

# The importance of Multi-skills coaching for budding sports enthusiasts

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- **Multi-skills coaches are eager to change the ‘can’t-do’ mentality endemic in today’s society.**
- **Skills learnt will provide children with the opportunity to turn their hand to almost any sport in the future.**
- **There is a danger children will be left on the starting blocks, struggling to catch up, with a risk of losing them from sport altogether.**
- **Schools have a vital role to play as they have access to every child in the country.**

You wouldn’t dare build a house without digging the necessary foundations. The cracks would soon start to appear.

Providing firm foundations is a basic principle for many of life’s endeavours – starting a business, for instance, or building a lasting relationship.

In the world of sport, coaches must supply their protégés with the [fundamental building blocks](#) in order for them to kick on and fulfil their potential.

Multi-skills coaching aims to provide children with these building blocks.

## Back to basics

‘There is a growing consensus that a Multi-skills upbringing leads to longer-term ability and success. That’s what biographies of sportspeople tell us,’ explained under-nines football coach and sports coach UK Senior Coach Education Advisor [Andy Grant](#).

But what are these building blocks?

Essentially, they are:

- catching
- throwing
- travelling
- stability

As the children develop these skills, so they will improve:

- stamina and speed
- coordination and balance
- agility and flexibility
- strength and power

They are, then, the simple bare necessities for a life in sport and, ultimately, will improve your performance in almost any sport you may choose to take up in the future.

[Gary Fowler](#) holds the 1st4sport Level 2 Multi-skills Development in Sport (QCF) qualification and has a wealth of experience teaching children the fundamental movement skills that underpin this coaching.

However, he believes the skills highlighted above should not be the starting point for coaches and should be secondary to understanding the psychology of a child.

He is a firm believer in enforcing a 'can-do' mentality in children but claims this attitude is sadly lacking among parents and teachers alike.

'Developing that mindset at an early age is so important,' says Fowler. 'Just have a go, and if it doesn't work, it's not the end of the world. Get that idea across, and then it's easier to introduce the throwing, catching and jumping.'

Fowler, an Active Communities Multi-skills and Multi-sports Coach for Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council in Northern Ireland, began his career in a single-sport background, teaching football in the United States for nearly 10 years.

When he came back, the more time he spent with primary-age children, the more he noticed how incapable they were of doing even the most basic athletic movements. It shocked him.

'I was coaching a handball class to a group of nine, 10 and 11 year olds in a church hall, three teams rotating through, and when one wasn't playing, I said "Just jump up there on to the stage," and 95% of them couldn't do it. Just the simple act of putting two hands on to the stage and springing up on to it was beyond them.

'Kids aged four or five can often do things better than those several years older than them because they don't have the "can't-do" mentality at that young age. The more I coached, the more reinforced that belief became.'

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Gary Fowler

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*Happy days: There's no danger of not enjoying yourself at Gary Fowler's sessions*

**Fun and games**

It's fine to incorporate Multi-skills if you play a particular sport three or four times a week, but if your hockey club meets for just one hour a week, that doesn't leave much time to develop the love for your sport.

And the fear is, by taking away the racket, stick, ball or goalposts, you could drive children away.

'At the end of the day, you want these kids to keep coming back, and you have to use your judgement as a coach,' says Grant.

'If they spend a lot of the session just moving around cones and practising different jumping skills, is this really selling your sport to these children so they come back next week?'

I would recommend coaches spend most of the time with a ball, sticks, rackets and so on. You don't want to lose that, it's how you tweak it that is the key.

'There's no hard and fast rule. A lot of it comes down to the age of the children, their motivation, how many times they come to the sessions.'

### **The haves and the have-nots**

Grant explains that children can basically be split into two categories, and it is the role of the coach to determine which one each child fits into.

'If you have a lifestyle that includes a variety of sports then you are going to develop these Multi-skills – agility, handling skills, speed etc.'

'You have some children who are in a judo club once a week, play football, have attended swimming lessons from the age of four or five. They will have a well-structured all-round sports experience.'

'But not all children are active and have been brought up on sport. That leads on to the other school of thought – that you need to have specific activities that focus on developing Multi-skills.'

### **The computer generation**

You would not find many parents who would disagree that the modern-day child spends as much time playing with avatars as children their own age, and as much time sitting on their backsides as on their feet.

It is a big problem for coaches as many children no longer develop the basic movement skills they once did automatically as part of the process of growing up.

Chips have always been a kids' favourite, but now, it is computer chips that have seemingly taken over as the staple diet for youngsters.

'Children are definitely more inactive than their predecessors and lack these basic skills,' says Grant.

'It is a nationwide problem. In years gone by, that would never have been an issue for a coach because children would have turned up having spent their week climbing trees, throwing rocks down the river, playing in the playground.'

'Younger children – seven, eight, nine year olds – were used to hopping, jumping and straightforward catching and kicking of a ball.'

'So most coaches would agree they need to invest some of their sport-specific time on the longer-term benefit of the children – not just teaching their own sport but wider skills development on top of that. Twenty years ago, it wouldn't have been needed as it wasn't an issue.'

## **The school of hard knocks**

According to Fowler, it is a classic case of health and safety gone mad.

‘We see kids who play a lot of football up to the age of nine or 10, and even they can’t do those basic things. Whereas I had a little girl at a summer camp a few weeks ago who had just turned four, and I assumed she had done some sort of gymnastic work, but she hadn’t. Her mum said she just throws herself around the floor all the time.’

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*Nanny state: Fowler believes we live in an overprotective society*

### **Solutions and examples**

So is Multi-skills coaching, or the principles involved, automatically built into coaching courses these days in the light of the changing lifestyles of children in modern-day Britain?

‘I wouldn’t want to make a sweeping statement for all governing bodies,’ says Grant.

‘Some have tried to introduce that. For example, the Rugby Football League’s Level 1 course has changed in the last two or three years. They have introduced SOL, which stands for stability, object control and locomotion.

‘In rugby league, a high level of movement skills is a requirement of the game, and they have put a strong focus on developing SOL at a young age.

‘Their focus is still very much on the main elements of the game, but introducing a game of dodgeball, for example, will focus on invasion skills and handling skills, while coordination skills will be involved, as well as the rugby league elements.’

So in an era when the number of housebound children is multiplying, and society is waging a war with rising obesity levels, sport provides a key to their freedom, and glaringly obvious health benefits.

The danger is that children could be left on the starting blocks without Multi-skills coaching at a young age.

### **Start as you mean to go on**

I throw in another potential stumbling block. Do a lot of grass-roots coaches concentrate solely on sport-specific exercises, further neglecting the chance to build those fundamental movement skills?

‘There is nothing wrong with coaches focusing on their own sports per se,’ says Grant.

‘The coaches and children have a passion for it. But there would be a case for the coaching outcomes to also underpin some of the Multi-skills highlighted.

‘So, for example, a session on football passing and receiving skills could also look to add a focus on children’s coordination, in terms of lateral skills, at the same time. Instead of focusing on movement to create space, they could actually talk about forward and backward lateral movement as a means of getting away from defenders – not necessarily changing the activity but getting more value from it by focusing on a movement skill.’

Fowler, taking over the baton, suggests having an emphasis on Multi-skills in introductory level qualifications, Level 1 awards or youth awards.

‘At the moment, often, the parents don’t know what Multi-skills coaching is. If we built it into those qualifications, then maybe longer term, we can learn to appreciate the benefit of it.’

### **Top of the class**

Fowler is a firm believer that children should not be mollycoddled at home or at school, and Grant also weighs in on the important role schools can play in teaching Multi-skills.

‘What schools have is a vast contact list – every single child in the whole of the UK. There’s no grass-roots sports club outside of school that will be able to make that reach.

‘I think there’s a good case then to work on educating PE teachers so they do specific work on those children who lack some of the basic movement skills.’

Academic study seems to be more of a priority for head teachers and boards of governors than physical literacy, Grant agrees.

‘Any extra funding is at the discretion of the head teacher. Investing in equipment, an external qualified coach coming in to teach Multi-skills or working with primary school teachers to do some continuing personal development (CPD) to make them better at delivering PE in schools is not always a priority.

‘You are competing with other academic subjects and demands on school resources.

‘And when the SATS are coming up, does PE take a back seat? It comes down to the priorities and commitment of the school at that point.

‘Overall then, schools have a vast role to play as they can access every single child, and they can make sure they leave with a strong Multi-skills underpinning.’

### **Gary Fowler’s top tips**

1. Keep the 'C' system of coaching in mind both when planning and delivering sessions.\*
2. Stop demonstrating! It creates copycats and prevents interpretation. Even young kids are more than capable of taking a simple explanation or direction on board.
3. Use children's peers as motivation and demonstration of practice – it is a good kind of copying or stealing!
4. Do not be afraid of organised chaos. Your session does not have to look pretty to be effective. This relates to your confidence as a coach.
5. Encourage creativity and risk taking in children – as coaches, we are often afraid to do so. Take risks, try new things, and if it doesn't always work, so what? Learn from it in the same way kids do.
6. Keep it simple. Use games from the school playground or 1980s birthday party games. The simplicity and fun of these can be a great starting point.
7. The coaching table – psychology underpins **all** other aspects, whether they're technical, tactical, social or physical. Imagine four legs of a table, with the ground being the psychology of the child. If the ground is uneven, it impacts on the balance of the table as each of the four legs wobbles.
8. Develop ownership – give lots of responsibility to children at a young age to set the tone early. Allow them to make decisions, self-coach and lead under your guidance.
9. Disguise repetition – variety for children keeps them engaged, but sometimes, the most subtle change to adults can seem like an entirely new task or game for kids. Use your imagination and theirs.
10. Be demanding – many parents and teachers are too soft with kids. Children are more than happy with levels of expectation once they get used to them. It's just their nature to test boundaries and responses with us.

*\* The 'C' system of coaching is a model explaining the holistic development of children through sport by developing their character and caring, competence, confidence, connection, and creativity. You can find out more about the 'C' system in the [sports coach UK 'Coaching Children 5-12' workshop](#).*

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