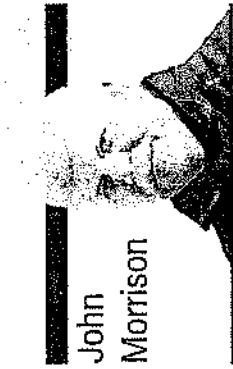


Children aren't mini adults

Children are mentally and biomechanically different to adults, so training at this level must be tailored accordingly



John Morrison

AFTER almost two decades working with u-10 children in my earlier coaching until I currently working with the Orchard Academy youth squads, I'm more convinced that the first coaching children receive should be appropriate and based on their maturity level at any given time.

In a recent Award Two for Children course in Dublin, I stressed that children are children, not mini adults, and should be treated as such. To expand on the concept I will over the next few weeks explore things a little bit further.

This first article is on developing skill.

The human nerve and muscle systems only reach full maturity in early adulthood. Immaturity of development makes it harder to learn specific skills. Thus younger children usually have limited skills. Not just a matter of co-ordination, they are less able to concentrate and make decisions. Fundamental skills learned at this time, such as throwing and catching are the foundation for learning more sophisticated skills later.

Skill teaching is vital. It must be done at the child's own level and

when they are ready to learn - motivated, not just physically ready.

If children don't want to learn, are uninterested or bored, then they will not improve. Activities therefore must be made enjoyable and be varied. Children learn a great deal from copying others, friends, teachers, parents, coaches and so on. Imitation is powerful so as coach you must provide appropriate technical and ethically sound models. Shouting at them, being negative in any way toward them, blaming them, will destroy their development instantly.

Children often make very rapid progress. They tend to be more confident than adults, so don't destroy this. They are more willing to try new skills and less afraid of failing. Less confident children should be given encouragement not correction, as much as they need.

The way coaches can help children acquire skills can be outlined as follows.

Stage One: Understanding

Never assume that children know what you want. Show them and explain in simple terms. Be patient, you may need to explain what you want several times in different ways that they can understand. Children have a limited attention span. Treat them as individuals and assess what each individually - not collectively - needs to focus on.

Stage Two: Practising

Make sure your coaching sessions are meaningful and enjoyable. Pro-



DIFFERENT STROKES... Your training should be appropriate to the abilities of the grade you are working with
Picture: Brendan Moran / SPORTSFILE

vide an appropriate type and amount of practice. Communicate effectively. Provide regular feedback, especially when working with children with shorter attention spans. Think about how to reinforce the progress children are making. Make sure children have mastered the relevant skill(s) well before you expect them to perform, especially in team

games: Make practice fun, interesting, varied and as close to the actual performance without the pressure of competition. Adapt sports to make them suitable for children.

Stage Three: Performing

Children react more slowly than adults. Give them as little as possible to think about, and as much time

as possible to think about it. When coaching beginners, start by making most decisions for them. Explain why decisions are made, and encourage them to think for themselves next time. Plan practice sessions, offering only limited choices, with enough time for children to choose and use the necessary skill. The smaller the group, the easier it is for them to make decisions. As children improve, change the speed and available space to make each task more difficult.

To keep children interested, tell them what you are doing and discuss with them what to do next. All the things children need in life they are born with, for example high self-esteem, and thinking well for themselves. The ability to ask questions, the ability to problem-solve. For example, watch a child left alone how quickly they discover how to get up stairs. Curiosity, imagination and creativity. The need for specific direction in all they do. The ability to thrive through routine, flexibility, perseverance, persistence, a willingness to share.

If adults destroy any of these in a child, they damage their chance of success in life and sport or survival in either of these spheres.

Next week I'll look at giving positive feedback and the third article considers the mind of a child.

Remember, children are children, not mini adults. Coach them as children so they can learn to be successful adults.