

THE MIND...

Positivity in everything you do

As young players develop their game it is important to remember that they thrive on reinforcement from their coaches



John Morrison

LAST week I introduced a trilogy of articles on the theme of developing skills in children.

That development will be fruitless if positive feedback is avoided as positive feedback is a vital link in a young person's development in sport.

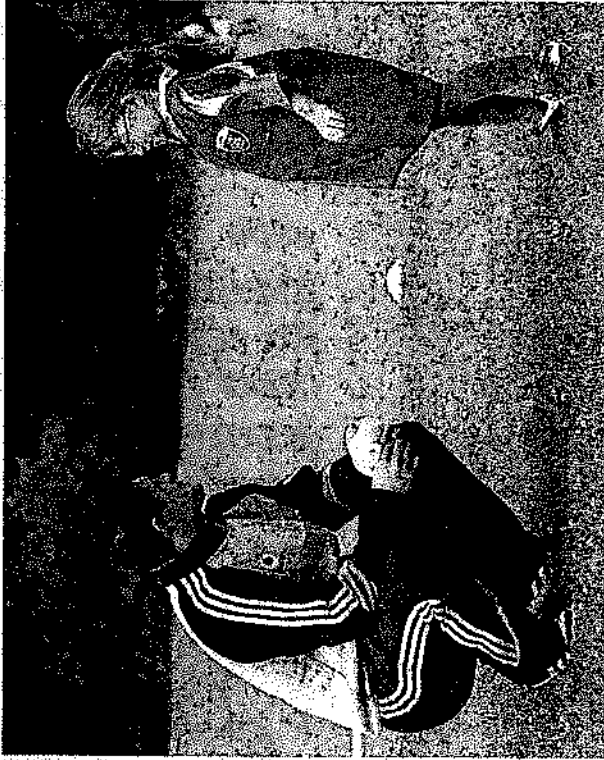
Many sports people find it hard to assess their own performance, especially children as they have so much less experience. Empower them by telling them when they are doing well. Make it easy for them, by a positive, caring approach, to tell you when they encounter difficulties.

Communication is the key. If they have problems, help them deal with them one at a time. Talk to them about their performance. Some find it very difficult to improve without your active help.

In general there are two approaches to coaching skills:

1. Shaping - This involves accepting a less than ideal version of the skill at first. Here, parts of the skill are left out first, then added later as the children master basic skills.

Remember, master the movement before exercising the process - that is, using the skill in a game. This process gradually shapes a child's



ON THE LEVEL...Don't talk down to young players or tower over them

Picture: Brendan Moran / SPORTSFILE

performance by developing strengths, improving things which need fixing and adding new refinements. This is made special when the child informs the coach, 'Look what I can do now.' Then it becomes self taught, magic. **CHANGING**

2. Changing involves breaking the action down into a series of simple steps or global parts. For example, hard foot, fast leg and chest on for contact, distance and direction in a kick. Children practice each step. Until they are competent at it, both slides. Once a child is ready, two or more steps can be practised together.

Eventually all the steps learned become a complete skill action. The choice between shaping and chaining depends on the skill being taught. All, including children, find big movements - gross motor skills - easier to learn than small, accurate movements - fine motor skills. For example teach kicking before solo running.

To begin with, shaping may be the right choice. If the movement is simple, teach it as a complete unit. Complex movements, such as blocking, tackling, high catching and so on, which have many global parts

are best taught in a chain - head, hands, then feet approach.

Make each part of the chain a meaningful exercise in itself. Bear in mind some children may have more difficulty than others. Don't get frustrated at them, don't rush them and make sure their feedback is as positive as before and as with the quicker learners.

Use this simple sequence to coach skills:
- Start at a simple level, until mastered.

- Move onto more difficult levels, until mastered.
- Be patient with the children.
- Recognise their limitations.

- See difficulties from their point of view, not your own view.
- Children have a short attention span. Avoid long, boring sessions.

- Children enjoy using what they have learned. Give them a chance to use their new skills quickly after they are ready to do so.

- Don't be afraid to ask questions, asking the child what they felt was better, these are actually the child's learning outcomes.

Ask what they feel needs fixed and act on it with them.

Ask what could they do or what game could they think up to develop their strengths and fix what needs to be fixed.

You will get answers, the start them towards developing creative thinking, discovery learning and decision making skills.

Don't worry, they'll be more confident about doing this than the adult especially if your feedback is always positive.

Children are born asking questions. Some practical tips:

- Treat each child as an individual.
- Make sure they are ready to learn, emotionally as well as physically.

- Explain, until they understand, what you want.

- Demonstrate it and give them plenty of time to try out the skill.

- Keep practice fun, varied and active. No queues.

- Let them use their skills in a meaningful situation as soon as they are ready.

- Fix things that are not working. Don't call them mistakes.

- One at a time. Often by skilful questioning and prompt statements - not telling - the child can sometimes fix it themselves.

- Start with big, simple movements skills, develop basic movement patterns before trying to reach specialist skills - be quick, don't hurry.

- Guide children's attention to the most important things.

- Make sure you get on the child's wavelength, listen to them and talk to them in their language and at their level. Never talk down to them nor stand towering above them.

- Be positive - Encourage rather than criticise them.

- Better to use kind words than a whip.

Learning skills should be fun. If children don't enjoy it, coaches achieve nothing at all except maybe to produce adults who will neither play sport themselves nor encourage their children to do so. The more fun, the less stress. Use positive feedback.