

What coaches need to know when coaching children and young people

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From my years of coaching children and young people in different sports I wanted to share some key details that may help you become a better coach. I have delivered coach education to many different National Governing Bodies in sport and leadership training to CEO's and Directors of major companies like Mercedes Benz based on my methods, Values and Ethos.

In this blog I aim to give sport coaches some tools to help them work better with children and young people.

3 TIPS WHEN WORKING WITH CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

1. HOLISTIC APPROACH

Understand that coaching alone is not enough to make the most of your athlete's potential. I have coached children now for 15 years and have learnt more from them than I ever had any NGB coaching qualification.

Understanding the children and young people you are working with is vital to their learning. The stereotypical coach, who of course knows best, will have a mind-set of "I teach this and they will learn". If you still believe this you should not be coaching children.

Start by building a better relationship with your student. Do you know much about their life outside of your session? Do you know the family dynamic's or about the child's past in any form? I am not suggesting you become a social worker but a little understanding goes a long way. They may be in a single parent home or have learning disabilities. These things will effect the child learning. Something a little as not eating well because they were rushing to make it to the session on time after school can have a massive impact on performance. We as adults regularly think about this but I have worked with children in very deprived areas and learnt quickly that this is an issue. Parents sometimes do not properly prepare their children for after school activities.

If your students are regular, have you got any kind of contact with the school? This can even be through the parents telling you about not only the issues but also achievements. Knowing about these things will give you a better understanding of the child's day to day behaviour and therefor help you understand how they might better learn that day.

Some of the children you work with may be from single parent households or not live with their parents. If so, they may be looking for a role model or mentor to help guide them. Coaches quite often become a role model even if you don't realise. So think long and hard about your own behaviours when you are around them.

Mental health is becoming more apparent in today's society. I have always taken pride in understanding this to the best of my ability as I work with a lot of young people who live with mental health issues. You, as a coach can improve a child's mental state which ultimately could save their life. Think about that for a minute...

Sport is such a powerful tool in terms of controlling a person's mental state. Use yourself as an example.

You have had a bad day at work or a money situation is stressing you out. You go to the gym or you go for a run. How do you feel afterwards? Now imagine the extreme emotions someone might feel if they suffer with depression. I say imagine as I can only empathise. When we exercise we release Endorphins. Endorphins diminish the perception of pain. They also act as sedatives. They are manufactured in your brain, spinal cord, and many other parts of your body and are released in response to brain chemicals called neurotransmitters. The neuron receptors endorphins bind to are the same ones that bind some pain medicines.

I will leave you with a thought on this section. We all have a 'mental health' Have you ever experienced stress or anxiety? How did you deal with it?

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2. DON'T LET EGO BE THE ENEMY!

This relates mostly to you as a coach. Over the years I have worked with coaches from; Football, Basketball, Boxing, Weightlifting, Volleyball, Judo, Brazilian Jiu jitsu and MMA. I have met and been coached by so many egotistical coaches of these sports that they failed to teach or even engage me.

As a former professional MMA fighter and a Black Belt in Brazilian Jiu Jitsu I see this more than ever in these sports. There are no qualifications for coaching in these sports and no standard or structure as such to what a coach should work to.

Now, I'm not saying there are no good coaches in these sports. There are plenty. I have competed in sport to a good level for many years in; Football, Basketball, Taekwondo, Athletics, American Football, MMA and BJJ. The best coach I have ever been coached by is my professor and good friend Marco Canha. I received my Black Belt in Brazilian Jiu Jitsu from Marco in 2016. Marco has been the most influential coach I have ever had. This is not to do with his technical knowledge of the sport (which is amazing by the way) but more to do with his interpersonal skills and approachability. Marco has a unique way of making his students feel like part of his family, in a class of sometimes up to 40 students that is saying something. Marco will know every student by name and have a certain connection with every one of them. A good coach will recognise the importance of building these relationships rather than having a dictator approach.

I often come across coaches that believe they know everything. They feel that the world cannot teach them anything else about their sport and so they are a good coach. You can be an expert in your sport and have all the technical knowledge but have terrible interpersonal skills. You will not be a successful coach. Improve your knowledge as a coach and improve your interpersonal skills. Both can always be improved. I often have coaches tell me, "There are no coaching qualifications for my sport because there is no NGB". Have you tried going on Mental Health training or Child Protection. Or looking on [Sports Coach UK at the workshops they offer](#). Like Community coaching or Equality and diversity.

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3. TEACHING VS LEARNING – CREATING A LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

Now this is the biggest turning point for me when I am working with coaches. As coaches, we tend to coach how we have previously been coached in the past. I am lucky enough to have been coached by some amazing coaches and some terrible ones. This has allowed me to learn from each experience and take the best attributes of each coach and apply that to my methods.

Do you think the children and young people are learning just because you are teaching them? What are you doing to create good learning environments?

"Learners learn, Teachers and coaches help that process happen. Sometimes"

A real turning point in my coaching career was when I watched Rita Pearsons 2013 TED Talk, Every child needs a champion. If you haven't watched this already, I highly suggest that after reading this you make your way over to YouTube to see what she has to say. As a sports coach you need to understand there is a chance you could be the biggest influence in a young persons life. You need to develop relationships with your students. People don't learn from people they don't like. Once a young person looks up to you they will see you as a role model as automatically want to listen to what you have to say. This is creating a learning environment.

Don't be fooled. If you think because you have been involved in your sport for many years or competed at a high level that you will be a good coach. Pride yourself on not only improving your knowledge of the sport but also the softer things which will usually be the better investment. Learning how to improve your personable skills would not take a lot of effort. Just practice.

No significant learning can be done without a significant relationship – James Colmer

I want to leave you with this thought. People learn when they make connections. I would like you all to try an exercise. Instead of doing the usual process of; Warm up, drill, drill, drill, train /play.

Allow the young people to make connections in a good learning environment. Allow your students to connect the dots by increasing the difficulty of the learning. Challenging their thinking on what should happen next. Allow them to show you what they mean then challenge them with questions on their decisions. Don't just teach what you have been taught and assume they are learning it and that it is the best thing for them to learn. As they make the connections the brain is working harder rather than just copying something you have shown them.

You, as a coach are the only barrier for your athletes.

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