Identifying Excellent Coaching Practice along the Sporting Pathway

Research Briefing No.1: The Children Coaching Environment

July 2012

This briefing will be of interest to anyone who works within the children coaching environment. It features extracts from a larger report produced for sports coach UK by the University of Stirling. More information and links to the full report can be found at the end of this briefing.

This briefing is produced as part of the Excellent Coaching Practice Project. It is designed to stimulate debate and ideas on excellent coaching practice rather than produce an agreed definition of excellence. As such it should be read in the spirit in which it was intended.
1. Summary of results

The research found that excellent coaching practice within the children coaching environment was likely to:

- Be fun, family oriented, and develop team work.
- Focus on development over winning.
- Promote continued involvement in the sport and guide progression through the player development pathway.

Coaches working with children would:

- Create an environment that emphasises learning and development, is fun, and inclusive.
- Develop a rapport and a relationship with the athletes.
- Adapt to the situational demands and individual needs.
- Provide athletes with individual feedback.
- Include questioning and listening to promote understanding.

Coaches working with children developed their skills by:

- Learning from other coaches through observation and discussion
- Reflecting on their own coaching practice
- Learning from quality coaches, mentors, and building interpersonal skills.

2. Recommendations for coach development

Recommendations for coach development included:

- More coach education courses available for children’s coaches from novice children’s coaches to advanced children’s coaches.
- Courses specifically looking at how to build rapport with children.
- Opportunities to learn from quality coaches.
- Mentoring.

3. Recommendations for future research

Recommendations for future research included:

- More detailed analysis of what makes an excellent coach in this environment including observation of excellent coaches in practice.
- Identifying what an excellent session and programme would look like for children.
- Research on how to build effective relationships with players and/or how to engage players from an early age.
4. Detailed analysis by theme

4.1 Coaching outcomes

The children involved in the study all indicated that fun was an important outcome of excellent coaching practice. They said that ‘having a laugh’ during the session was important to them. The coaches echoed this sentiment endorsing that excellent coaching practice should lead to sessions that were fun for the athletes in order to keep them interested and involved in the sport. One of the coaches stated:

I think for me the elements that make up good coaching practice is making the sessions fun so what we are aiming to do is engage the youngsters so they will take part in the sport and give what they can to it.
(ChildCoachM2)

The coaches believed that getting the whole family involved and selling hockey as a ‘family package’ was another way to keep the children involved in the sport. The coaches also identified that excellent coaching practice in this context was about developing the athletes rather than about winning. For instance, one of the coaches said:

Sometimes they are on the winning side and sometimes they are not but actually most of the time the score doesn’t matter it is the quality of what they are doing and they are getting the feedback in a positive way.
(ChildCoachM2)

However, one of the coaches suggested that developing the will to win was still important. This coach stated:

I think the will to win is important. Winning for the kids is more important than to the coach, they like to win and I want them to like to win. If we lose that is ok. You can’t be a coach who wins at all costs with kids.
(ChildCoachM1)

The parents interviewed in the study had a similar view and suggested that the concept of development over winning was important. One of the parents stated:

I think the way we do it here is good. [Another club] they are more competitive whereas kids from our club they are yeah if we lose we lose but we will try our hardest and they are not up nor down about it. You can see other clubs it is a hardship to lose and even the coaches take it bad.
(ChildParentM1)

The parents also believed that developing team work was an important outcome of excellent coaching practice. For example, a parent stated “the kids seem to play more of a team now, they seemed to have grasped that whereas with other clubs they have this one player and that is the team and the others are standing about” (ChildParentF1).

4.2 The Bigger Picture

The coaches in the children’s context believed it was important to know the next steps in the player development pathway in order to provide advice and help to the players on how to progress further. This is reflected in the following statements:

You need to know the next step on the pathway as in who would they go to next. Maybe getting a coach come down to one of your own sessions so they can see where the next step is. (ChildCoachF1)
It is your responsibility that child or family know where to go next because if they are not from a hockey background they won't know where their local club is or the next development session is so not to let them drift away. (ChildCoachF1)

4.3 The Group Environment

The coaches agreed that the environment had to be fun and happy and one which emphasises learning. For instance a coach stated “Ideally I want an open happy environment that people are prepared to go out and practice, try things and learn from themselves, listen to input and carry it out” (ChildCoachM1). The coaches also believed that for this context it was important to have the same coach lead the session each week to ensure consistency and because the young age group 'like a familiar face’. This was echoed by the athletes as they indicated that they liked to know the coach. The parents stated that they preferred the hockey environment over other sports because it was friendly, relaxed and all the children were included. This is emphasised by the following comments:

Another thing I like about the hockey because you are so close to these football grounds, the parents can get involved to encourage and there is a lot of sportsmanship to it. With the football there is cursing and swearing of these parents in the background saying all sorts to their kids whereas here it is a relaxed manner, everyone is friendly and that is something I like. (ChildParentM1)

I think the coaches are good here and the fact they encourage and make kids welcome whereas in the basketball I think if you weren’t as good as they expected you to be then you are left aside. Here they try to bring everyone in. (ChildParentF1)

4.4 Coach-Athlete Relationship

The coaches believed that excellent coaching practice involved getting to know their athletes. A first and crucial step in this process was to learn their names. Following this, it was important to build a rapport with the children, ask them questions, listen to them, and get to know them as individuals. This is reflected in the following responses “I think the element of being able to relate to the individual players and get to know individual players, not as hockey players but as individuals” (ChildCoachF1), “Ask them questions or have a conversation with them” (ChildCoachM1), “I think the one thing that is important is to learn their names. It makes a huge difference” (ChildCoachF1), and “It is fine talking about long term player development but what we need is long term player relationships, they know they can phone, they know they can talk because they know me and the others” (ChildCoachM2). The coaches go onto say that a way to build up these relationships is to have the same coaches and helpers attending on a regular basis.

The athletes in this context identified that they wanted to get to know their coach and they liked coaches who can chat to them both on and off the pitch. For example, a player stated “Not just on the training pitch but when we are walking around the school they are like hi, they talk to you, have a conversation. Even at some tournaments they will see you and come and talk to you” (ChildAthleteM3).

4.5 Planning and organisation

The coaches agreed that planning and organisation were important elements of excellent coaching practice. The coaches believed that a great deal of planning and organisation
was needed for this context to ensure that the sessions were fun, safe and helping to develop the players. One of the coaches suggested that the level and depth of planning may depend on the experience of the coach. For experienced coaches, they may have a general plan for what they aim to work on daily or weekly but they do not need to write down each specific drill. The coach remarked:

For me with 15 years experience the planning might be today we are going to work on the slap hit and I might make a few key notes to myself about the slap hit but then the individual drills that I will do on that day they don’t really need to be written down, they are in my experienced head and it is about plucking the right drills out for the right group at the right time. (ChildCoachM1)

The athletes in this context agreed that sessions should be fun and exciting but still focussed on learning. They indicated that they enjoyed learning new skills during the sessions. This is reflected in the following comments: “I like my coach to teach us skills every week so every week we are learning new skills, that makes it fun” (ChildAthleteM1) and “It has to be fun but don’t take it so far that you are not learning anything” (ChildAthleteM3). The athletes also indicated that they liked the sessions to involve competitive games. The competitive aspect of the sessions was also identified by the coaches. One coach stated “You need a game element to keep them motivated. A lot of the players love your 2 v 2 ladder so if you win you move up and if you lose you move down” (ChildCoachF1).

Adaptation was also identified by the coaches as an important element of excellent coaching. They believed that coaches should adapt drills regularly to keep the athletes’ concentration. As one coach explained:

Yeah they have a very short attention span so the really young, the primary fives and sixes, it is maybe five minutes a drill and then after that they have lost concentration. Unless you can change the drill, it may have the same theme, but change the drill every four or five minutes they are away with the fairies. (ChildCoachM1)

In addition, coaches should be ready to adapt to the demands of the situation such as if there are more or less players than expected, the session is not going as planned, or to provide opportunities for repetition without feeling repetitive. Responses from the coaches and tutors included:

in terms of excellent coaching it is being able to adapt quickly to the environment you are working in. (ChildTutorF1)

Yeah you have to be confident though and not be scared to think oh yeah lets change that. And it is not feeling threatened that you have not done what you were meant to do. (ChildCoachF1)

If you have made a bad lesson, too advanced or whatever, it is about always being willing to adapt it. (ChildCoachM1)

I think that is part of the skill of coaching, how you are able to adapt simple objectives but disguise it in a different form. (ChildTutorM2)
4.6 Working with athletes

The coaches believed that in the children’s context a large amount of tactics and technical detail were not needed. The priority at this stage was getting them playing and having fun. This is reflected in the following statements: “I don’t think tactics or specialist plays or you are a full back or you are right midfield is important either. I just think they need to be on the pitch playing” (ChildCoachM1), “Get them in game first and once they are here you want them to keep them in the sport so you want it to be fun and safe, get them running, get them to socialise, bringing in teaching points as you go but not to overdo it” (ChildCoachF1), and “We all use humour and there is a lot of laughter. I think it is about not pressing the point for too long and getting some light relief into the session” (ChildCoachM2).

4.7 Session Delivery

The coaches believed that questioning and listening was an element of excellent coaching practice. For example one of the coaches stated:

I am an absolute believer that you have to listen to your students or pupils. The reason I do it so to understand what they are thinking. I need to know what you saw, thought you saw, are thinking so I can understand where you are coming from so I can correct it, change it, agree with it. Quite often they will hit a good shot and I will ask why was that good? (ChildCoachM1)

Questioning was seen as important in order to get the athletes to think for themselves. One of the coaches referred to this as a ‘decision rich process’ as he believed the athletes need to think about what they are doing and the decisions they are making. Comments from the coaches included:

If you keep telling them what to do then they end up robots and then if something goes wrong they won’t know what to do. Get them to explain what to do, saying how do you adapt to it? (ChildCoachF1)

Most practices should be decision rich. Let’s make a decision, why are you doing that, why did you pass it to that player? You need that from a young age. It is ok starting with a closed practice then say adding in a defender to make it an open practice and now they have decisions to make. That is the biggest issue I have with coaching in this country it is not decision rich. (ChildCoachM1)

I think it is fine doing a bit of teaching but we try to do is get the kids to start to think for themselves so you might pose them a problem, go away in a small group and see what you can try and do about shooting. (ChildCoachM2)

The parents believed that players should be split up into smaller groups in order to receive more attention and feedback. One of the parents stated: “I think small groups helps, gives them more time with the ball and it is repetition as well that builds the skill. If you just do it a couple of times you won’t learn it” (ChildParentF2). This was echoed by one of the coaches as he believed that excellent coaching practice did not just rely on one coach instead a group of helpers/coach leaders are needed to deliver a session. This allows the children to spilt into smaller groups and get more attention. This coach stated:

The crucial thing is to have enough helpers and people around with a sufficient knowledge that they can translate your plans into practice. On a
Saturday we have an average of 40 kids so we would usually have a compliment of four or five adults and four senior secondaries so we can break into five groups and so there are lower numbers to work with. (ChildCoachM2)

**4.8 Intervention skills**

The coaches believed that excellent coaching practice was providing players with individual feedback to correct their errors. For example, a coach stated:

> The only individualisation they get is when it comes to error correction because they all have different errors. For one drill a group may not have their hands together for the hit so they need to do that. Another group may have their hands together but swing the stick way up so they may need to do something different. (ChildCoachM1)

The coaches agreed that the feedback should be positive and constructive in nature. The athletes echoed these sentiments as they suggested that an excellent coach provides feedback individually, helps correct technique, and provides demonstrations to increase their understanding. The athletes agreed that this feedback should be constructive as they did not like it when a coach “shouts at them”. For example, one of the athletes stated: “If you are not quite doing something right then he won’t shout at you. He will take you to the side and show you what you are doing wrong instead of shouting at you.” (ChildAthleteM3)

**5. Learning and development in the children coaching environment**

In the children coaching environment two themes emerged as important in the development of excellent coaching practice. These were development experiences and desired opportunities.

**5.1 Development Experiences**

This theme focuses on how coaches have learnt excellent coaching practices. One way of learning that appeared important to the coaches was learning from other coaches, both from hockey and other sports. The coaches valued:

- observing other coaches,
- having discussions
- sharing ideas
- reading
- reflecting on trial and error.

For example, a coach stated “As much as possible go and watch coaches, what do they do, how do they work? Steal their ideas, if you see something that is good then use it. Listen, read, observe, ask questions” (ChildrenCoachM1). Another method of learning was learning through experience and self evaluating their own practice. For example, one of the coaches stated:

> The word experience, how do you get that? Well unfortunately that might be through doing several bad practices in order to develop your practices or to do an excellent practice. You know yourself when you come out of a session, when you are buzzing and everything you wanted to get across has happened. A good portion of the time you are thinking that was ok and that was ok but as long as you keep thinking about it and trying to improve. (ChildrenCoachF1)
5.2 Desired Opportunities

The coaches identified several opportunities that would help them develop their practices further. Firstly, the coaches wanted access to better quality coaches in order to see what they were doing and learn from them. The coaches also thought mentoring would be beneficial. For example, a coach stated “I think the mentoring aspect plays a very significant role. It might be the case that the coach doesn’t know they do a certain trait. Somebody on the side saying why don’t you try it this way might help” (ChildCoachF1). Lastly, one of the coaches believed that coach education courses should cover how to build up a rapport with the athletes. This coach remarked “Body language and being able to communicate. We don’t cover this in the courses” (ChildrenCoachF1).

6. About the research

This research was conducted by the University of Stirling on behalf of sports coach UK. The fieldwork was undertaken with Scottish Hockey and involved interviews and focus groups with coaches, participants and parents along the sporting pathway (children, young people, adults, talent development, elite).

The purpose of the research was gain an in-depth understanding of the coaches’ and participants’ views on excellent coaching practice.

You can read the full report on the sports coach UK website http://www.sportscoachuk.org/resource/identifying-excellent-coaching-practice-along-sporting-pathway