

Teaching Psychological Skills for the Ages

Kids who quit soccer never learn how to play the game.

Why do kids quit soccer? They express it in different ways (boredom, loss of interest, rather do something else) but it all comes down to not having fun.

In this context, fun means being challenged and having success meeting the challenge.

To be an effective coach, we must understand the game at the level our players are able to play it in order to challenge them. But if our knowledge of the game is greater we must take care not to expect our players to perform at a level they are incapable of performing.

The effective coach must know the developmental level of the players.

U-6 players live in a world that is their own as they search to define themselves. They have little if any awareness of others on the pitch and success may come from imaginary victories in their own world.

U-8 players begin to become aware of other players and this means they can begin to learn to play in coordination with teammates; they begin to pass the ball. But this cognitive growth develops gradually for years in the pre-adolescent period and their ability to grasp issues of space and time remain limited.

Increasingly during U-8, U-10, and U-12, players define their self-concept by comparing themselves to others. There is a great opportunity for failure and a loss of self-confidence. Coaches can avoid this by stressing that success is not defeating an opponent in a match or a practice drill but in performing to their best and meeting achievable challenges. Focus on improvement rather than comparing them to others.

U-14 and older finds players capable of dealing with abstract concepts and understanding sophisticated tactical issues involving play off the ball.

Even if all the players were at exactly the same developmental level, which they are not, there would be significant differences in how players learn. Some will hear verbal instructions and understand. Others will require the coach to diagram the play on paper. Others will need to see someone doing it in order to understand. Some will have to walk through the task before understanding what is required of them.

The job of the coach is to match his or her knowledge of the game with the players' developmental level and learning style.