

Understanding the Youth Hockey Player

Coaching youth players can at times be very frustrating because the players just do not seem to understand what the coach (parent) is trying to communicate. After all, it is very apparent to the coach what is being said and very apparent to the parents in the stands what needs to happen to improve the team.

But what about the player? Does the player understand what the coach is saying? Maybe a better question is, “Is the player capable of understanding what the coach or parent is saying and asking the player to do?” That question led me on a search for some answers.

I started with the Child Development Department at the University of Minnesota and found my way to the University of Washington and a gentleman by the name of Frank L. Smoll and his associate Ronald E. Smith. Together they have compiled an extensive collection of research summaries and bibliographies that address not only my question but a host of other concerns regarding youth and sport participation.

The title of the book is, *Children and Youth in Sport A Biopsycosocial Perspective*. This is heavy reading material and 400 pages long. I would like to share a few lines from the Preface of book with you.

“One of the keys to unlocking the potential of youth sports lies in understanding their physical, psychological, and sociological dimensions. Since the mid-70’s the scientific community has studied the impact of highly structured sports on young athletes and on the complex network comprising coaches, parents, and peers.... The accumulation of empirical evidence has also resulted in a body of knowledge that spans several disciplinary areas, including psychology, sociology and the sport sciences.”

After spending a considerable amount of time reading through this collection of research summaries and conclusions, I gleaned a handful of important and reoccurring messages that absolutely apply to youth hockey players, coaches and families. I will share a few of the important items with you here for your consideration. The *italics* are mine.

- Years of playing experience is not related to increased skill development until ages 9 or 10 years old. (*No rush for the players under 9*)
- At all ages the variable that determined the skilled players from lesser skilled players was the amount of time practicing/playing with a friend (s) a player spent outside of the organized practice and game sessions. In fact, the skilled players reported nearly twice as much time practicing with a friend than the non-skilled players. (*Maybe playing 100 + games a year is not the answer?*)
- Skill execution and knowing when and how to execute the required skill is the limiting factor in sport performance. Coaches need to understand that athletes make many of their decisions based on their own skill constraints. (*If youth coaches spend more time on cognitive skill development the players will be able to perform at higher levels*)

- Younger children, under the age of ten, define their own competence and abilities in a sport by the outcomes in the games. Therefore a player on a winning team will associate the team success with his own success and vice versa. They do not have the ability to separate their own performance from the team. *(Parent and coach feedback can make a big difference in the child's experience)*
- Parental feedback decreases in importance for the child from ages 8 to 14. There is evidence that at ages 11 and 12 the players begin to evaluate their own performance against a fairly complicated system of comparing direct feedback from other adults (coaches) and indirect feedback (coach feedback to other team members performance) as it compares to the player. *(This gets pretty complicated! You need to read the book.)*
- The ability of a player to comprehend the time and space relationships that hockey is made up of is termed as perception. Players under 10-11 years old have limited ability to sort and prioritize the cues in the playing environment. As they get older they increase these abilities to change focus depending on the immediate task at hand. *(Team skills will improve with age. Focus on individual skill with players under 13 years old.)*
- Players need to learn how to execute skills and learn when to use the appropriate skills. Practice should be constructed to allow players to develop their decision making abilities while using the skills. Participation in the sport does not guarantee development. On the other hand continuous prompting and cues from coaches will actually hinder the learning process even if it generates immediate results. *(Small area games and cross ice sessions will foster better decision making skills. Coaches need to allow the players to learn on their own.)*

These points are just the tip of the iceberg but they are good information for parents and coaches to remember when you are administrating or participating in youth athletics. As adults, we see the world through our own eyes and experiences. To insure that our children have a quality experience playing youth hockey, we need to also see the game through their eyes.

Frank Smoll will become familiar to most of you over the course of the next couple years. He has written several booklets to help parents and organizers of youth sports that will be used in conjunction with the new initiative from Minnesota Hockey termed Hockey Education Program (HEP). If you are interested in this book you can order it through Amazon.com.

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