes.**

When creating individual goals, athlete input may help create a sense of ownership, responsibility and therefore independence. It may also support autonomy and self-identity, where an athlete is afforded to work towards qualities they value too. In addition to this, parents being aware of goals may help athletes progress in and outside the TDE if they can reinforce or encourage attainment in other settings.

There is a need to carefully consider the type of goals an athlete may have, these can put more or less of a focus on winning and results as opposed to learning and development. The balance of types of goals should be matched with the stage of development of the athlete, determining the level at which they need to be more or less focused on performance.

However, in general, process and performance goals (focus on what is needed to improve) are more conducive to learning and development than outcome goals (focused on results and 'success'). Process-orientated goals set out what the athlete needs to do to be successful, thus encouraging mastery of skills.

## Types of Goals

### **Performance:**

Concerned with the certain levels of performance, not in relation to process or results, usual in reference to an athlete previous performance (e.g., make a certain amount of 3-pointers in a basketball game).

### **Process:**

Concerned with the actions or steps the athletes need to effectively do to be successful (e.g., the personal steps an athletes needs to follow in their daily routines for them to be one time).

### **Outcome:**

Concerned with the results or outcomes, product-orientated emphasising social comparison and object outcome (e.g., the race or match result).

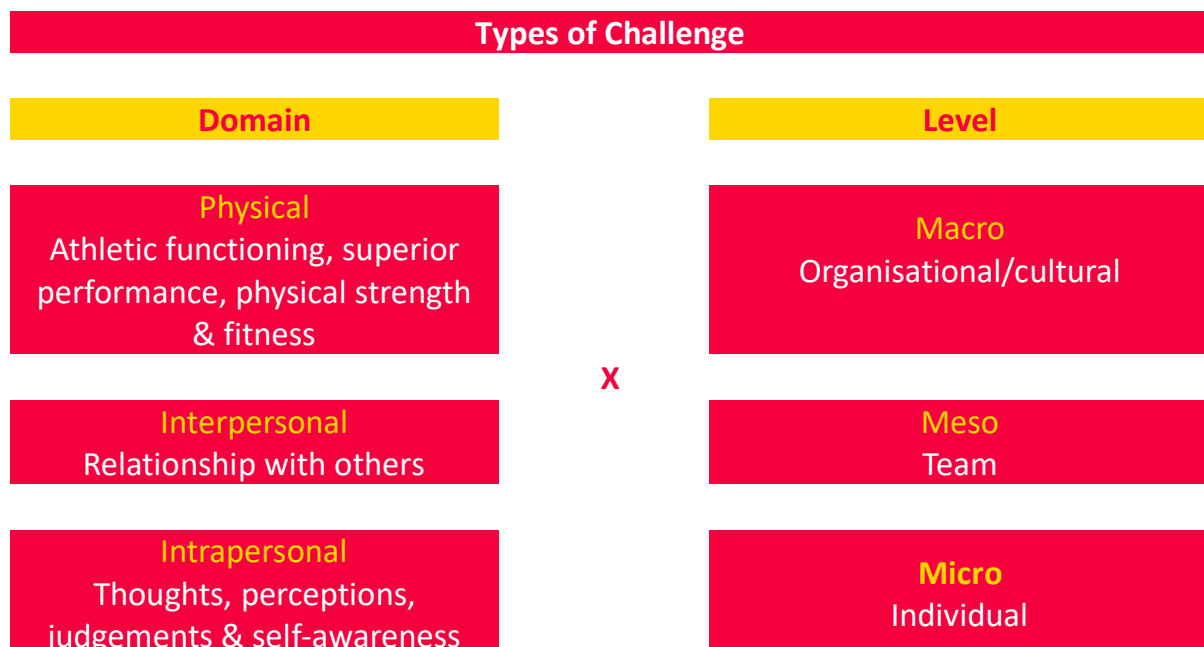
(Burton et al., 2001; Nicholls, 2021)

## PRINCIPLE 5: MANAGING CHALLENGING EXPERIENCES

### Create Stretch Points Consistently

The notion of challenge is perhaps one of the most frequently discussed and controversial topics within talent development. It is both a tool for growth, and a risk-factor in holistic development. Challenge refers to the idea that for development to occur and, arguably reaching the highest levels of sport, athletes need to experience and learn from physical, social, and psychological challenge that is beyond their current coping ability. Through these challenging experiences, athletes can apply, test and learn the necessary psycho-social skills to strive, survive and thrive. Moreover, in a virtuous cycle, these skills become a resource and a catalyst for future development, performance and life. Growth from challenging experiences is important to support athletes to navigate difficulties in TDEs (e.g., losing, injury), their athletic journey (e.g., transitions) and to cope and thrive in the future outside their TDE. The reality is that talent development is a difficult and challenging process; TDEs ought to provide athletes with the personal internal resources to help them cope.

There are different types of challenge. Athletes may experience challenge incidentally through everyday events in the TDE (e.g., non-selection for a competition squad), and coaches can harness these as learning opportunities (e.g., through framing conversations). The TDE staff may also deliberately plan the experience of challenge periods or events by athletes, as part of their development needs (e.g., playing up an age group). Both require appropriately informed decision-making by coaches and other staff to optimise learning and athlete wellbeing. **Challenge should safeguard athlete health and wellbeing, and keep athletes at the centre of the experience with purpose and control.**



(Howells et al., 2017; Wadey et al., 2020 p.13)

## Foster Striving, Surviving and Thriving Competencies

A useful framework to position and operationalise the notion of challenge is the concept of developing striving, surviving and thriving competencies (Mahoney et al., 2014). This approach aligns with holistic development as a strengths-based philosophy of development – it aims to move athletes beyond a coping state of surviving and towards positive and energetic periods of thriving in moments of challenge, underpinned by a constant goal desire to achieve this through striving. Psycho-social difficulty is an ever-present feature of talent development and sporting performance, so it is both a resource to learn from and an experience to navigate. Athletes need to know how to optimally deal with challenge utilising psycho-social skills (e.g., resilience, control, determination, self-belief, communication under pressure, etc). However, for optimal development, it isn't enough or sustainable to just survive, TDEs should aim to create a striving for thriving amongst their athletes, creating moments of enjoyment amongst challenge and a development of internal capacity and resource to overcome future challenge. Practically, this means that TDEs should be looking to develop some aspects of these psycho-social skills early on in an athlete's development journey, so they can be deployed and capitalised on later. Psycho-social development should not start when an athlete needs to learn how to survive - this may undermine their ability to thrive in that moment. TDEs should therefore aspire to make this the striving goal of athletes, so they can begin to autonomously seek to move through and between surviving and thriving (Mahoney et al., 2014).

### Provide individualised and timely support

The experience of challenge is highly individual. It is how athletes perceive that challenge, not necessarily what it actually is, which is important for growth and support (Taylor and Collins, 2022). Athletes may view and respond to challenge in different ways. For example, one may perceive training with the age group above as tough but beneficial, while a different athlete may experience the same event as overwhelming and damaging to confidence. When planning the delivery of challenging experiences, coaches should consider how different athletes may react and avoid sweeping decisions covering multiple athletes such as age groups. Individualisation hinges on knowing athletes. Coaches and staff can make efforts to learn about the autobiography/life journey of athletes or speak to parents to understand how athletes have responded to adversity previously in their life.

The benefits of challenge are not optimised without appropriate support. Appropriate support is situational, offered or delivered by the right person, and at the right moment. The support needed is likely to be emotional (management and regulation of emotions) or esteem-related (self-confidence) and different people in the TDE will have different roles to play.

- **Coaches & Support Staff** have a responsibility to support athletes reflect on the challenge. This might be aiding the reframing of the event as something that is positive to their development against their long-term development plan or offering care and consolation. Coaches need to be given time in the day to have conversations like this. Perhaps consider building reflection time into timetables to allow sufficient time for follow-up conversations. Timing is important too, athletes need to have the calmness and energy to meaningfully reflect on an event. (Taylor and Collins, 2022).
- **Family** play a different role to coaches. They typically don't have a role that requires sport expertise but rather relies in the human connection with the athlete, where there is likely high levels of trust, love and care. Family can be useful in framing challenge in the big picture outside of sport, making sense of

what it means in the broader life and history of that athlete. TDEs could consider how families' contributions can be optimised, and how families see how they can contribute. Importantly, families need to be aligned with how the TDE views development, and indeed the use of planned challenging experiences. They should be educated on these, especially about why they are important and what the TDE does to support athletes. Consider how the TDE can provide the opportunity to interact with family around challenging periods and build this into events or communication schedules. (Taylor et al., 2017).

- **Peers and Friends** can be a useful asset to support athletes through challenge. Athletes may talk to peers and friends openly. Peers can share prior experiences, aiding relatability between them. This may help athletes come to terms with their difficulties and discuss solutions going forward. Consider how athletes can be given autonomy in group discussions to share their experiences. Athlete lounges and changing rooms which 'they own' may be powerful in creating safe and open spaces for conversation between peers. (Barnes et al., 2021).

## PRINCIPLE 6: INTEGRATED LIFE SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

Life skills are important to youth athletes for the present and the future. As athletes can spend considerable time in the TDEs, this can limit life skills building opportunities elsewhere. When athletes leave sport through deselection, choice or retirement, they need to have the social resources to cope and thrive in society too. Athletes also need these life skills to function around their TDE, for instance, to engage and work with support staff when an issue arises. Life skills are described as:

*‘those internal personal assets, characteristics and skills such as goal setting, emotional control, self-esteem, and hard work ethic that can be facilitated or developed in sport and are transferred for use in non-sport settings’*

(Gould and Carson, 2008, pp. 60)

### Examples of Life Skills

Active Listening	Perseverance	Reflection	Professional Work Ethic
Respect	Time Management	Resilience	Self-Regulation
Dealing with Pressure Situation	Team Cooperation and Collaboration	Conflict Management	Group Leadership
Emotional Control	Problem-Solving	Daily Organisation	Goal Setting

Gould and Carson (2008) & Rongen et al. (2021)

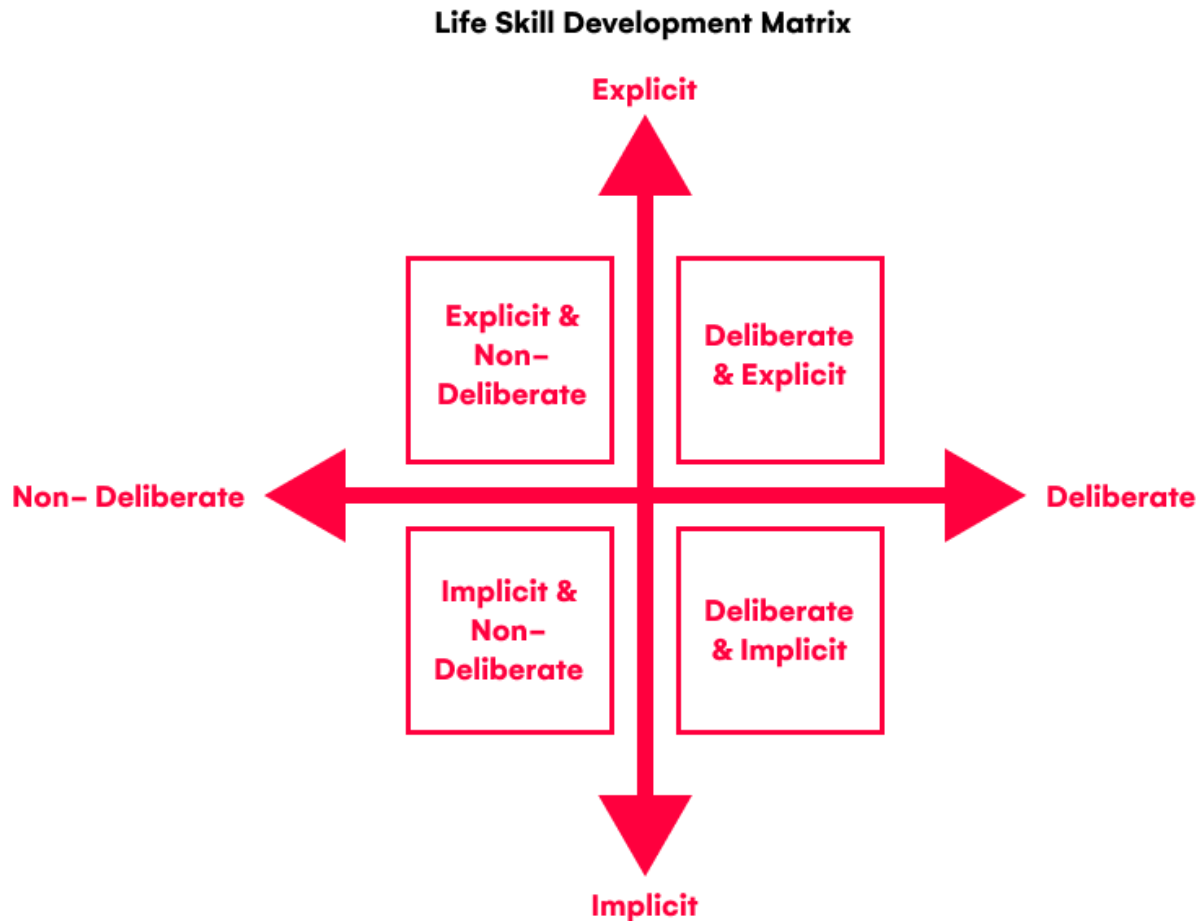
### Facilitate Interpersonal Growth

It is commonly believed that life skills may be developed organically within youth sporting environments, just by being involved with sport – this is true to an extent. However, contemporary research suggests that while implicit learning might incidentally happen, this is not controllable, so should not be relied on (Bean et al., 2018; Lara-Bercial & McKenna, 2018). Rather, TDEs should consider how they can deliberately develop athletes’ life skills as part of their development programme (Lara-Bercial & McKenna, 2022). Life skill learning is an inherently social endeavour, so explicit development is also about social interaction in the environment of the TDE.

The life skill matrix developed by Lara-Bercial and McKenna (2018; 2022) is a useful conceptualisation of the different ways a TDE can contribute to life skill development. Teaching can vary on the scale of how deliberate it is. Some teaching maybe intentionally planned by the TDEs, and some might spontaneously emerge through ‘teachable’ moments in the environment. Teaching may vary in how explicit or implicit it is, some maybe obvious and part of a life skill learning moment, and the coach



may tell athletes this. Or the teaching may be implicit and not made overtly aware or visible to the athlete, it may be a part of other activities athletes are engaging in. This matrix can be used to plan life skill development in goal setting strategies or coaching planning systems and helps coaches consider time-efficient ways in which life skill development can be implemented amongst other practices.



**Lara-Bercial and McKenna (2022)**

- **Deliberate-Explicit:** This could be in the form of workshops with athletes or in and around the TDE where coaches and staff role model and reinforce good life skill behaviours. Life skills can also be practiced where coaches and staff will make it clear that athletes are utilising these life skills in the TDE. For example, athletes are responsible for managing and cleaning their lounge. Perhaps athletes are supported to develop a rota for cleaning it, they sign an agreement displaying their commitment to this, and athletes agree to hold each other accountable to this. Coaches reinforce this (athlete age dependent) and clearly explain why life skills in this context are important and relevant to their training and competition and everyday life now and in the future.
- **Deliberate-Implicit:** This could be through team standards or values or coaching strategies that provide ownership to athletes. TDEs may have team values which they expect athletes to adopt, over time athletes may foster these. During a technical training session, athletes might be given responsibility over 'self-running' the activity promoting leadership and communication skills, and

perhaps even conflict management! In a talent development setting, this might help keep the focus on their training but at the time help develop life skills.

- **Non-Deliberate-Implicit:** These are the moments that occur organically in the TDE, like the risk of deselection and external competition. Sport is fertile ground for this. However, coaches need to think about how moments like these can be managed and optimised for life skill learning. Where appropriate they could be harnessed as an opportunity to explicitly learn, through follow-up conversations with athletes. However, in some cases, it may be wise to avoid explicit involvement, to not shift focus away or if it was an overly upsetting experience.

## Foster Life Skill Transfer

The next stage of life skills development is the connection between the skill in sport and the skill in life as the strategies above just consider an athlete's initial opportunity to learn and practice the life skills. For life skills to be optimally utilised for 'now' or the 'future' in other contexts, athletes must know how to transfer them. There are also life skills which athletes use in every day that they can transfer to sport, to use in their TDE. It is all about connecting sport and life and vice versa.

To support transfer, TDEs should provide opportunities for athletes to authentically utilise life skills. This could be in the TDEs, competition trips, team building away days, team days off, community events, etc. These are the settings where TDEs should reinforce the application of life skills and even reward athletes if they do 'practice' the skills. In this sense, time out of the TDE where athletes experience society in a more diverse way could be planned as a life skill learning and transfer activity. For example, athletes in the TDE could engage in charity work in the local community where the environment is based (Pierce et al., 2018).

Coaches and other staff in the TDE should talk to athletes about life skills and transfer. This could be informal 'side-line' chats or with time set aside. They can talk about moments they have used skills learned in sport in everyday life, providing concrete examples of it, and then get athletes to think about and share examples themselves. You can work backwards too, what do athletes do well in other contexts to manage themselves, and have or how can they do that in the TDE.

Parents are also a big asset to transfer as they are already a child's number one life skill coach! Parents are perhaps the only other person besides the athlete themselves who has some oversight across all the environments. They can therefore be a significant asset towards the reinforcement of life skills transfer moments. Before that, however, parents need to realise WHY life skills in sport are important. TDEs should take the time to support parents for the reasons outlined above. Consider planned activities like parent workshops or the sharing of policy to help with this. It is also worth coaches and staff reinforcing this message in day-to-day interactions with parents. Getting support for the development of life skills in the TDE can help those skills be developed and transferred elsewhere. See this as a way to 'double down' on life skill development. Parents can even be educated about the idea of explicitly teaching or implicitly teaching life skills to help with this. If athletes are involved in multiple environments, parents can act as the bridge between to share key messages on life skills.

# Conclusions



The International Olympic Committee have proposed a holistic development approach to youth athletic development. This report presents research conducted by ICOACHKIDS exploring the development of holistic development environments. It is written as a resource for those working in talent development environments.



In this report holistic development is defined as having three interrelated dimensions:

- **Athletic Skills** – The development of the skills and characteristics (i.e., technical, tactical, physical, psychosocial) needed to progress towards higher levels of athletic performance and competition.
- **Health and Wellbeing** – The promotion, development, safeguarding and maintenance of physical, mental and social health and wellbeing.
- **Life Readiness** – The development and application of attitudes and skills required to succeed in and outside of sport, now and in the future.



Six principles of good practice are presented to drive holistic development in the talent development environment:

- 1. A Holistic Philosophy of Athlete Development**
- 2. Stakeholder Alignment and Support**
- 3. Creating a Climate of Care**
- 4. Operating with the Long-term in Mind**
- 5. Managing Challenging Experiences**
- 6. Integrated Life Skills Learning.**



Sport is dynamic and talent development environments are all contextually and culturally unique, the six principles offer guidance for the development of holistic talent development environment, however, these should be considered, applied and or adapted for each TDE.

# References and Further Reading

For a full list of references and resources for further reading, please click [HERE](#) or scan the QR code below:



**Disclaimer:** The European Commission support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents, which reflect the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use, which may be made of the information contained therein.



[ICOACHKIDS.ORG](https://ICOACHKIDS.ORG)



[ICOACHKIDSWORLD](https://www.facebook.com/ICOACHKIDSWORLD)



[@ICOACHKIDSWORLD](https://twitter.com/ICOACHKIDSWORLD)  
© 2023 ICOACHKIDS



[ICOACHKIDSWORLD](https://www.instagram.com/ICOACHKIDSWORLD)



[/ICOACHKIDSWORLD](https://www.youtube.com/ICOACHKIDSWORLD)