

Be aware of kids self-image

Children have an acute and constantly evolving sense of self. It's an area where coaches need to work with great care



John Morrison

CHILDREN growing learn about the world around them. Their self-image is developed and shaped by the aims they set themselves, their competition achievements, other children's achievements and feedback from adults.

Pre-school children think they are the centre of the world.

Once at school they pay much more attention to other people because they have little experience on which to base judgements.

They, too, find it difficult to discriminate between what adults say and what other children tell them, some 'independents' still rely on their own judgements, balancing others advice with their own assessments.

As children grow, the influence of significant others grows; for example, their peer groups, parents, teachers, coaches and so on - the ring of influence. This ring of influence and their behaviours can help to shape the child's self-image which may be a positive or negative influence and can induce stress. Children depend on their significant others for help, encouragement and support. Children are easily led, anxious

to please and prone to over-enthusiasm.

As coach it's vital to ensure the child's interests are put first.

Children begin co-operative play around age five. After that friendship is increasingly important.

At nine plus they may belong to small tight knit groups, already competing to see who's best at a range of activities. From then on, friends are a major influence even persuading each other to try sports they never would have considered. Co-operation and teamwork are better now and they are much more aware of their own and their peers skills.

With adolescents, peer groups often are the dominant influence; sometimes conflicting with coach and parent relationships. Teenagers adopt the values of the group in preference to adult values, judging themselves on whether friends approve of.

Positively, groups often develop a powerful team spirit and they learn to use each other's strengths in a positive way.

It's vital that their coach makes them aware of their strengths. Regular positive feedback by the coach reveal those strengths to them and so builds their confidence.

Coach encouragement and support helps them trust their own judgement instead of doing what other children think they should do. Coaches may not replace the peer influence but they can balance it.

It's vital children find sport a positive experience. Losing is often re-

garded as failure and winning as success. Losing is more things aren't working while success means things are working. Thus very many more children are classed as failures rather than successes and negative experiences outnumber positive ones. Over-emphasising outcomes,



CHANGING NEEDS... Coaches should consider the reality that as children grow their ring of influence will be constantly developing
Picture: Brenda Moran / SPORTSFILE

that is winning or losing, rather than performance is likely to raise the level of competitive stress.

Young people then worry about failing and worry that others think badly of them. Consequently, fear of failure makes itself felt in the form of a high level of drop-out.

Some practical tips:

- Put the child's needs first, winning second.
- Maintain an element of fun during practice sessions and competitions.
- Treat each child as an individual.
- Don't ignore children who need help. If they need support it's up to the coach to give it.
- Don't force children to perform. They must want to perform.
- Do ensure they have successive experience of achievements so they feel good, lots of high fives.
- Encourage them, especially teenagers, if they suffer an embarrassing incident, a fall or a defeat. They are self-conscious so self-esteem protection is vital.
- Avoid giving critical feedback, sarcastic remarks, or disciplining children and teenagers in front of others, particularly their peers.
- Reinforce attitudes of fair play.
- Work with parents, not against them.
- Plan and publish sessions before they start.
- Make sure what you say to children is what you do.
- Above all, remember children are children, not mini adults.