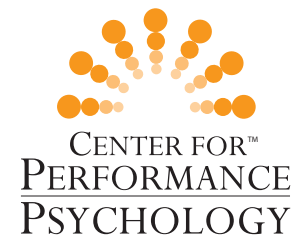


BEST PRACTICES FOR COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT: VISION, CHALLENGE AND SUPPORT

By Michael Kuebler. Reprinted with Permission



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Dr. Yukelson, the director of Sport Psychology Services for the Penn State University Athletic Department and a member of USA Football's Football and Wellness Committee, describes a best practice model for cognitive development.

A fear within the sport of football that Dr. Dave Yukelson has is of overbearing coaches that hurt their kids' development. They focus on things like winning at all costs and being tough, and oftentimes this leads to the kids having less fun. It hurts the development of their physical and mental skills and can potentially turn them off to the sport altogether.

"Some coaches come in and they're like 'this is the most important thing in your life.'" Yukelson said. "You want it to be important for the kids but where they're motivated enough to want to improve from 9th grade to 10th grade to 11th grade. In order to do that, a good coach teaches skills that the kids develop competencies in, but they also motivate them and inspire them.

"Some coaches over-coach, and they're over-emotional and over-zealous and they're degrading and demeaning. And that doesn't work particularly well in youth sports."

The antidote to this type of coaching is positive coaching. Positivity is the key to creating an environment in which youth players can learn the sport, develop their skills, and have a fun experience instead of one that will affect them negatively.

"I think the whole picture - it's got to be positive," Yukelson said. "When a coach is positive, it's just being excited about the upcoming season, about the team culture that's going to be developed and to see what this year's team is going to be about."

Cognitive development relates to the mental, emotional and social aspects of skill development such as motivation, concentration, confidence, composure, and social interactions. Coaches need to focus on developing the kids' physical, emotional and social skills in the proper way by setting a good example, creating the right culture, teaching respect and making it fun where the kids will want to come back.

"We label it cognitive development—you're helping them have a better understanding in each of those areas of what the sport experience means to them," Yukelson said. "Just helping them to feel good about their sport participation so that they're motivated enough to want to keep doing it."

Yukelson also describes a best practice model for coaches to follow to ensure positive cognitive development for their kids. The leadership model is derived from a high performance company that Yukelson consults with, Lane4, and consists of three components that are all interrelated: vision, challenge, and support.

Vision involves establishing what you want this year's team to accomplish. The coach will create the right environment in which the players can thrive

and work on skill development. This environment must also encourage the youth to strive for their best and develop confidence in themselves.

The second component—challenge—works off the vision that has been set and is tied to goal-setting and the developmental needs of the kids. Through the work of the coach and the team, each individual needs to develop a goal-setting ladder that focuses on individual improvement with daily, weekly and monthly goals and benchmarks. This process will promote ownership and accountability while keeping the kids mentally focused on the goals and vision. The goals need to be challenging but not unrealistic to the point where they will guarantee failure and hurt the players' progressive development both physically and mentally.

The third part is support that provides an encouraging environment that gets the kids to thrive. This comes back to the main point of positive coaching leaving the right effect on the kids. This can be accomplished by being positive, encouraging, supportive, and catching kids doing things right. It's okay to discipline kids if mistakes are made, but use a positive approach. Don't be negative.

"If you envision three interlocking circles, now all of a sudden these three things work together. They

don't work in isolation," Yukelson said of the three components of the model. "When the three circles work together, I think it's a great best practice model that is simple and really captures the developmental nature of what you're doing whether you're working with beginners, intermediate, or very elite football players."

Following this model will not only help improve the players' football skills but also make sure they are developing a healthy mindset around the game.

In addition to creating a positive environment and getting the kids to buy in to the team's vision and goals, one of the best things a coach can do to develop his players in the physical, mental, emotional, and social skills is lead by example. There are certain values and mental strengths that a coach should work to develop in his players, including composure, respect, sportsmanship, handling pressure, integrity, passion and leadership. A coach has a responsibility to project all of these aspects himself, especially if he expects his players to portray them as well.

A positive environment full of the right values, encouragement and example-setting will keep youth players healthily engaged in the sport with both their physical and mental development. ●