

Positive Learning Environments – A Teaching Model for the 21st Century

JOHN ALLPRESS National Player Development Coach, The FA

Developmental issues present youth coaches and player developers with an interesting array of challenges and choices when working with young players in youth football. Foremost amongst these challenges and choices is the decision as to which one of the youngsters will eventually become the first team player and to that end we are all involved in the 'talent identification' game. Young players present us with these challenges throughout their formative years, in six months or less a player can be unrecognisable from who he was and progress from being a 'potential performer' to a 'current performer' or vice versa. Link this with the additional complications of age group classification, physical, social and psychological factors and the coach is presented with an almost impossible task when attempting to predict with any degree of certainty who the players will eventually be especially below fourteen years of age. What is definite is that if a players' potential is unpredictable his needs to an extent are not. Young players are first and foremost young people with dreams and aspirations in football most of which will go unfulfilled. So our duty as coaches is not just to the happy few we feel have a future in the game but also to those who are not deemed to have 'outstanding potential' at any particular time in their career. They should at the very least feel valued and have a positive and worthwhile experience while in our care. To this end coaches may find the following points useful:

- Put the players' welfare and needs first.
- Agree long, medium and short-term objectives with players and staff and stick to them.
- Keep your word to gain trust and respect.
- Address players' different learning styles.
- Be aware of individual needs and differences in players and staff and cater for these as much as possible.
- Create an inclusive atmosphere in and around the players, staff and their activities.
- Accentuate the positive at every opportunity and encourage a 'no blame' culture where mistakes are recognised for what they are – 'staging posts on the road to success'.
- Encourage player and staff contributions – ask questions. You might be surprised by how much even the youngest players know.
- Pay attention to detail in every aspect of your work.
- Enjoy your work and show pleasure at the players' success.

- Support the players when they feel they have let you down.
- Create 'positive learning environments' in training, meetings and matches.

So what are the criteria essential to a positive learning environment? They can be summed up as follows:

- Safe – all learning environments should adhere to health and safety guidelines and the physical loading should be appropriate.
- Secure – players should feel secure enough to experiment, make mistakes and ask questions.
- Inclusive – no player should be left out of a practice. Organisation should be flexible enough to cater for odd numbers. On match days the starting line up should vary, as everybody needs to learn how to be substitute and starting is different from always being substitute. Players' views in briefings and debriefings should be treated with respect and acted upon.
- Ownership – players should be allowed to take ownership of the work and if appropriate take practices to another or more individual level.
- Enjoyable – work needs to be enjoyable. Enjoyment comes from an appropriate challenge successfully met.
- Choices – learning environments need to reflect the game where exactly the same thing never happens twice but lots of very similar things happen often. Within this environment players need to experience 'repetition of opportunity to practice' and be given choices and chances to make decisions.
- Challenges – within positive learning environments should be difficult but not unobtainable.

We could sum up by including a possible philosophy for the player developer which encapsulates much of the above:

- Player Centred
- Player Driven
- Players First
- Winning Second
- This is not a soft option as:
 - Player Driven does not mean Player Dominated.
 - It certainly does not mean Coach Dominated.
 - It means getting the Balance right.

- It requires a sound and extensive Knowledge Base if it is to be effective.
- It means the coach working closely with the players and revolves around LOOK; LISTEN; HELP; SUPPORT and SHARE and knowing 'When to do What'.

Remember above all Coaches need Credibility in the Football. When asked what they required from their coaches the vast majority of players said that first and foremost they needed the coach to help them achieve their GOAL. So be very clear why you are there.

In order to develop as coaches and teachers of the game we must strive to understand who we are dealing with, how they are feeling and what is appropriate to teach them. We must also be aware when it is appropriate to let them go on and find out for themselves, how to talk and listen to them, and get the best out of them so that they can continue to learn and be challenged in order to fulfil their potential whatever it may be.

In summary please read the following statements and think how they make you feel:

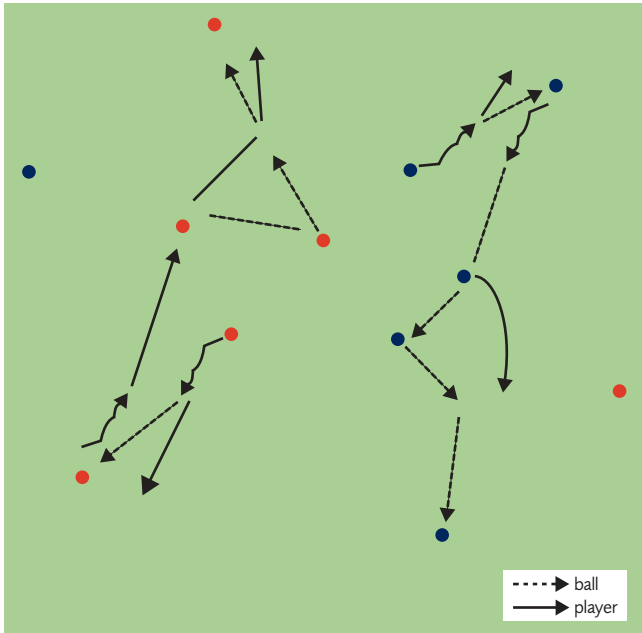
PLEASE COACH

- Don't tell me off when I get things wrong.
- I love playing football – so give the chance to play and enjoy it.
- Let me make mistakes without being made to feel stupid.
- Don't expect me to get it right first time – but praise me for trying.
- Don't slap me down when I ask a question – your answer may help me learn.
- Don't expect me to be able to produce what we practice in a match straight away – I may not be ready.
- Try other ways of teaching me if I seem to be struggling – I can learn if you find the right way.
- Look at me when I talk to you – it lets me know you are really listening.
- Remember I am a young person not a small adult – sometimes I don't understand what you are saying.

To work as a football coach today you need to have a clear philosophy, an extensive knowledge base, you need to be fair and consistent, friendly, dynamic, pro-active and positive as you and your players are going on a journey of discovery together. Positive Learning Environments can be an effective teaching model for the 21st century. The trick is to get the balance right.

Positive Learning Environments – Practices

Theme: Combination and Link Play
 Game: 'Go in; Go out'
 Age Range: 12-16



Basis of the Game

- If you play out of the circle, you go out
- If you play into the circle, you go in
- Players on the inside combine but are always changing
 - Possible combinations:
 - Wall pass
 - 'Sids'
 - Round the corners
 - Foot on
 - Take

Go in; Go out game

Organisation

- Divide players in two or three groups depending on numbers
- Minimum number per group is five
- Three players form each group remain inside the circle formed by the rest of the players
- Each group bibbed in a different colour

- One ball per group with a player inside the circle.

Objective

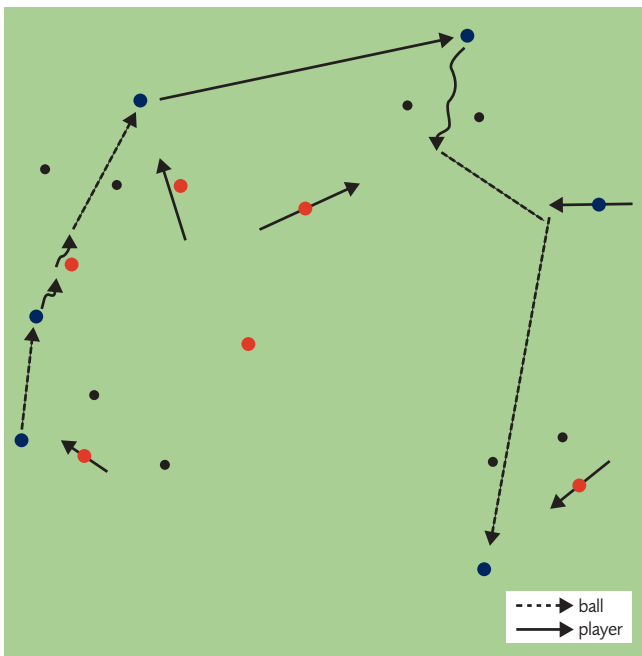
- To create a Positive Learning Environment
- To encourage combination and link play in movement
- To encourage clever play
- To encourage players to see the next pass or movement
- To improve passing, receiving and dribbling skills.

Outcomes

- Passing
- Receiving
- Dribbling
- Decision making
- Support play
- Setting up play
- Thinking time
- Clever play
- Combination play
- Players free to express themselves.

Positive Learning Environments – Practices

Theme: Decision making
 Game: Through the gate
 Age Range: 8-11



Basis of the Game

A team can score by either passing to a team mate through the gate or dribbling through the gate.
 A goal cannot be scored at the same gate in succession.

Organisation

- Area: Quarter of pitch
- 6 v 6 / 7 v 7 or use floating player if uneven members
- One ball
- Four goals marked with discs in any formation.

Objectives

- To create a Positive Learning Environment
- To encourage passing and support play
- Switching the point of attack
- To encourage decision making.

Outcomes

- Passing
- Receiving
- Dribbling
- Turning
- Running with the ball
- Defending
- Decision making
- Switch play
- Support play.

Try them and ask yourself if they are safe, secure, inclusive and challenging. Do they give choices and ownership and are the players enjoying the challenge?