

**Effective Community Based Youth Sport Programs:
Developing an Activities Checklist
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Youth sports in the United States has grown steadily in the past quarter century. It is recognized by society as a valuable development outlet for children. It is estimated that nearly 40 million children participate in organized youth sports each year. The vast number of children now playing has placed the burden of coaching and administering programs largely on adult volunteers. These adults are placed in positions where they exert great influence on young athletes but, unfortunately, fewer than 20% of the estimated 2.5 million youth sport coaches have received any type of training to become a coach (Martens, 1997; Stewart & Sweet, 1992). It is the coach who serves as the link between the adult world and the world of the child. Often, the only view of sport that an adult volunteer has is one of adults playing the game. There is a huge difference between the game for children and the game for adults. The knowledge the coach possesses and the ability he/she has to impart that knowledge will greatly influence the child, parents, sports officials, and the sport itself. There is clear evidence that coaches can present negative influences without realizing the damage that can be done.

This paper is designed to address the needs of the volunteer youth sport coach. It contains a number of principles for coaching young children and will conclude with a checklist for coaches to determine if the principles for coaching young children have been met. Developmentally appropriate practices; clear, concise and correct information; protocols for instruction; a simple to complex progression of skills; a safe and appropriate training space; an opportunity for children to be involved in decision making opportunities; and activities that have direct implication to their sport will be addressed. The purpose is to better prepare adults to deal with the needs of children.

Developmentally Appropriate Practice

Too often, an adult volunteer coach only has an adult vision of the sport they are coaching.

By this I mean their view of the game is one played by adults. The game children play does not fit this model. Children lack the technical skill, tactical awareness, physical stamina, and psychosocial development required to play a game following an adult structure of play. What is needed is a developmental approach that provides for the needs of every child regardless of age and physical maturity. Being developmentally appropriate means allowing children to play any sport at a level that is beneficial to them.

Games and practice sessions need to involve every child with play opportunities. Every child needs as much participation as possible. No child should have to wait in line for their "turn," be a substitute for a prolonged period of time, or be denied the opportunity to develop skills and abilities because their rate of learning is different from others in the same group. "Selecting out" children, because they are not as physically mature as their peers, has damaging, lifelong implications. Youth sport programs must be modified to enable all children to engage in activities that foster success, and most of all are fun. The key measurement of success is to see how many children return to play the next day, the next week, and the next season.

Young children are very egocentric (a self-centered focus almost to the exclusion of anything else), are able to focus on only one task at a time, have no sense of pace (they move at top speed, get tired, stop and recover, then go at top speed again). They can only process small amounts of information at a time, have an immature understanding of time and space relationships, and are still physically developing and need movement activities that contribute to total body development. Small-sided games with modified equipment, playing space, and rules of play must be developed and mandated.

One major issue that must be addressed by parents and youth sport administrators is when should children formally begin participation in youth sports? This is clearly a maturational readiness decision. All children grow and develop at different rates. Most children start school at

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age five. Not all are ready. The same is true in youth sports. Not all five-year-olds are ready for this environment. Some are, most are not. The notion of “earlier is better” is ill advised. Early exposure to organized youth sports does not translate into competent performance at a later date. It often means “burnout” at an earlier age.

Another major issue is the length of games and practice sessions. A common philosophy is that of “more is better.” Many adults think that having children practice for longer periods translates into improved ability. This is not the case. Sports practices and games for children under the age of ten must be held to one hour or less in total time spent engaged in activity. For children ages 5-8, the time should be 45 minutes or less per session. More sessions per week are not the answer either. Three sessions per week is appropriate. Informal play, especially play initiated by children, must be encouraged. I was encouraged many times as a child to, “go out and play.” There is much value in that statement.

Clear, Concise and Correct Information

It is very important for coaches to be able to provide information that children can understand. Children can learn concepts and can be expected to follow directions. It is important for coaches to state clear directions, keep information brief, and be sure to deliver information in a positive manner. It is imperative that the information be correct. If you are not sure what the correct method or rule is, find out before you deliver the wrong information. A positive, enthusiastic approach is infectious. No child (or adult for that matter) likes to be yelled at. Children need to hear feedback about what they are doing well more so than what they are doing wrong. When conveying information, use the child’s first name, as it personalizes the feedback and is internalized. Use “good job, well done, and nice try” only when warranted. Don’t over do it.

Protocols for Instruction

Protocols help establish a creative atmosphere for learning. Each youth sport environment presents its own unique challenges for coaches. It might involve functioning in a gymnasium, on a soccer field, baseball diamond, or in a swimming pool. It is important to establish standards or protocols so everyone can function effectively during practices and games. Technically, the word protocol refers to established norms or courtesies that have been predetermined (Graham, 1992). They establish boundaries and help the coach maintain control of the environment. Common questions that create a need for protocols include, what do players do when they arrive for practice? How do coaches start and stop activity? How do players get and return equipment? How do players select partners or form groups or teams?

Young children often rely on adults to get them to practice. They tend to arrive at different times. When players arrive at practice, what do they typically do? Often, they stand and wait for everyone to arrive and for practice to begin. Sometimes they find alternative activities to engage in (often, inappropriate) and sometimes they might actually begin to play on their own. It is this last choice that we need to encourage. It is sad to think that millions of children have to be told that it is OK to play. That is why they came to practice. Have a plan for them to immediately engage in some aspect of play upon their arrival. As more children arrive, they can immediately join whoever is there or start their own form of play. Before long, everyone has arrived, and they are all playing. At this point, stand and watch them play for another 5-10 minutes before you “start” practice.

Establish clear start and stop signals and inform them what is expected when you say “go” or “stop” or “freeze.” Please get them to respond to voice commands – avoid using a whistle. They should respond to the signal the first time not the fourth time. Often using the name of the game as a start signal reinforces it and also allows them to move into their own space before the game actually begins.

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Place equipment needed for practices and games in one place and instruct children to get and return anything they use to that one place. This prevents equipment (balls) from being kicked or thrown all over the place. Also instruct children on what the protocol is when equipment ends up in the street, parking lot, or the deep end of the pool.

How do you have children form pairs, small groups, or teams? How do you accommodate an odd number of players? Do all activities need to be practiced with “even” numbers? Call out a math problem and have them solve it with the number you desire. The idea is that everyone can be a partner, no one is excluded from being a member of a group, and everyone forms the desired size group as quickly as possible. If a player does not have a group initially, they know it is OK to join any existing pair or group. Encourage cooperation.

Simple to Complex Skill Development Progression

Children need to experience the game at their level. They need to be engaged in activity as much as possible. As children begin to develop basic skills, they need to be challenged by progressively more difficult tasks. Remember, all children learn at different rates. Some children need to spend more time and practice on the very basic skills (foundation) while others are ready to progress to more difficult skills or skill progressions. Children need to be encouraged to try new things even though there is a perception of difficulty. It will help with their intrinsic motivation to play. An important point to remember is that children need to experience high levels of success. If the task is too difficult, a level of frustration may set in and their motivation to try new tasks may wane. If the task is too easy and they are not challenged to attempt more complex tasks, young players will become bored and will seek out other activities (often inappropriate) in an attempt to overcome their boredom. By changing game activities and allowing each child to experience multiple success opportunities, everyone will benefit.

Safe and Appropriate Training Space

A responsibility for every coach is to make sure the environment selected for play is of appropriate size and is safe for participants. This responsibility also includes equipment (in good condition and working order). Do children feel safe in this environment or are they threatened? If they feel threatened, why?

Safety is a major issue. If your practice space is in the public domain, you don't know what may have transpired in that space since the last time you used it. Does the field have broken glass or holes, will the goalposts topple over in a stiff breeze, has the pool been repeatedly checked for chemical balance, has the court been cleaned and mopped recently? These are basic questions that must be answered. You may need to be the one that “fixes it.”

Another risk management issue involves the answer to a simple but very important question. What do I do if someone gets hurt? Answering this question involves developing an Emergency Action Plan (EAP) that must be done prior to the first practice session.

Opportunity to Make Decisions

Every time a child touches a ball, swings a bat, or takes a step in a sport activity, it is a decision-making opportunity. The more activities you construct that allow children to make decisions on their own, will translate into greater success for each child. By providing equipment for every child to use constantly during the practice time, it will translate into thousands of decision-making opportunities, which enhances learning and self-confidence. Children need the opportunity to figure things out and to solve problems when they arise. It is easy for the coach to “fix it” but that will not benefit the child when other problems arise. Adults tend to tell children what to do all the time. Encourage them to solve movement and organization problems on their own. Step back and encourage children to figure things out. As long as the environment remains safe, most decisions made will be OK.

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Children need to learn how to function in the space provided. They need to learn how to follow the rules of practice (protocols) but need the freedom to move and make decisions on their own. The coach must control inappropriate behavior and children should be removed from the activity if they cannot follow the rules or change their behavior when spoken to. Physical punishment for bad behavior is a bad idea. Children choose to participate in sports so that they can play. Denying playing time usually will lead to better or improved behavior. Remember; be critical of behavior, not of a child's personality.

Implications for the Game

All activities performed during a practice session should have a direct relationship to the game that children play. Children need to learn how to utilize skill and to solve problems based on how the game is played. Static skill practice with no pressure of time, space and opponents will not transfer into competent play in game conditions. The key is to have children practice the skills while moving in similar ways as they would in a game. Design activities that simulate the game.

Avoid lines, lectures, and laps. Children, and adults for that matter, do not like to wait in lines. If every child can practice at the same time, lines are not necessary. Keep your verbal information to a minimum. Tell the group what you would like them to do and get them to it. If you talk for more than a minute, you will lose their attention. See if you can get them to change their activity without having to stop and listen. Many coaches begin practice by having children run laps around the field or court. There are more appropriate ways to get children "warmed up." It also does not develop fitness as the laps are not intense enough and don't last long enough. Children, for the most part, intensely dislike running laps. I would bet that you disliked running laps when you were a child so why continue this activity that puts kids in a bad mood at the beginning of practice.

Coaching Activities Checklist

The following list is provided for coaches to use after every practice or game. The list is actually appropriate for coaches of players of any age. If the answer is YES to all the questions posed below, then it is safe to say that the children were involved in a developmentally appropriate session; that was conducted in a safe environment; which allowed them to practice and learn new skills; encouraged them to make decisions and solve problems; and was directed by a coach who cared and communicated well. If there are smiles on faces and they are excited about coming back to the next practice or game, then they had FUN and you were successful.

1. Are the activities FUN?
2. Are the activities ORGANIZED?
3. Are all of the children ENGAGED in the activities?
4. Is CREATIVITY and DECISION-MAKING a part of each session?
5. Are the activity spaces SAFE and APPROPRIATE?
6. Is the coach's FEEDBACK positive?

References

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