



**ICOACH
KIDS**

COACHING CHILDREN LITERATURE REVIEW PRACTICAL SUMMARY

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



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Introduction

Millions of children and young people take part in sport and physical activity across Europe every day. However, the majority of their coaches are either not qualified or hold lower level generic qualifications that do not prepare them specifically to work with this age-group.

ICOACHKIDS (ICK) is an international, collaborative, multi-agency¹, Erasmus+ co-funded project aiming to support the development of a Specialist Children and Youth Coaching Workforce across the EU to ensure all youth sport participants have a positive experience led by suitably trained coaches.

This document is a **Practical Summary** of the larger literature review conducted as one of the corner stones of ICK (downloadable at www.ICOACHKIDS.org). It is 'Practical' because it brings together the main finding of the literature review from the perspective of what these mean for coaches working on the ground. In that sense, it provides simple and pragmatic advice that youth coaches can start using straight away to continue to develop their programmes and sessions.

The findings of the ICK literature review were structured using the functional model of coaching proposed by the European Sport Coaching Framework (ESCF; Lara-Bercial et al., 2017, Figure 1 below).

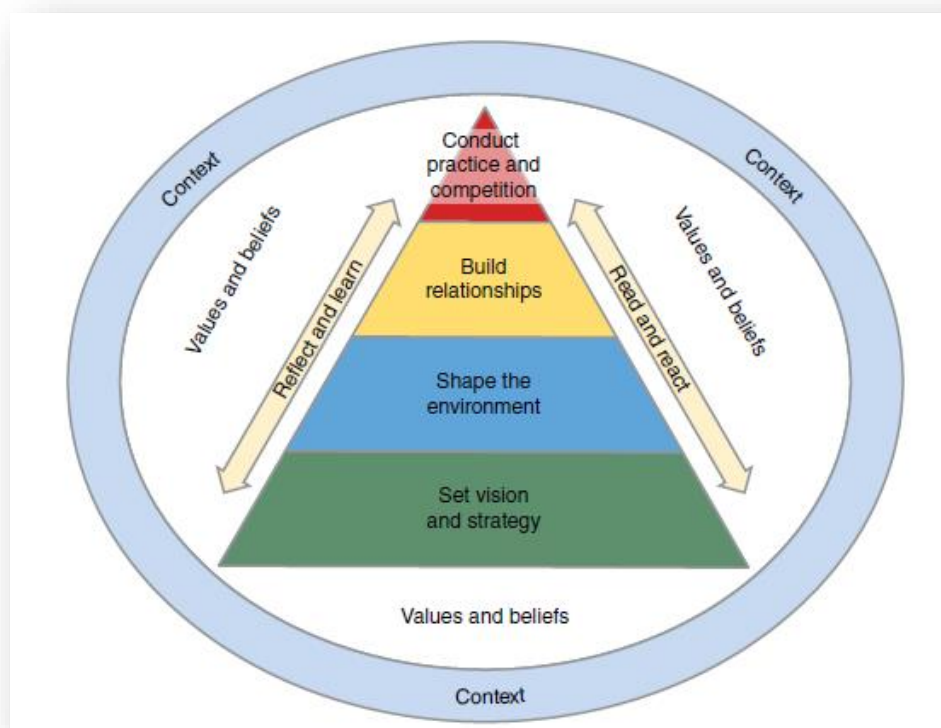
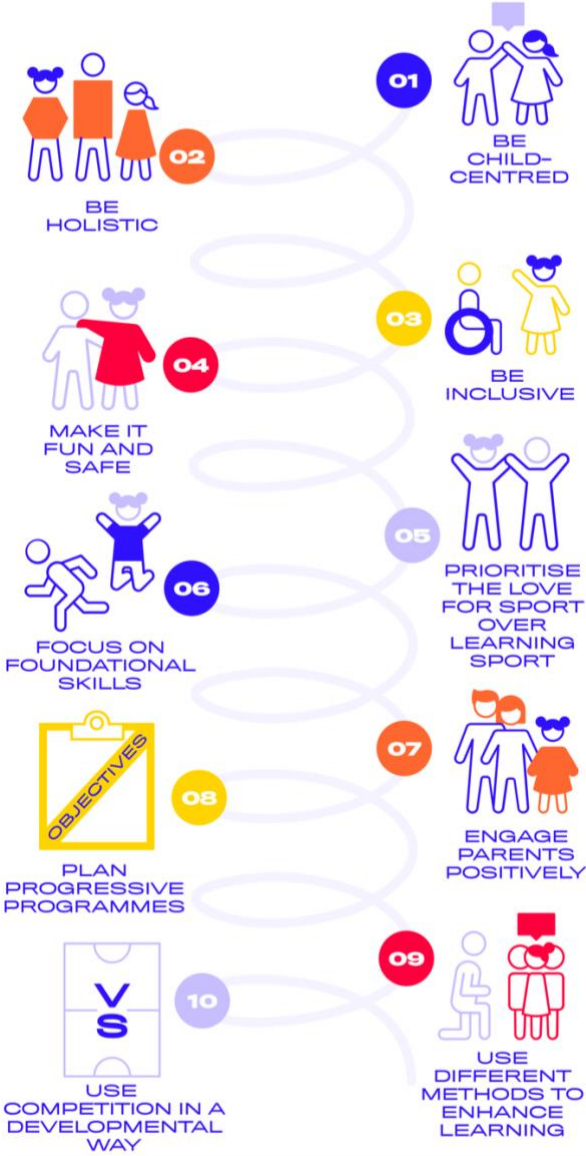


Figure 1. The primary functions of the coach (Reproduced from ESCF, Lara-Bercial et al., 2017, p.27.)

¹ ICK is led by Leeds Beckett University and brings together a consortium of eight organisations including the International Council for Coaching Excellence (ICCE), Sport Ireland, the Hungarian Coaching Association, Netherlands Olympic Committee (NOC*NSF), Universidad Europea in Spain, Lithuanian Sports University and the Royal Belgian Football Association.

In light of the findings of the review, the ICK expert group developed *The ICOACHKIDS Pledge* which includes **10 Golden Rules for Coaching Children** that coaches and sport clubs should adhere to in order to guarantee positive experiences. In addition, therefore, this practical summary contains a section wherein specific applied advice is provided to facilitate the adoption and implementation of each of the golden rules by coaches, administrators, programmes and clubs.

The ICOACHKIDS Pledge



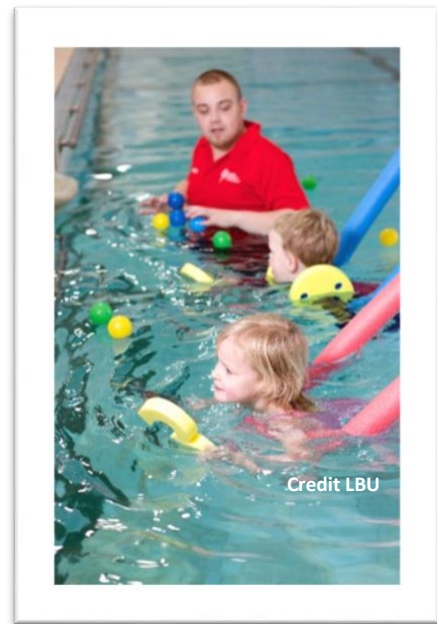
We wish you all the best in your coaching and in the development of a specialist children and youth coaching workforce.

The ICOACHKIDS Team

Coaching Children Literature Review Practical Summary – What You Need To Know Today

The Context

- In the academic literature there is an increasing recognition of the need to purposefully consider and understand the socio- cultural context in which a sport programme takes place in order to make sure it fits appropriately with the existing cultural and social parameters.
- This emphasizes the '*contextual dependency*' of sports coaching, represented for instance by the national attitude to education and sport, and the existing soft and hard sports infrastructure and resources.
- The literature also provides evidence that contextual assumptions (for example regarding gender or culture) influence how coaches are viewed or positioned in sport. This underlines the importance of positive and functional interactions between all stakeholders within the context and the coaches: i.e., families, clubs, schools and sports organisations.
- Coaches should not only be aware of the context they work in, but also influence and participate actively in it for example by talking to parents, managers and other stakeholders.

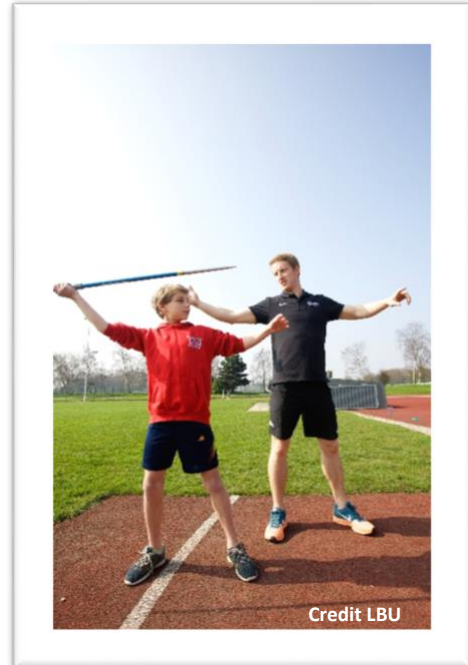


Values & Beliefs

- Expert coaches can be distinguished from less expert ones by their well-developed and reflected upon philosophies about coaching which guide their decisions and practice.
- Coaches develop philosophies by understanding the values and beliefs that are familiar within the context and connect that to personal values and beliefs. This can be seen as an ongoing process as coaches gain expertise and experience, which may change their beliefs and values.
- Coaching therefore is about the interplay between concrete coach behaviours, values and beliefs and context.
- Self-reflection is central to the development of a coaching philosophy. Coaches should make time and space to reflect on their coaching approach/philosophy, behaviours, alignment of values and beliefs and actions.

Setting the Vision & Strategy

- Sport participants development is conditioned by the general developmental processes that impact on human development. Research in youth sport, however, rarely uses knowledge from other disciplines to theorise development trajectories.
- Researchers emphasize that child/athlete development is driven by genetical predispositions, environmental influences and the interaction between the two.
- No single contributor to development (genes, parents, coaches, culture or peers) acts alone, resulting in a non-linear process, which depends of multiple variables. Thus, researchers caution against the increasing practice of early talent identification and selection driven by genetic predisposition and current performance levels, as it is highly doubtful that these markers lead to the identification of which children will become elite performers in the future. Selection before puberty should be avoided in most sports, or at least re-considered.
- In the literature, additional markers other than chronological age have been proposed to identify the developmental stage of a child. These include relative age, training age and biological age. The use of development stages is proposed as a better marker for development than age.
- In the developmental literature, age and stage approaches to development have been proposed to guide youth coaches and administrators. These are based on the idea that children have different needs at different developmental stages/ages. These approaches have been commonly used in other research domains, such as education and psychology. Yet, the literature review suggests that age/stage thinking is not commonly adopted in coaching. This leads to coaching practices which treat younger age groups as if they were 'mini-adults'. Coaching has to differentiate between children and adults, and between children and young people at different stages of development.
- Age/stage approaches highlight the importance of facilitating transitions between stages. Research provides insight into the complexity of this process and offers recommendations to prepare children for what lies ahead.
- Effective children's coaches should adopt a holistic development perspective. The literature provides a variety of models for child development rooted in a holistic standpoint. These approaches allow children to develop life course competencies or life-skills as well as physical and technical skills.
- There is evidence in the literature that it is possible to gain wider benefits from sport participation: i.e., healthy lifestyles, better self-images, cognitive benefits, life skills and appropriate social behaviour. This holistic perspective has also been shown to



enhance the chance of higher sport performance, well-being and life-long sports participation.

- Social, emotional and life skill benefits may result through sport participation, but are not guaranteed; good and positive relationships with peers and coaches are conditional for that as well as the time children are involved with the activity. In addition, skills are not always automatically transferred to other areas of children's life. Intentional programming is highly recommended.
- This underlines the importance of positive (pedagogical) sports environment, allowing children to learn life skills and fostering life-long sports participation.
- In general child development has been embedded in a deficit-based culture (what's wrong with kids), yet the literature provides insight on more strength-based approaches, focused on 'what children can become, instead of what they are lacking'.
- Coaches need to recognise their role as 'facilitators/guiders/influencers' instead of 'controllers'

Shaping the Environment & Building Relationships

- The term Pedagogy is ambiguous in the literature. Its definition depends on national culture and local traditions. The two major ways to understand pedagogy refer to:
 - The art and science of teaching
 - The field that concerns itself with the psychosocial development of children and young people
- In any case, the literature states that a pedagogical climate is set with the child's best interest at heart. In sport this has also been referred to as an athlete-centred approach. A positive relationship between coach and child is the foundation of a pedagogical climate. On the other hand, 'having fun together' can be seen as 'the glue' between the child, the coach and the sport.
- In sport research, different 'pedagogical climate' models have been proposed. Within these, the concept of 'motivational climate' is one of the most commonly used.
- Coaches should be aware that mastery-oriented climates lead to better performance, higher levels of intrinsic motivation and sustained participation as well as greater well-being, higher dispositions to learn and more engagement. Coaches' behaviours play a key role in the development of children's goal orientations and regulation. Fostering autonomy, competence and relatedness/belonging promotes better sport experiences.
- Coaches must see themselves as a role model for the children they coach.



- There is also evidence in the literature that sport can also have negative effects.
- The safeguarding and protection of children should therefore be on the minds of coaches, policy makers and top of the political agenda. All stakeholders must ensure that children are never put at risk physically or emotionally.
- According to the literature risk factors for negative experiences in sport are connected to the characteristics of the coach, the child athlete and the environment, such as the hierarchical nature of some sports organization, the intentional grooming of children by coaches, abuse of power by the coach and the personal ambition of child athletes (perfectionism, etc.).

Conducting Practice & Competition

- To foster and maintain long-lasting enthusiasm for sport, coaches must develop attractive sport practices which provide opportunities for fun as well as development.
- For effective child development in sport, learning should be individualized and adapted to every child. Coaches must therefore understand children's personal developmental trajectories.
- Coach need to determine the core concepts and principles of their sport and focus on what is important at different stages of development. Mid and long-term programs for practice must be shaped as a spiral where themes are regularly covered and expanded based on well-defined short, mid and long-term goals.
- Practice plans are flexible constructs which constant adaptation to the present situation. This highlights the importance of short, mid and long-term planning and the paramount role of reflection skills for coaches.
- Fundamental motor skills must be prioritized at an early age
- In addition, practice should contain self-organised elements to foster initiative and creativity, and to create a greater sense of ownership amongst the children.
- There should be a balance between drills and game-based learning to maximise learning. The provision of appropriate feedback is paramount. Moreover, coaches should not only focus on the 'what' but also explain the 'why' and 'how' to accelerate and sustain learning.
- Practice sessions should be informed as much as possible by a problem-solving approach, allowing children to develop their own solutions, develop a deeper understanding of the activity and show initiative.
- Coaches should be aware of the different types of feedback and use it appropriately to meet the needs of the learners
- According to the literature, competition is central to development and motivation when conducted appropriately. It can also be used as an assessment and progress information tool. However, it is important to note that there are significant differences between children in their need for competition.
- The literature provides clear evidence that a sole focus on 'winning' in competition does not lead to positive developmental outcomes for children.
- Coaches must be aware that, through sport, children develop at multiple levels: technical, tactical, physical, mental, social and emotional. Development in these areas is interdependent and thus delivery must be integrated.

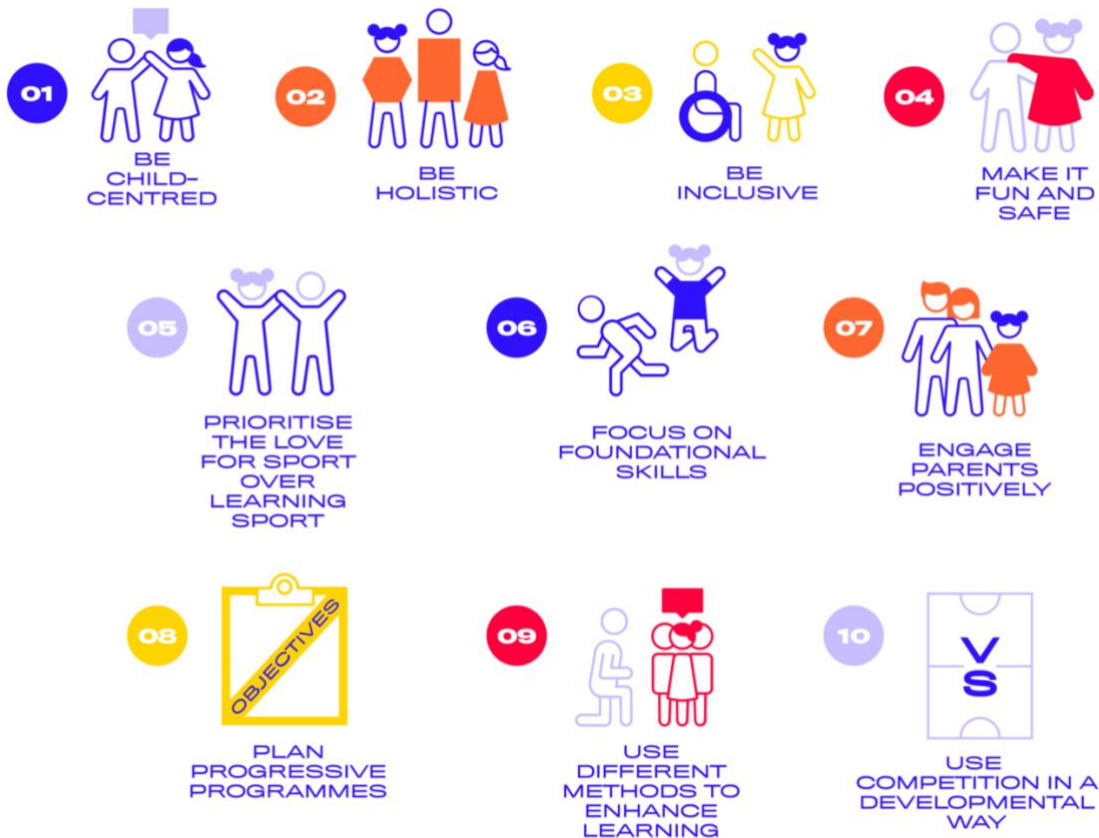
Reflecting & Learning

- According to research, expert and successful coaches continuously reflect on their practice. Reflection should not be only on athletes' performance but on the coach's.
- Reflection accelerates coach development and improves effectiveness.
- There are a variety of different models for reflection available. Effective reflection help coaches consistently evolve their competencies and practices.
- Reflection is a learned skill that requires an open-mind. As coaches' knowledge grows and they gain experience, their beliefs and values will evolve and change.



'Living' The ICOACHKIDS Pledge

Now that we have learned what the literature has to say about coaching children, it is time to get down to ground level and really get to the bottom of what it means for your coaching. The next section uses *'The ICK Pledge'* as a way to organise our thinking and provides clear advice about how to bring it to life in your day to day.



1. Be child-centred.

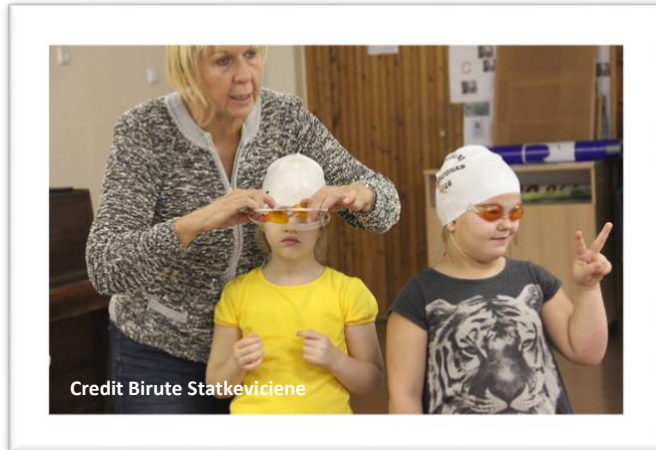
Always have the best interest children at heart and listen to them. It is about what children want and what they need, not about the adults!

- Take the adult 'glasses' off and try to see the sport through the eyes of the child. It looks a lot different from where they sit.
- Find out children's motivation to attend your sessions: Why are they there? What do they want out of it? What do they like/dislike? What kind of sport experiences have they had before?
- Determine the age and stage of development of the children you coach. This will allow you to better decide what their needs are, and to tailor the sessions appropriately to maximise learning and enjoyment.

2. Be holistic.

See and develop children in your sessions as people first and foremost, not only as athletes.

- Aim to develop their psychosocial skills and capabilities not just their physical ones.
- Give them opportunities to develop a positive sense of self by valuing each child regardless of their skills and by helping them focus on their own personal improvement and effort.
- Create an environment that caters for and promotes the development of children's social, emotional, cognitive and moral repertoire.
- To do this use activities that engage the children at more than just the physical level, make the most of teachable moments and challenge them to think as well as to move.
- A good session is not one where everyone looks active and 'on the move', but one where children are holistically engaged, even if at times they are not moving.



3. Be inclusive.

Cater for all levels of abilities and motivations. Coaching is far from a one-size-fits-all. Get to know the kids you coach and dare to coach them differently.

- Make sure that you have removed all barriers to participation so every child feels welcome regardless of their background, motivation, ability, and previous experience.
- Greet all children individually and by name. Ask them about their day.
- Pay equal attention to all children regardless of ability level.
- Differentiating (creating sessions where all children are engaged, stretched and learning) is one of the hardest things to do. It requires good knowledge of the children and a lot of planning, but it is worth the effort!
- Use the Inclusion Spectrum developed by Ken Black and Pam Stevenson to create inclusive sessions:
 - Open activity: all doing the same task with no restrictions
 - Modified activity: all doing the same task, but with certain individualised modifications so all can be successful
 - Parallel activity: all doing the same task, but in groups of similar ability level
 - Different activity: different children doing different tasks suited to their needs

4. Create fun and safe environments:

Children want to have fun and learn. To do both they need to feel safe. As a coach, you have to build positive relationships and enjoyable and caring climates that allow them to thrive and that keep them coming back.

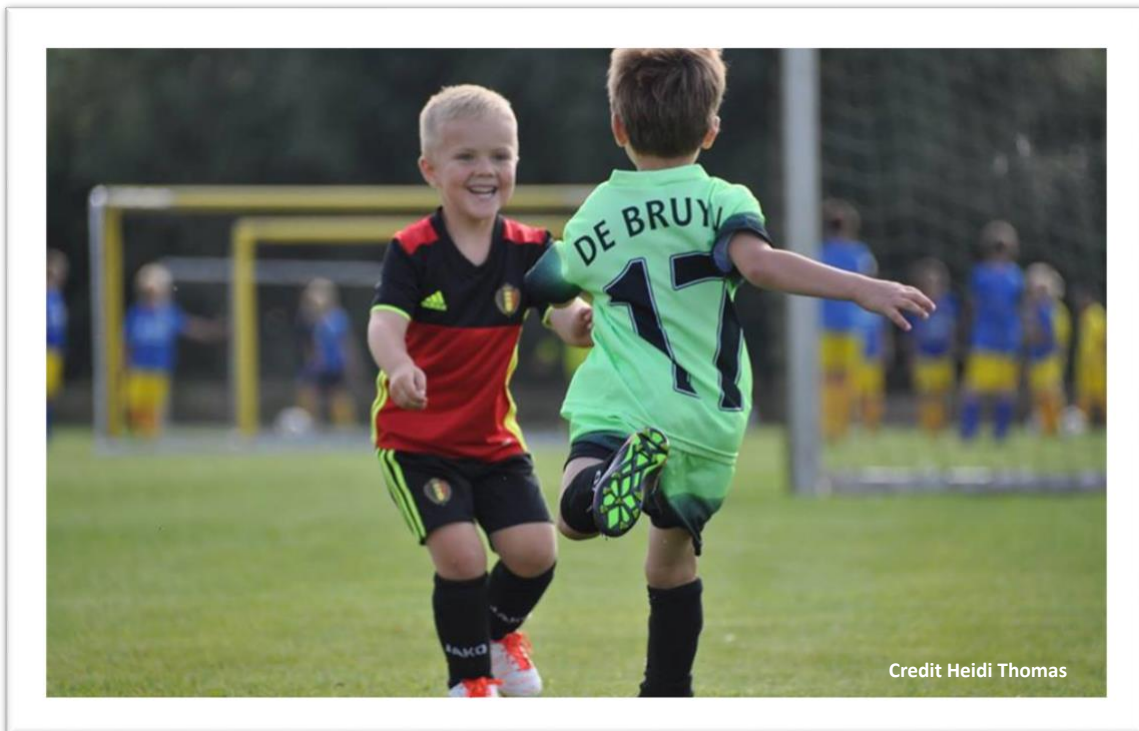
- The most important factor in determining what children make out of sport is the quality of the relationship with the coach and other children. Go out of your way to build great relationships. Spend time on it. Nothing else matters until this is achieved.
- Safety first - physically and emotionally:
 - Make sure that the physical environment is risk-free: equipment, surface, surroundings, weather, etc. Put all measures in place to minimise accidental risks.
 - Make sure the emotional environment is risk-free: children should never feel pressured or fearful because of the coach's actions. Scolding, shouting, threatening and ridiculing do not belong in children's sport.
 - The above doesn't mean that children should not be challenged to improve or held accountable for their behaviour, but this should always be done in an appropriate manner.
- Make sure children are safeguarded and protected from any potential threats to their well-being (i.e., have a safeguarding and protection policy and protocol in place.)
- Sounds counterintuitive, but don't let learning get in the way of fun. When children are having fun and are deeply engaged in an activity, they experience more positive feelings and learning happens faster and is longer-lasting.
- Fun means different things. It can be the thrill of learning something new, the exhilaration of getting it right for the first time. It can also be the feeling of competition and challenge. And sometimes is just about being plain silly and doing an activity that is just good old fun.
- When you are having fun, they are having fun. Let your hair down coach!



5. Prioritise children's love for sport and physical activity.

Only a small proportion of kids want to be elite athletes, and of those who do, only a minimal number will actually become elite athletes. Yet, all of them have the potential to become healthy active adults. Creating that fantastic legacy is part of your job.

- Make sure children want to come back next week for more. Make it fun, make it enjoyable, make it varied and novel, make sure they are learning, make it a social experience. Get them hooked!
- Encourage the whole family to be active: for instance, have parent and child sessions every now and again (or even always if you are dealing with younger kids) or talk to parents about how important it is for their kids to see they are active too.
- Spend time helping children understand the benefit of sport, physical activity and of leading a healthy lifestyle



Credit Heidi Thomas

6. Develop foundational motor and game skills.

Do not be overconcerned with the specific skills of your sport. At a younger age kids need to gain essential motor skills and learn the basics of how to play games using generic tactical principles that apply to most sports. This actually leads to increased lifelong participation as well as higher levels of performance.

- Yes, if you are coaching a specific sport, your sessions will have a distinct sport-specific flavour, but the main ingredients should be fairly generic:
 - Foundational motor skills: also known as the fundamental movement skills (stability, object control and locomotion or balance, agility and coordination).
 - Foundational game skills: also known as fundamental game skills (i.e., use of space, creating advantages, anticipation, tracking others)
- All of this can be worked on through fun drills and games, and within the framework and theme of your own sport. You don't have to abandon your sport to be able to coach foundational skills, you just need to be creative: we are looking to give sessions a sport-specific flavour, not to overcook them.

- As children grow and develop, and as their foundational skills are consolidated, you can introduce more complex movement skills and more sport-specific techniques, skills and tactics.

7. Engage parents in a positive and constructive manner.

Parents are not the enemy, but the biggest resource at the disposal of coaches, schools and clubs. They want the best for their kids and so do you. Partnership is the key word.

- You will never know what parents can offer if you don't talk to them. Open and maintain regular lines of communication with the parents. From casual chats on the sideline to more formal group and individual meetings. You can also do anonymous online surveys to get their views on things.



- Parents know their children better than anybody. If you want to know the kids you coach so you can tailor your delivery, you have to talk to their parents.
- Parents have amazing organisational skills (they run a family!) as well as more specific technical skills related to their professions and jobs. Tapping into this wealth of experience and expertise is at your fingertips, but you have to make an effort to reach out. Do you need someone to do your register, collect fees, design your next event's poster, raise funds, drive the minibus, an assistant coach, a video technician? Parents should be your first port of call. They want to contribute to their kid's development and the opportunity to 'muck in and help out' might be what they have been waiting for.
- And yes, parents can sometimes be overzealous and do or say things they should not... However, as a coach, it is also your responsibility to support parents and help them understand the best ways they can help their kids make the most out of sport. The role of the coach as an educator cannot be overestimated.

8. Plan developmentally appropriate and progressive programmes and sessions.

We are taking kids on a learning journey. Coaching children should not be about 'peaking-by-Saturday' to win a game, but more about the accomplishment of mid to long-term holistic goals. Failing to plan is planning to fail!

- First of all, you must have a good idea of the destination point for the children you coach. What does the finished article look like? What skills do we want them to develop (physical, technical, tactical, mental and psychosocial)?
- Then you have to work backwards and develop short, mid and long-term goals and plans that will help the kids get there. Your role will depend on how long you are going

to be working with those kids. However, regardless of whether you will coach them for 5 hours, 5 days, 5 weeks, 5 months or 5 years, you have to develop a plan.

- There should be a clear link between annual or season plans (macro-cycles), blocks of sessions (meso-cycles), individual sessions (micro-cycles) and each drill or game in your sessions so you can say and see how all of it contributes to the mid and long-term goals.
- Programmes, plans and sessions must be developmentally appropriate, that is, they need to take into account the children's age and stage of development. Children are not mini-adults! You have to make the game fit the kids, not the other way around.

9. Use different coaching methods to enhance learning.

Learning is a complex process and it doesn't happen overnight. Different coaching and teaching strategies can serve different purposes at different stages of learning and development, complement each other, and help us achieve the desired results.

- There is not one single or best way to coach. Different coaching strategies are better suited for different stages of learning and have different effects.
- Coaching methods based on repetition and sustained periods of focus on a single skill are best in the early stages of learning something new, lead to rapid improvements and give the coach more control over what's to be learned and how. Yet, this type of practice, as well as not been always very enjoyable, does not appear to lead to skill retention, nor to the transfer and application of a skill to a 'live' context like a game or competition.
- Coaching methods based on fully or partially replicating the environmental conditions of the sport (i.e., games-based coaching; constraints-led approach) are recommended when a minimum level of proficiency in the skills involved is already present. This type of practice tends to be more enjoyable, leads to more sustained learning and promotes 'learning in context' which facilitates transfer of skill from training to competition. Yet, improvement happens at a slower rate and the coach has less control over it.
- In addition, and whether we are using a drill or game-based approach, practice sessions should provide opportunities for children to problem-solve, develop their own solutions to technical and tactical problems and thus develop a deeper understanding of the activity. This can also foster initiative and ownership of their development.
- In any case, it is not an 'either or' situation. The art of coaching is to know when a child or a group need to be exposed to one type of practice or another to maximise their chances of learning and retaining a skill or concept.



10. Use competition in a developmental way.

Competition is neither good nor bad by itself. It all depends on how it is organised, presented and managed. When done properly, competition is an amazing motivator and a lot of fun. Competition can also teach children a lot of good skills and attitudes like fairness, sportsmanship, respect, teamwork, and resilience.

- Make sure the format and the atmosphere around competition is built around the developmental stage of the kids and considerate of their needs.
- Competition formats that mindlessly reproduce the adult version of the game are bound to fail. Think about the best way to adapt the game to the kids' capability: for instance, the size of the playing area, the weight and size of the ball, the number of players per team, the length of the game/race, the size of the net/bat/stick/racquet, etc.
- Competing and winning are two different things. The focus of matches, games and meets should be on teaching kids to compete appropriately, not on winning. Competing is about trying your hardest and giving your best all the time. A win-at-all-cost mentality can really spoil the party.
- At some ages and in some contexts, keeping score, winning and losing should not even come into the equation. A 'festival-like' approach where no score is kept, may be more appropriate.
- Competition for children is just another learning tool or form of training. Particularly after a certain age, it can serve a great purpose as a 'skills benchmarking' exercise that can guided future training and foster motivation.
- Competitions can also be a fantastic way to enlarge the social circle of the children by allowing them to interact with the other team's players more like partners rather than opponents. In some countries and sports, they even mix the teams up when they play games!

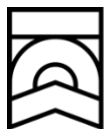
We hope you find this advice useful. We would love to hear what you think of it @ICOACHKIDSworld

Good luck with your coaching!

The ICOACHKIDS Team



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