

COACHING CHILDREN – RUGBY LEAGUE

- Children's sport is an important part of Australian society and it is from today's children that our future top players will come.
- It is essential that coaches and officials provide children with the best possible sports experience.
- If children have successful sporting experiences, they will learn the skills of rugby league well, enjoy rugby league and more importantly will remain active in rugby league throughout their school life and into adulthood.

Children:

- Children play all sport for fun.
- They like to meet new friends.
- They enjoy and want to learn new skills.
- Children are not "little adults". It is inappropriate to expect them to perform as adults do, or to perform under the same conditions as adults.

An Effective Coach Will:

- Recognise the motivation behind a child's involvement in rugby league.
- Make children feel comfortable and happy with practice and games.
- Aim to improve the quality of the experience for each child.
- Be concerned about relationships formed with each child and between children.
- Provide accurate technical information.
- Be able to relate to all groups involved in rugby league – parents, officials, visiting teams.
- Be aware that there are many styles of teaching and that children respond to different styles.
- Appreciate that children have differing ability levels and organise appropriate skill practices to cater for all levels.

Coaching For Fun and Success:

- Allow children to contribute to their own learning.
- Develop basic skills.
- Involve a variety of activities and challenges.
- Cater for children of different backgrounds.
- Encourage a child to perform to the best of his/her ability.
- Protect children from the likelihood of failure.
- Have a good balance between activity and rest.

Planning For Practice Sessions And The Game:

- Being well planned is vital and the learning outcomes of each practice should be carefully considered.
- Be sure the session is positive and contains readily achievable goals.
- Include modified games with plenty of variety.

- Make a point of saying and doing things that make children feel successful, accepted and important.
- Being positive should begin with your first greeting and continue throughout the session.
- Remember mistakes are a natural part of the learning process.
- The goals of each session must be achievable, challenging and show a progression of difficulty.
- Keep the child's stage of development in mind when planning activities.
- Over plan rather than under plan. It is easier to omit activities than trying to fill in time.
- Include individual, small group, non-competitive, self-paced, co-operative and competitive activities.
- Also remember to include some time for free play with minimum adult direction, but supervise closely.
- Adjust field, grid sizes and equipment when applying skills in games.
- This will allow children to have more fun, be more actively involved and very importantly to develop the correct motor patterns.
- Rotate players through positions, roles and skills even when it may lower the performance of the team.
- Avoid the temptation to "over play" your most talented players.
- The average or lesser skilled team members deserve equal playing time.
- Use the game as you would a coaching session.
- Correct mistakes and provide instruction positively and quickly.
- Establish routines for accepting refereeing decisions.
- Applaud the opposition.
- Support other members of the team.
- Prepare for unexpected events and managing injuries (Leaguesafe – FAO).
- Whatever the coach does will be providing children with a role model.
- Do not forget to evaluate your own coaching performance.
- Examine ways in which you can get the most from the time you have with your players.
- How you can better cater for the children's varying skill levels and how you can make your sessions more challenging.

The "Drop Out" Factor:

- Many players drop out when they reach their teenage years and do not remain physically active as teenagers and adults.
- Children drop out for a variety of reasons:
 - Not receiving ample game time.
 - Children do not mind losing as long as they feel they have had their fair share of playing and involvement time.
 - The coach or parents overemphasising winning.
- Coaches who overemphasise winning as the important outcome have difficulty providing equal playing time to all participants.
- Being yelled at by coaches and parents.

- Positive encouragement at practice or during games will hasten skill development, not hinder.
- Being injured without competent attention and care (FAO/Leaguesafe).
- Provide safe equipment and facilities.
- Use safe coaching methods and always coach within the rules of the game. They have been designed to help minimise the risk of injuries.
- Losing – If success means winning then it could be said that losing equates to failure.
- Children are more likely than adults to view success as getting something right or doing something better than the last time.
- It is therefore imperative that a coach of rugby league coach effectively, with integrity. COACH THE PROCESS, NOT THE OUTCOME.

Children As Individuals:

- Improvement in performance should be measured against individual past performance rather than against other children.
- Maturity level could be/is the reason for performance levels rather than skill alone?
- Avoid stereotyping children into positions and roles based on their size and maturity. Let them learn all positions and roles.

Competition:

- Competition is sometimes scrutinised and considered undesirable.
- If managed well, competition can be extremely motivating and can help children feel good about themselves.
- The result of the game should be stressed less and the focus placed on the children's individual performances.
- When winning the game is the only focus of competition, and is the measure of success, the experience can put children off, so that they lose interest.
- A successful team is much more than a winning team.
- Success comes from simple things like improving on a specific skill, getting something right this week that was too difficult last week,
- Of course if success equates to winning, losing means failure. The extreme stresses this creates in competition can and will result in a loss of self-esteem and self-confidence.
- Children are not ready mentally for these stresses so they walk away.

Players On Successful Teams:

- Feel good about themselves.
- Attribute failure to bad luck.
- Are confident about future success. They believe they play well at all times.
- Are likely to stay involved through adolescence and adulthood.
- Improve skills naturally with these good experiences and good coaching.

Players On Unsuccessful Teams:

- Feel bad about themselves.
- Attribute failure to a lack of ability and attribute a win to good luck.
- Are not confident about future success.
- Tend to drop out – loss to rugby league and benefits of an active lifestyle.

General – Competition Structure:

- Coaches must match children to compete against those of equal ability or against a standard that the child can achieve.
- When choosing roles and positions for players in a team, the less skilled player should be placed in positions where they can make a contribution, be involved but not be embarrassed or feel that they have disappointed everyone if they make a mistake.

Tips For Coaching Children:

Help keep children focused and on task by:

- Limiting instruction to only one or two at a time using simple precise language.
- Allow plenty of time to practice.
- Planning variety in activities and making sure all activities are achievable.
- Give precise and immediate feedback but refraining from highlighting mistakes. Focus on effort rather than on the result.
- Young children have short concentration spans and will benefit from regular breaks.
- Being a consistent role model of someone who believes in fair play, patience and responsibility.

Ways To Promote Sportsmanship

Coaches and parents can promote good sportsmanship by:

- maintaining a “Fun is Number 1” attitude. If everyone is having fun, it will make learning all aspects of the game more enjoyable and rewarding.
- designing sport activities, which facilitate co-operation rather than just competition so that youth learn about fair play.
- teaching children the rules of the game and making sure that everyone (players, parents, fans) abides by those rules during competition.
- encouraging and supporting all players on a team.
- controlling emotions in frustrating situations.
- treating officials, coaches, players, team mates and opponents with respect and avoiding ridicule and sarcasm.
- using moments from the game to teach about being a good sport (“I know it seemed like you scored the try but I was really proud of the way you didn’t argue with the referee”).
- making sure there are consequences when poor sportsmanship is displayed.
- providing examples of good sportsmanship such as shaking hands with the opponent at the end of the game.

Participation in youth sports provides numerous opportunities for healthy development physically, socially and morally. The key to children gaining these benefits comes from coaches, parents and other adults not only teaching children how to play the sports, but also supporting and demonstrating how to be a good sport. This can be done not only during the game, but also when playing rugby league in the back yard.

Violence In Sport:

There are several theories on the causes of violence, both in sport and in the general population that could be relevant to developing policy positions or ethical standards.

- **Biology:** This theory suggests that humans are inherently violent. In this theory, sport would offer a relatively safe and controlled way to discharge aggression.
- **Psychology:** Violence is caused by frustration as one’s efforts to reach a goal are blocked. In sport, this frustration could be caused by officials, opponents and so on.
- **Social Learning:** This is currently considered the most persuasive explanation. Violence in sport is learned as an accepted method of “playing the game”. Violence or fighting might be officially condemned and penalized but unofficially praised by coaches, team mates, fans, the media etc. The official penalties may be insufficient to deter the behaviour.
- **Building a new brand of sport** that supports core positive values such as respect, fair play, discipline and integrity means finding practical answers to these issues and developing the commitment and means to change.

What about violence in sport? To start, we need to determine for each sport what constitutes crossing the line between playing the game and unacceptable violent behaviour.

Then, we need to:

- remove any rewards for unacceptable violence by players.
- penalize unacceptable violence so that the disadvantages outweigh any advantage that may be gained in a game.
- encourage players and coaches to focus on skill and the joy of striving for excellence rather than merely on the outcome of winning. The players who lose a well played, fair game must become more valued than the players of a poorly played, unfair or lucky win.
- organise workshops, education sessions, team, parent and community meetings, and public awareness campaigns on the positive core values of sport, fair play and how we can build a new brand of sport together.
- encourage participants to see opponents as necessary collaborators in the pursuit of the well-played game and worthwhile sport, not as enemies to be conquered or vanquished.
- encourage the pursuit of sporting excellence and fun by being the best that you can be in fair, honest and skilful competition.

How Parents Can Ruin Kids Sport:

Kathy, the mother of a child with a disability describes her son's grade one ball in tin relay. "There was Johnny, proud as punch, holding his ball, ready to run and place it in the tin. Some other mothers whose kids were in the same team were huddled together. Then one of them came over to me and said, "wouldn't the other children have a better chance of winning if you took your son out of the team?" Kathy says, "I just saw red. I screeched at this woman. I'll kill you before I'll take my kid out of that team".

As Kathy's experience demonstrates, ugly parents aren't a unique feature of Wimbledon. Neither are they exclusive to competitive or elite level sport. Ugly parent syndrome can be unleashed at the most junior level and, unfortunately, it isn't uncommon for fury to be directed towards another parent's child.

Anthony Klarica is head of Sports Psychology at Olympic Park Sports Medicine Clinic in Melbourne. Anthony is so concerned about parents ruining kids' sports that he believes guidelines should be drawn up to explain how parents should behave at sports events, how they should interact with their child and their peers, as well as how children should be treated away from the sports arena.

If parents follow these guidelines, he says, it might be possible to prevent psychological distress in young athletes.

Anthony Klarica claims parental attitudes were a main cause of burnout, stress and other psychological problems. In extreme cases, young athletes who couldn't cope with poor performance levels had exhibited suicidal tendencies.

A classic example of broken prodigy is Jennifer Capriati who went from a 13-year-old child tennis champion to a 16-year-old drop out and drug user. After a loss in Japan, Jennifer was heard screaming at her father, "What the hell do you know? You are destroying my life. I don't care if I ever play tennis again. Just get out of my life."

Parents and Children's Sport:

One mistake parents can make is trying to become their child's coach. Although parents' efforts to give their kids an extra edge may be well intentioned, this can be counter productive.

Parents who instruct children on the way to an event, yell or signal moves from the sidelines, and tell them what they should have done after the race or force kids to train, place the emphasis of sport on winning, rather than participation. This pressure to perform can cause stress, which actually detracts from the child's ability to perform, or it could promote a defeatist attitude.

Kevin Spinks is a professor and researcher in sport psychology at the University of Saskatchewan, Canada. He spent nine years working in Australia with elite athletes and teams. Spinks cautions, "children who perceive winning as all important need a high opinion of their ability to maintain the confidence to perform because they interpret failures as signs of their lack of ability. These children tend to think along the lines, "I'm not very good at this, so why bother really putting myself out. I'll only end up failing anyway. When they fail, they take this as another sign that they do not have the ability, thus perpetuating a downward spiral, possibly resulting in a complete withdrawal from sport".

Anthony Klarica says, "for adolescents, the drop out rates from sports are astronomical. It is quite possible that one contributing factor is parents putting too much pressure on winning. The truth is there are more losers in any sport than winners. Young athletes need to learn how to cope with losing".

What does motivate parental pressure to win? What lies behind those typically pushy parent catchcries of justification; "it's for your own good. You need to understand that you didn't play well!" What drives parents to teach their children that peers are the enemy or to resort to emotional blackmail, "who wants you to succeed more than I do?"

According to Angela Rossmann, author of *When Will the Children Play*, "it can be tempting for some parents to project their aspirations onto their children but probably the most common reason for wanting our kids to do well – apart from the positives for them – is that it validates us as parents: If my child does well we might reason, it means I must have done a good job". Rossmann says, children pay a heavy price when our goal is for them to be on top. They can come to feel depersonalised, valued only for what they achieve, and merely indicators of their parents' success."

For some parents, involvement in their children's sport is viewed as a personal sacrifice so they demand a result (winning) for their efforts. Anthony Klarica says, "parents should remember that they are supporting their children's' development. Kids shouldn't feel obliged to perform."

Klarica advises parents to ask themselves "What do I want my child to get from sport?" He says, "physical activity is about developing co-ordination and skills, cardiovascular and muscular strength to lay the foundation for a healthy life ahead, as well as social skills. Children can learn skills that will be beneficial in other areas of their life and, later, in the workplace, especially if their parents role model positive behaviour such as encouragement."

Anthony Klarica says, “when the focus is on enjoyment of sport, rather than winning, children are likely to maintain interest. Anthony Klarica offers some sporting guidelines for parents:-

DO:

- encourage your child to participate in physical activity.
- put an emphasis on participation and effort, not winning.
- support your child while he/she is playing, simply by being there.
- comment on how hard they tried, or something positive.
- leave the coaching to the coach.
- ask the child how he/she would like you to act or support them. Is there anything they would like you to do?
- model self-control and enjoyment as if playing with them in the yard or at the park.

DO NOT:

- yell at the child for errors or mistakes.
- yell abuse at umpires or opposition during a game.
- criticise umpires, opposition or put a coach down in discussion with your child about practise or a game.
- put all the emphasis on winning.
- make exaggerated facial expressions or hand signals to the child while they are playing or competing.
- If you are playing a sport or activity with the child at home, or at the park, do not try to turn it into a definitive coaching session. Rather, allow the child to have as much fun as possible, so that they are motivated to go and participate and play again. That way they will remain in the sport longer and develop the skills and abilities over time.