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A critical discussion of what approach coaches should adopt when coaching children

It is beyond doubt that regular participation and engagement in sport during childhood is beneficial for children's development in many different areas of their lives (Bailey, Hillman, Arent and Petitpas, 2012; 2013). According to Bailey *et al.*'s. (2012; 2013) Human Capital Model, participation in sport and physical activity is able to afford children benefits within the physical, emotional, social, individual, intellectual, and financial domains of learning. However, just because children take part in sport, it does not automatically mean that they realise the benefits Bailey *et al.* (2012; 2013) talk about. Some academic scholars (e.g. Coakley, 2011) have been critical of the impact sport has on a young person's development, even going as far to say sport can have adverse affects on children's development. One factor that determines whether sport is viewed positively or negatively by children, and thus able to contribute to their development is the actions of social actors, such as parents, siblings, and friends. In addition to these, sport coaches are a group of people who, through their actions and behaviours, are able to significantly influence how children experience sport. The purpose of this article is to offer a critical reflection on two commonly discussed approaches to coaching children and the associated outcomes of these approaches. The concluding section of this work will offer some questions for coaches to consider. Prescriptions of 'good coaching' are deliberately not offered here, but rather the intention is to make coaches think about their own practices and the extent to which their coaching is most suitable for the children they are coaching.

In organised sport, coaches are tasked with overseeing the learning environment. This means

they decide what learning activities children will engage, when they will engage, and for how long. Moreover, coaches, through the way they behave and interact with children, are able to affect their behaviour and attitudes toward sport. From a psychological perspective, it has been widely reported that coaches who use more positive behaviours and praise effort rather than performance are more likely to appeal to children's motivations for participating (Cope, Bailey and Pearce, 2013). This is in opposition to a coaching approach that incentivises winning at all costs and is critical of children's efforts and performances.

Ultimately, how coaches structure the learning environment and behave will influence children's learning in different ways (Cushion, Ford and Williams, 2012). For example, coaches who adopt a highly instructional approach limit the opportunities children have to make decisions and solve problems (Ford, Yates and Williams, 2010). Alternatively, a questioning approach has the potential to develop children's cognitive skills if these are asked in such a manner that requires children to think about their performance (see Cope, Partington, Cushion and Harvey, 2016).

Two approaches

Over the course of the past two decades, there have been discussions in coaching, which have polarised this activity into two broad approaches: coach-centred and athlete-centred. These are not the only approaches discussed in the coaching literature, but are two that seem increasingly popular amongst coaching scholars and practitioners.

Coach-centred coaching

A coach-centred approach has been suggested as one where the coach adopts the position as sole decision-maker who provides limited opportunities for children to have an input into what they learn, and how they learn it. Children who are subjected to such an approach have a high level of docility and are required to perform and act in certain ways, as directed by the coach (Cushion and Jones, 2006).

Athlete-centred coaching

Athlete-centred coaching, on the other hand, is an approach that advocates the involvement of children in their own learning. This requires a re-positioning of the coach from a transmitter of knowledge to the co-creator of knowledge with children. Children who are coached in an athlete-centred manner will feel empowered, as they are enabled ownership over their learning (Kidman, 2005).

Appropriate coaching

There is little doubt that if these approaches are delivered as they have been characterised, an athlete-centred approach will allow children to develop their learning in and across the range of domains as suggested by Bailey *et al.* (2012; 2013). A coach-centred approach on the other hand is more likely to limit children's learning, given the coaches' unwillingness to relinquish control of the learning situation. While we are not denying that an athlete-centred approach is intuitively more appealing than a coach-centred approach, especially when coaching children, there is a danger that coaching researchers and practitioners dichotomise these approaches into good or bad forms of coaching. The problems with this is that these decisions are often made without a prior statement of who the children are, what the coach was trying to achieve and why, and what the children required from their coach at a certain point in time.

Therefore, the tendency to consider coaching approaches detached from knowledge of the coach, child, and learning environment portrays an incomplete picture of what is happening and why. We would accept that in general terms a coach-centred approach is not the most appropriate when coaching children, but it is dangerous to automatically assume this without knowledge of the other factors discussed, and thus make a judgment regarding the appropriateness of the coaching. Furthermore, it is also short-

sighted to make an assessment of coaches' practices based on a snapshot of what they do. For example, adopting a stance more akin to a coach-centred approach might be the most appropriate course of action at a particular point in time with a particular group of children. The point here, and to reiterate again, is that without knowledge of coach, child, or context, it is impossible to say what is best for them.

It would seem to us that some of the issues related to coach-centred and athlete-centred notions of coaching, and when these should be applied are born from misconceptions of what these approaches are, and what they look like in practice. Indeed, more recent thinking in the coaching literature has been critical of what athlete-centred coaching is, and has questioned the seemingly 'one-size fits all' nature of this concept (Nelson, Cushion and Potrac, 2014; Jones and Ronglan, 2017), and the extent to which so called athlete-centred approaches genuinely involve and embrace children's input vs. coaches' assumptions of what they think children want and need (Cope, Harvey and Kirk, 2015). Moreover, an alternative view of athlete-centred coaching appears to be understood by some as a 'hands-off' approach to coaching, whereby the coach does little more than set up the practice activity and just lets the children get on with practicing free from any coach input (Cushion, 2013). This is not to say there is not a time or a place for this. Indeed, there is significant evidence that supports the developmental benefits of children playing free from adult involvement and intervention (i.e. Brockman, Jago and Fox, 2011). However, in the context of coaching, part of a coaches' role is to make a decision whether what children want to do is always best for their learning, otherwise it could be contended that having a coach serves no purpose. Furthermore, evidence from a meta-analysis (Alfriero, Brooks, Aldrich and Tenenbaum, 2011) conducted using a sample of 164 studies revealed that under most conditions, explicit instruction in the form of feedback, scaffolding, and explanations assist learning more than unassisted discovery. This is compelling evidence that the 'hands off' approach to coaching is perhaps not as helpful as many understand it to.

Social media

It could be argued that this misinterpretation has increased since the advent of social media. In

coaching and teaching, sites such as *Twitter* and *Facebook* have opened up a whole new community for coaches to be able to develop their knowledge in areas they had limited access to previously. However, because such sites are rarely regulated or moderated, these can be the breeding ground for discussions built on opinion, rather than evidence. They can also be places, especially in the case of *Twitter* with limitations on tweet length, that very general information is shared, and the possibility for misinterpretation is rife both from the perspective of the person writing the tweet, and the person reading it. For example, we often see tweets that espouse very general information that could be associated with coach and athlete-centred approaches, such as 'coaches should remain silent when coaching', or that 'coaches should not give any instruction'. Taking a sympathetic view, we understand the point that is being made. However, it does not detract from the fact that such tweets offer limited guidance to coaches regarding the approach to coaching they should adopt. In fact, it could be argued that these tweets, lead to an even greater confusion regarding what coach-centred and athlete-centred approaches are, and when they should be employed.

There is little doubt that, in most circumstances, an athlete-centred approach will be the most appropriate when coaching children. Nonetheless, the purpose of this short article was to help coaches think about whether their approaches are actually athlete-centred and thus able to accrue the benefits associated with such an approach, or whether they are a misinterpreted version of this approach, or something different altogether. Either way, to make judgments regarding what is best for children and their development, their first needs to be an understanding of what they need and want, before coaches can make a decision of what the best course of action might be. In some cases, an approach more synonymous with coach-centred characteristics might be the answer for some of the time. Of course, most of the time what children will probably need and want will necessitate a more athlete-centred approach, but the point here is that this should not be assumed.

Moving forward, there are a number of factors we feel coaches could consider when thinking about the extent to which their coaching practice is children-focused. We deliberately use the term

'children-focused' because the following points are based on prioritising children's learning, above those of the coach.

1) Is the coaching based on the coaches' agenda (i.e. what the coach wants to achieve) or the child's agenda (i.e. what the child wants to achieve)? It might be that the two are not mutually exclusive, but when they are, the coach needs to reflect on whether their needs and wants are being prioritized over the children's (i.e. winning vs. wanting to play with friends).

2) Are children being provided the opportunity to learn how to learn? This necessitates that coaches structure practice and behave in certain ways. This might seem somewhat of a contradiction based on earlier arguments made in this article, but the point here is that teaching children how to learn is not achieved by treating all children the same. Generally speaking, an athlete-centred approach has been suggested to lead to this outcome being achieved, but this is not to say this approach is appropriate all of the time. Again, the coach has to use their expertise to decide what coaching approach is needed and when.

3) Are coaches making an attempt to find out what children want and like from being involved in sport and coaching, and taking this into consideration when planning and delivering sessions? As stated, this is not suggesting that coaches conform to children's every demand, but finding out and responding to what interests and motivates them to play is a critical factor in ensuring children enjoy sport and remain motivated to participate (Cope *et al.*, 2015). In addition, asking children and responding to their requirements shows them that they are being valued, which again is important in ensuring their continued participation.

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