

# Gender bias - Should our language really be different towards the youngest of players?

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My weekend dynamics have changed a little this season and instead of the privilege of coaching a side, I find myself on the opposite sideline, watching my son as he takes his first steps into refereeing. It's taken me to various local clubs and close to the always interesting conversations and offerings of supporters and parents.

Now, I've [covered my views on parents and how we can work with them in a previous blog](#) and have little else to add but something struck me in the language of Coaches and Parents this last week.

[How different the approach was towards the girls who were playing the game.](#)

Many thoughtful articles and discussions have already taken place on here, ([check out Blake Richardson's really interesting blog on differences between the genders](#)) and without doubt some high profile issues on the treatment of women in society as a whole are well up the news running orders. Following on from these, I can't help thinking that whilst watching recent matches, here, yet again, is another example of gender stereotyping along with pink clothes and traditional toys. When footballers are numbered 1-9 on a pitch, playing the same game and under the same rules, why should the language differ? In these recent matches what struck me as I warmed my hands on a polystyrene cup was that whilst the language may have come across as patronising or condescending towards the girls that were playing, the words used were EXACTLY the words that should be directed to any child learning the sport?

'Oh, well done!', 'great effort' 'nice try'

Isn't that how we should be addressing all 7-11 year old players? Praising their efforts? Encouraging Trial and Error? Happy just to be there watching them play the game? I became aware that it was the boys on the teams getting the raw deal. Receiving less encouragement but more instruction. Drowning in jargon and being berated for 'playing across your goal' (Possession was kept and an attack built, by the way!). Parents could see that the girls were 'giving it their best' but didn't seem to acknowledge that the boys were doing the same.

If we are truly going to treat kids (and therefore people) as equals, then surely we must ignore the gender differences and see footballers all as the same at this age. To bash the stereotype idea, the three girls I've seen recently were as 'tough' and hardy as any of their male peers. One was incredibly intelligent in her running and another technically excellent in her positioning. All of their actions received praise and we watched them grow in confidence as the game progressed. Some other players in the game were not so lucky. Ridiculed for errors by some and regularly asked to up their game. These players were the ones who started to feel the cold. These players wanted to receive the ball less and certainly didn't want to keep it. These players started to argue with others. These players were the boys.

I hope I'm not misunderstood here. I've run three different grassroots sides and in a rural area, there are few girls' teams or leagues. However, I can honestly say that I've been an advocate for mixed football for many years. There has always been at least one girl in my team. Not as a token or a gesture but purely because they were kids who wanted to play football. Gender has never been an issue although I really cannot be sure if or how my language or demeanour ever changed when I addressed them.

If boys are to grow up respecting women's right to be competitive in sports and the workplace, then we are doing little to help them by treating them differently in our sports environments early on. I accept that as we get older, then the dynamics and language may need more thought but as Blake points out in his blog, the very young are minimal in their difference.

I've really enjoyed taking in these recent games. The way the girls have been treated and addressed, whatever the intentions or motivation, was spot on. Surely every kid should be treated like this? Why not praise, encourage and let them all enjoy sport without fear of failure or experimentation? Why not accept that every player is doing the best they can with the ability they have at this snapshot in time. I've seen girls correctly praised and admired for their efforts.

Let's give boys the same chance?

Every Child Counts.

Thanks for Reading

Rich

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