

Developing decision makers

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By *Fran Kulas*

Would you, as a parent, go in your backyard and cheer for your kids while they are playing tag with their neighborhood friends? Would you tell them where to hide in a game of “hide-and-go-seek”? Would you tell them who to pass to in a two-on-two basketball game in your driveway? I feel sure those who asked themselves these questions responded with a definitive “no.” Since you wouldn’t cheer for your child or offer strategic comments to them in neighborhood games, why do you do it during their team’s soccer game? Is it because you view their performance as being more important because they are wearing uniforms and there is a referee? Are you the type of parent who believes that your success in raising your child will be measured by what your child does or doesn’t do in his/her soccer game?

The sideline behavior of coaches and parents must improve. In Dr. Lynn Kidman’s book “Developing Decision Makers,” she points out that “it is imperative that we give priority to the development needs of children, ahead of adult needs.” Children actually need less direction than most parents and coaches are giving them. Let’s explore solutions that will help give the game back to the kids.

Adult Reinforcement

Adult influence is a very instrumental factor on the way children develop psychologically, socially, cognitively, and emotionally. As Kidman points out, “Adult reinforcement is the main influence on the way children perceive failure. If adults make it clear that they expect their children to win, they insinuate that the children will fail unless they win.”

Adult reinforcement can be both positive and negative. While parents and coaches may have the best intentions at heart, Kidman notes that adult expectations can often inhibit a child’s enjoyment of a sport. “Because the desire for adult approval is very strong before puberty,” Kidman writes, “Children’s ability to perform at their own level and for fun can be inhibited. Therefore adults have a responsibility to consider which expectations are their own and which are their children’s. This is a difficult task because it requires some degree of objectivity.”

Sideline Behavior and Comments

A simple, yet seldom-used method of determining what children want to hear from the sidelines is proposed in the book: “A good way to determine whether the sideline comments are helpful and supportive is to ask the children what they prefer to hear on the sideline, if anything.” Have you ever tried this approach? I challenge you to do so and report back to me with the responses you solicit.

Steve Tranter, Director of Coaching for the Cincinnati United Premier Soccer Club in Cincinnati, Ohio, distributes a document to all of his coaches entitled “Coach Protocol.” In this document, coaches are instructed to “only give instruction when the ball is out of play.” While this may be considered extreme, it certainly serves as a sound guideline for parents and coaches to refrain from trying to control the players’ every move versus allowing them to discover the game at their own rate.

Parents and coaches often get wrapped up in the moment and get overwhelmed with the emotion that they want the players to succeed. We must, however, as adult leaders in a child’s game, ask ourselves, “Are we giving information for rapid performance change or for deep rooted learning?”

An old Chinese Proverb states: “I hear and I forget. I see and I remember. I do and I understand.” Let’s remember these wise old words while on the sidelines of the soccer field. Kidman points out that “too often we give children answers to remember rather than problems to solve.” There couldn’t be a more true statement.

Let Them Play!

U14 boys' rugby coach Hugh Galvan, paints a clear picture in Kidman's book when he is quoted saying "Certainly I used to be more directive, make a lot more decisions for players and didn't include them in the decision-making process, yet ironically, they play the game, not me." This youth coach has a firm grasp on what a coach is really meant to do: empower players to perform and make decisions independently. "There is no point in coaching unless the teaching you do helps the student overtake you," Galvan said.

Yet sometimes as parents and coaches, we sometimes selfishly want players to rely on us to be successful. Letting players play and make decisions on their own is perhaps the most important responsibility for adults. It is well documented that decision-making ability is considered particularly important within a free-flowing dynamic sport such as soccer, in which the coach has limited influence once the game begins. Sometimes, less is more.

Recently at a U.S. Soccer National Youth License course, instructor Ron Quinn provided a slogan for all adults in the game to model themselves after: "Over-coaching is when players look to you for every move they make. Under-coaching is when they can't find you."

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