



COACHING IRELAND  
OILIÚINT ÉIREANN

Coaching Ireland  
Coaching Children Workshop Series:

CHILD-CENTRED COACHING:  
UNDERSTANDING CHILD DEVELOPMENT &  
LEARNING & ITS IMPACT ON HOW WE COACH

Factsheet 2



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# COACHING CHILDREN SERIES: WORKSHOP 2

## INTRODUCTION

This factsheet aims to provide you as the coach with information on child development and to consider your own approach to coaching and coaching skills for the development of child appropriate sport and physical activity programmes. It aims to help you explore your coaching approach and values. Identify the key milestones in human development using the SPEC model (Social, Physical, Emotional, Cognitive). Identify how this development impacts on your coaching practice. Understand basic learning theories and learn how to apply them to your practice, and identify key coaching skills that will allow you and each child to enjoy and get the most from your sessions.

We know that sport and physical activity, when delivered appropriately, can have a positive impact on children's physical, personal and social development. However, we have to strive to create the right conditions to enable this positive development to happen.

## YOUR APPROACH TO COACHING

Being a coach can be challenging. You constantly have to make decisions which impact not only on yourself but also on the children that you work with. You are asked to find the right balance between child development, winning, fun and challenge. To be able to do all of this effectively and in a consistent manner, it is important that you are clear on your approach to coaching.

### What is your approach to coaching?

An approach to coaching:

- is a statement of your values and beliefs in relation to effective coaching.
- consists of your major objectives and the principles that you adhere to in order to meet your objectives
- guides how you behave and interact with the children you coach
- gives insight into your approach to child development
- is based on your experiences, knowledge, values, opinions and beliefs
- helps you to make ethical decision.
- promotes quality and consistency in your coaching behaviours.

Everyone has a specific approach to coaching but not everyone takes the time to examine it. If you have not examined it, your coaching approach will be at a subconscious level. This will still impact on your coaching behaviours, but can potentially create a mismatch between what you say and what you actually do when coaching. To ensure that it is appropriate and effectively guides you, let's make it conscious!

### Exploring your approach to coaching at three levels:



What are your key 'life values'?



Why do you coach?



How do you believe coaching should work?

### Now, take a step back and ask yourself:

- How well do your (and your club's) behaviours and actions match your statements?
- Is there anything you need to change in your approach to coaching or your coaching behaviours?

### TIP

Your key values and beliefs should apply across the board of behaviours that you engage in. Nevertheless, they need to adjust and be adapted depending on the needs of the children that you coach. When working with other coaches, you do not need to agree on everything, however your coaching approaches should complement, not contradict, each other.

## CHILD-CENTRED COACHING

### What is Child-Centred Coaching?

Coaching that is fully geared towards fulfilling the needs and wants of the child and not to the adults, the club, the NGB or any other institution.

To coach in a child-centred way, coaches must take into account what children want out of sport (see factsheet 1) and their individual developmental needs.

## LET'S GET REAL TASK 1 - MY APPROACH TO COACHING

This task is designed to help you reflect further on your approach to coaching and give you a chance to explore if it matches the approach of your club. It will also help you to consider if your actions support your approach or if there is a mismatch and what you can do about it.

	YOUR COACHING APPROACH	YOUR CLUB'S	YOUR ACTIONS	THE FUTURE
What are your key 'life' values?	Write here your answers to the questions on the left hand column.	Write here what you think your clubs approach is like and how it matches yours.	Here you need to look at yourself in the mirror and think if each of your actions around coaching are aligned with your stated approach.	Based on all you have written to the left of this column write about the things you may want to continue to do, do more of or stop doing.
Why do you coach?				
How do you think coaching should be?				

## THE SPEC MODEL Walk the Beams with each Child, don't Sprint the Beams

The SPEC model (Figure 1) of child development provides a 'whistle stop tour' of the stages children and young people go through from birth to maturity. Children develop along four beams: The Social, Physical, Emotional and Cognitive Beam. Typically, coaches take into account the physical beam of child development, but not think too much about the other three. However, as coaches we have the duty to deliver activities that are developmentally appropriate for all four beams.



Figure 1: The SPEC Model of Child Development. Table 1 provides an overview of the key milestones in child development in the four beams and the implications for coaching practice.

**The purpose of the SPEC model is for you to understand that:**

- children have to go through each stage of the beams
- that there is no magic wand to fast-track them through them
- each child will develop through the stages at differing rates as it is an individual process
- that it is your job to plan, deliver and evaluate your sessions at the right level of demand in all four areas for the children you coach.

**It is important to bear in mind that:**

Children will develop at different rates and we are bound to have a great level of variability within the groups we coach.

- Children will be at different stages in different beams.
- In assessing a child's development, we have to go beyond chronological age.

There are three ages for each child:

- Chronological: From birth to now
- Biological: Based on the child's maturity
- Training Age: Based on their experiences of the task.

Careful consideration to this must be given during planning. All our sessions and the activities within them contain elements that challenge children in these four beams. As children develop, they progressively travel along the beams until they become a fully mature, functional adult. Saying that a session or an activity is or is not working well is not enough. If we don't identify the reasons why, we have no chance of either replicating success or addressing the issues. In the main, the answer to the question 'Why is this working/not working?' lies within one or more of the beams.

## TABLE 1: THE SPEC MODEL OF DEVELOPMENT KEY MILESTONES AND IMPLICATIONS

SOCIAL	PHYSICAL	EMOTIONAL	COGNITIVE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The 2 key elements here are: the ability of children to understand their place in society; and the rules by which society operates.</li> <li>• Children start by being very self-centred and unable to share, work cooperatively to becoming progressively more able to do so and actually enjoy it!</li> <li>• For the coach, this may mean that very young children may not be ready to work in groups or to complete tasks that require high amounts of cooperation or collaborative thinking. It may mean that some children appear selfish and self-centred, but that this doesn't mean they are 'bad children'.</li> <li>• They also take time to understand the difference between their performance and the team's, other people's roles and how to work together for a common goal even if this means sacrificing your own.</li> <li>• Children will naturally form cliques. The coach has to strategically organise activities to encourage cross-clique relationships.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Children - grow from the head down and their proportions change over time; - develop from the centre out and from proximal to distal and are able to control big muscles first and over parts of the body closer to the midline; - grow fast for the first few years of their life. Then they go through a period of slow growth until they reach puberty.</li> <li>• It is important to realise that - during periods of rapid growth, motor coordination may be impaired; - they may struggle initially to isolate the muscles they need to use to perform a specific action and may use more muscles than they need. This can make them appear uncoordinated.</li> <li>• Prior to puberty gains in strength are mostly achieved through improvement in the central nervous system. So working with heavy loads is not recommended.</li> <li>• Strength develops before dexterity and we need to be careful not to ask them to do something that requires an amount of dexterity or accuracy before they are ready.</li> <li>• Children's energy systems will not fully develop until their teens.</li> <li>• Children should work for 5-20 seconds at a time with equal recovery.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Children start off being very self-centred and can struggle to cope emotionally with the demands of 'social life'. This may lead to tantrums or appearing not interested.</li> <li>• Most children don't understand 'delayed gratification' so this idea of 'if you work hard we will play games at the end' may not really work.</li> <li>• Also, as children learn to be able to manage their own emotions, they will be able to support others with theirs.</li> <li>• Children may lack self-awareness. This means they can't see how they are behaving or the impact it may have on others.</li> <li>• They may also struggle to express and control their feelings which may result in small things 'bubbling over'. A calming voice tends to work better than discipline.</li> <li>• Finally, some children may not understand 'cheating' and will think it is ok.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Children struggle with 'cause-effect' (understanding why something happens or the connection between certain behaviours and consequences). This may impact on their understanding of the task at hand or our instructions.</li> <li>• Concentration span is short and their ability to process lots of information is not as well developed as in adolescents or adults. So don't talk for too long and don't keep them waiting in lines!</li> <li>• Children may struggle to differentiate between effort and ability and thus think that if they try hard they should get it right straight away.</li> <li>• Failure may be difficult to cope with and coaches have a big role to play in getting young players to understand the nature of learning.</li> <li>• Children initially learn only by doing, trial and error directed by their needs. They can then start to imitate and only later to listen to instructions. We have to bear this in mind when trying to teach children.</li> <li>• Children may struggle to express what they mean and appear not as articulate, but they know what they mean, they just can't express it. So be patient.</li> <li>• As children become more self-aware they are able to evaluate their performance and conduct some self-directed learning and goal setting.</li> </ul>

## THE 4 COACHING ZONES

"What we learn with pleasure we will never forget" Alfred Mercier

Maximum learning generally happens in the space just outside and above our current level of ability. We call this 'The Learning Zone'. However, the activities we set up for children we coach can sit in one of four zones:

- **The Learning Zone:** The task and/or the set up fall just above the comfort zone thus stretching the learner's current capacity and maximising learning.
- **The Comfort Zone:** The task and the set up are just below or at the current level of ability of the learner. Activities in the Comfort Zone, keep learners fairly happy and may serve to consolidate current skills and build a strong foundation for further learning. However, if the demand level does not increase over time, boredom will set in.
- **The Boredom Zone:** The task itself or the way the activity is set up leads to boredom and stagnation. No learning happens in the Boredom Zone.
- **The Panic Zone:** The task and/or the set up are too far away from the learner's current level of ability. As anxiety and eventually panic set in, learning will decrease. Being in the Panic Zone can also jeopardise future engagement with similar tasks due to negative associations.

Activities need to be set at the right level in all four beams so children spend as much time as possible in the learning zone (where they are mildly stretched and learning is enhanced).



Lara-Bercial (2012)

## ADAPTING ACTIVITIES TO DIFFERENT ABILITIES

The level of challenge can be raised or lowered in any of the four beams. Although initially designed to enhance the inclusion of individuals with disabilities, the following is a quick introduction to the TREE and STEP models which will help you to be able to adapt your activities to suit the different levels of abilities of the children you coach.

THE



MODEL

THE



MODEL

- **Teaching/Instructional style:**

manual, verbal, practical, etc.

- **Rules/Regulations:**

what people are allowed to do....

- **Environments:**

the physical place where the activity happens...

- **Equipment:**

ball type or size, player aids...

- **Space:**

playing surface, distance between players/obstacles, use zones...

- **Task:**

change action / objective / scoring / system / speed....

- **Equipment:**

ball type or size, player aids...

- **People:**

change numbers, player role, limitations/advantages...

## TASK

Think of two or three of your favourite drills.

Now, think of as many ways as possible in which you could modify these drills with the help of the TREE and STEP model. For each modification consider:

- Have you increased or lowered the level of challenge?
- Whom does this drill suit now?
- Do you feel comfortable implementing some (e.g. equipment) but not other (e.g. environment) changes?
- Remember, practice makes perfect! By using the TREE and STEP models you will become better at adapting activities to suit the different abilities of the children you coach.

## YOUR COACHING TOOLKIT

Are you making use of all your coaching tools?

The term “coaching toolkit” represents your personal set of resources, skills and abilities that you use to coach children. The figure below outlines and describes tools that are frequently used by coaches.



**Demonstrations:** A practical exhibition and explanation of how something works or is performed.

- Aims to provide a model
- Careful when choosing demonstrators
- Careful when demonstrating yourself
- Angle of demo
- Focus of demo
- Avoid distractions
- Check for understanding
- Use of video images of pros?

**Explanations:** A statement or rationale that clarifies something to someone.

- Simplify or ‘chunk’ the information to avoid overload (one or two points of focus at a time)
- Bring your body down to their level and relax (don’t talk down to them or look threatening)
- Keep language positive, simple and unambiguous
- Provide opportunities to practice what has been explained
- Direct (and re-direct) attention to the important parts of the skill or tactic
- Help athletes to understand by creating images and cue words that they can use to build on previous experiences and skills.
- Make tone of your voice exciting to grab their attention
- Humour engages people; Sarcasm turns them off
- Check for understanding

**Trial and Error:** A process of letting children experiment with various methods of doing something until they find the most successful for them.

- Allow children to have a go (this will tell you where they are and help you decide what the focus should be)
- It also increases motivation
- It fosters initiative and self-driven learning
- It promotes self-awareness
- Combine it with questioning and feedback to turbo charge it

**Questioning & Listening:** Asking children questions and actively listening to what they say to their wants and needs.

- Provides athletes a chance to work out the answer themselves
- Fosters a sense of autonomy, trust and competence
- Blend with the background and take time to observe before asking questions
- Has to be focused and purposeful
- Phrased in a way they can understand exactly what you are asking them
- Give them time to think about the answer
- Rather than show hands, get all of them to think and then pick someone to answer
- Support the build-up of the answer by same kid or others
- Check everyone else understands the answer

**Feedback & Feedforward:** Statements that recognise good performances and provide reference points for improved ones.

- Internal: comes from own senses
- External Feedback: comes from others or outside sources (i.e. video)
- Focus on what they need to do to improve (Feedforward)
- TACT Model (Lara-Bercial 2013)
- T for Timing: immediate feedback is best, but time-constraints and mental readiness must be taken into account. If emotions are high... wait
- A for Approach: positive two-way dialogue, direct vs indirect
- C for Content: specific, balanced (+/-), solution orientated, avoid excessive detail
- T for Tone: no scolding, remove high emotions

**Praise:** A way to reinforce positive behaviours.

- Focus on process also not only outcomes
- Avoid praising only for ability or intelligence. Instead praise also for effort, persistence, hard work, good strategies, not giving up, etc.
- Try to be specific, but do not overwhelm with detail
- Avoid praising someone while they are totally focused and in the zone (it will take them out of it).

## LET'S GET REAL TASK 2 - MY COACHING TOOLKIT

This task is about reviewing the components of the coaching toolkit and reflecting on how you use them currently in your coaching and what you could do more of or do differently going forward.

Coaching Tools	What do I already do well?	What could I do better?	What will I do to improve this month?
Demonstrations			
Explanations			
Trial & Error/ Set Up & Stand Back			
Questioning & Listening			
Feedback / Feedforward			
Praise			

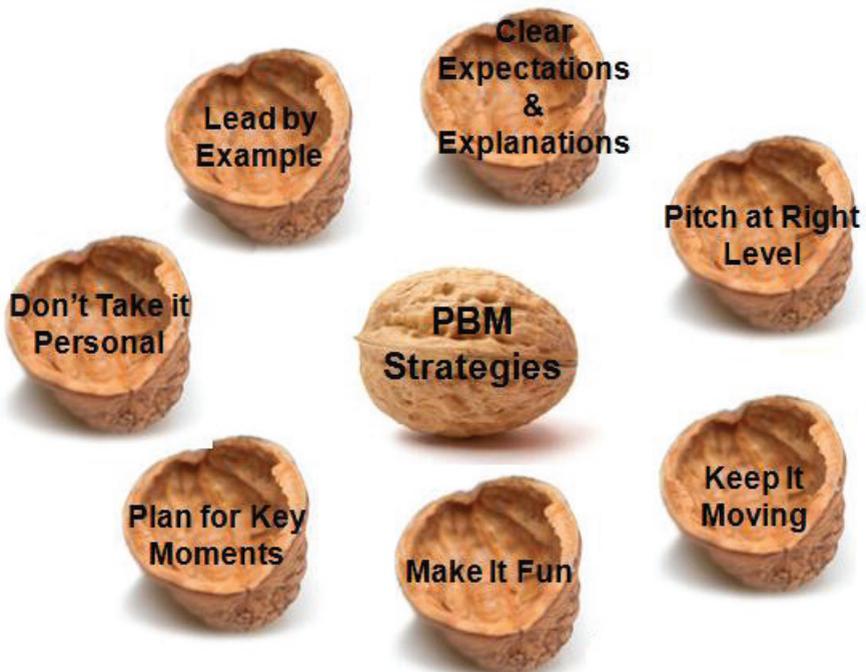
# POSITIVE BEHAVIOUR MANAGEMENT

The Key is to Foster Positive Behaviours rather than Eradicating Negative Ones

Positive Behaviour Management is about fostering the behaviours we want to see rather than using a disciplinarian approach to stopping the negative ones (Fuller et al., 2009). It is also about understanding that some of these behaviours, although can be seen as ‘annoying and disrupting’, are typical of children of a certain age and should be managed not punished so children can move on to the next stage of their development. Finally, coaches have to accept that a large part of behaviours exhibited by children during sessions and lessons can be avoided through careful planning and design and become more proactive behaviour managers.

Figure 3 below summarises some key ideas around Positive Behaviour Management from the perspective of a proactive coach.

## Positive Behaviour Management In a Nutshell



## LET'S GET REAL TASK 3

### POSITIVE BEHAVIOUR TRACKING TOOL

Use the PBM strategies that you are going to explore instances when the children you were coaching behaved really well or when you managed to turn a tricky situation into a resounding success. Then we will think of a couple of times when you didn't manage to get the best out of them. The key is to be able to identify why things happened and whether there is anything we could have done to steer them in a different direction.

Think about two examples of sessions or activities when things went really well or when you managed to rescue a difficult behavioural moment.	Describe what happened from the moment you walked into the venue. What you did, what the children did, anything else relevant.	What do you think made the biggest difference from those things you had control over (things that you did using the PBM strategies)?	What are the key learning points you can take away and try to replicate next time you are doing a session?
Situation 1			
Situation 2			
Now think about two situations when it didn't quite work and things got a bit heated and silly.	Describe what happened from the moment you walked into the venue. What you did, what the children did, anything else relevant.	Was there anything from those things you had control over (things that you did) that could have had a negative effect using the PBM strategies?	What are the key learning points you can take away and try to avoid/do next time you are doing a session?
Situation 1			
Situation 2			

# MY CHILD-PROOF COACHING CHECKLIST

Theme / Item				I will continue to..	I will start to..	I will stop..
consider children's developmental needs and plan accordingly						
keep children in the learning zone most of the time						
tailor my communication to the level of the children						
use a range of coaching tools to facilitate learning						
proactively foster positive behaviours						

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