

# Football and Age Appropriate Learning

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The expectations coaches and parents may have of young players football development has to consider a number of factors which are features of the growing child.

Craig Simmons, Player Development Advisor to The Football Association looks at the developmental learning of 9 to 16 year olds in 2001. Recent comments from coaches who determine the strategies for player development considered an interactive approach which recognised the changing priorities for the age related needs of the individual.

## Learning

The learning programme is central to player development and is influenced by a wide range of issues, examples of which are considered within this article. With the current level of participation and the subsequent expectations of parents and coaches increasing each year, the learning programme becomes vitally important to the development of young players.

Teaching and learning principles apply to football in the same manner they are applied in academic domains, therefore, understanding children's maturing minds is necessary if the process is to be effective. Robert Owen (1771-1858) the British Educational Reformist, advocated the importance of play and the learning process which occurred as a result of natural curiosity stimulated by play. Whilst Jean Piaget (1896-1980) the Swiss psychologist and developmental theorist explained four stages of mental growth in children. This framework continues to shape effective teaching and learning.

In his work Piaget identified the child's four stages of mental growth as follows:

- In the sensorimotor stage, occurring from birth to age 2, the child is concerned with gaining motor control and learning about physical objects.
- In the preoperational stage, from ages 2 to 8,

the child is preoccupied with verbal skills. At this point the child can name objects and reason intuitively.

- In the concrete operational stage, from ages 8 to 12, the child begins to deal with abstract concepts such as numbers and relationships.
- Finally, in the formal operational stage, ages 12 to 16, the child begins to reason logically and systematically.

Understanding how these stages affect player development in football is an important aspect of the learning programme, the suggestions which follow may support the existing knowledge.

- 1 Age groups 2 to 8 are pre football based and mainly concerned with parental and school influences, this area is of prime importance in the "Social" context.
- 2 Ages 8 to 16 are of particular importance to the football coach in the education of young players in the widest sense.

Within the learning programme the "technical" issues are the coaches responsibility, whilst the "physical" and "mental" (psychological) development may be under the guidance of the coach or sports scientists. These personnel complete the framework in which the player matures.

The interactive relationships between "technical, mental, physical and social" environments are related areas within the development strategy. Which element is prioritised in any specific age period should be determined in order to meet the individuals most appropriate needs. How these ever changing and sometimes confusing components are interwoven into the whole fabric of growth and development, is the task facing everyone concerned with maximising the potential of the developing player.

In an effort to establish the size of the task facing developers, an overview of youth development looked at the registration of players in the professional club academies and centres of excellence development programmes. These figures will vary each season.

The Premier League academy clubs register to date an average:

- 2,414 players aged 9 to 16  
The Nationwide League academy clubs register to date an average:

- 1,983 players aged 9 to 16  
Centres of excellence register to date an average:

- 5,618 players aged 9 to 16

**Approximately 10,000 boys between 9 and 16 years of age are involved in the learning programme for football each year.**

Effective education of such numbers indicates the need for a consistent teaching and learning programme which become an integral part of the strategy for player development. Whether the current system of football education and games playing intelligence is effective is open to debate, meanwhile, some of the qualities the coaches recently suggested they would like to see in young players are shown in the following tables.

These comments are from individual coaches and indicate some views and opinions from the professionals, the examples are based on experiences gained over many years of football and whilst they are not complete, they offer some interesting observations not always associated directly with technical learning.



### At 8 to 10 years old

The coach would like to see the player: show enthusiasm demonstrate a degree of skill on the ball enjoy the involvement have character like to dribble be prepared to mix with others to have imagination be unpredictable be uninhibited like to explore

#### Progressing to:

- have an awareness of others
- produce movement with and without the ball
- have a basic concept of space
- display a stable temperament continue to improve their techniques increase practice both in time and effort show a level of intelligence practice within mixed age, size and maturity groups.

8 to 10 An example of interactive elements	
Technical	<p>Clubs have increased access to children.</p> <p>Small sided games are encouraged in order to increase technique and movement.</p> <p>Bilateral learning is based on developing dominant and non-dominant sides.</p> <p>Creativity practice leading to novice skill acquisition is most appropriate at this age.</p>
Mental	<p>Peer groups are becoming more influential in club, school and social environments.</p> <p>Self concept has increasing impact on children's standing within the group.</p> <p>The "programming" of cognitive motor control development is important at this age.</p> <p>Individual differences are formed as personality becomes apparent.</p>
Physical	<p>Motor Control Development - This is the window of opportunity for neuro-muscular development, eg balance, coordination, speed, patterning, turning and flexibility.</p> <p>Possible mid growth spurt occurs in some children.</p> <p>The physiology of growth and activity continues.</p> <p>Core strength stability early work is introduced.</p>
Social	<p>Schooling reflects an age difference of up to 1 year within each year group.</p> <p>This age factor may have inclusion consequences due to the influence of age bias.</p> <p>Boys recognise their achievements.</p> <p>Families and peer groups comments influence boys thinking.</p>



## 11 to 13 years old

The coach would like to see the player add:

- an increased understanding of individual roles
- ability to be more specific when required
- increased understanding of team play
- identify others strengths and weaknesses
- deal with 1 v 1 situations more effectively
- a competitive level of mental toughness
- more individual qualities
- a level of cooperation with the coach
- an acceptance of coaching
- the practice of the "whole, part, whole" coaching approach
- combining with others effectively



<b>11 to 13</b>	An example of interactive elements.
<b>Technical</b>	<p>Skill Acquisition (intermediate), is expected to reflect appropriate decisions regarding; where, when, why and how the technique is selected and successfully executed.</p> <p>11 v 11 soccer begins in the present system.</p> <p>Bilateral learning is extended based on position related areas of the field using dominant and non-dominant sides, (under pressure).</p>
<b>Mental</b>	<p>The effect of male hormones are a consideration both physically and psychologically.</p> <p>Group dynamics begin to emerge and will be influenced by peer groups.</p> <p>Individual personality differences become more apparent.</p> <p>Peer groups are becoming more influential in club, school and social environments, as self concept has an increasing impact on children's standing within the group, this is affected by relationships with coaches and significant others.</p> <p>Anxiety, stress, confidence and arousal become more apparent.</p>
<b>Physical</b>	<p>Early maturers are apparent and influential.</p> <p>Adolescent growth spurt period occurs in early developing children.</p> <p>Strength gains are still mostly neural developments.</p> <p>Aerobic development is improved by inclusion to a suitable practice environment.</p> <p>Core stability and strength training (intermediate) becomes established.</p> <p>Plyometrics (intermediate) is introduced.</p> <p>Flexibility development programme offsets growth discrepancies, (eg. leg length).</p>
<b>Social</b>	<p>Change of school may be a new challenge.</p> <p>Individual differences become more apparent.</p> <p>Role models are important in the social learning environment.</p> <p>Expectations, reinforcement and role models are critical social learning mechanisms.</p> <p>Competition is regarded as social comparison for player, parent, and coach.</p>

### At 14 to 16 years old

The coach would like to see the player add:

- position specific knowledge
- an understanding of goal setting and feedback
- recognise winning as an expected future outcome
- more coping strategies
- evidence of increased emotional stability
- increase technical, physical, mental and social maturity
- a desire to be more competitive
- a level of increasing determination
- an individual personality which is more defined
- individual and team requirements more effectively

#### Age groups classifications:

- 1 Age references are for those players who represents the norm for their year group.
- 2 For players above or below the norm, adjustments have to be made in order to accommodate their age (eldest - youngest) within the year, or their advanced or delayed stage of technical, cognitive or physical maturity.
- 3 The interpretation of age recommendations has to address these issues.

#### Summary

- **The process of children developing from 9 to 16 demands a structure of organised teaching and learning!**
- Question - is the age appropriateness of suitable coaching and development seen as being vital to producing effective players?
- **Games playing intelligence is difficult to evaluate as many factors rely on subjective opinion!**
- Question - can this be linked to the more objective assessments derived from more easily measurable criteria?
- Question - together do they create the framework for the evaluation of the learning programme?
- **10.000 children are seeking a football education whilst growing up and continually changing!**
- Question - can football recognise the individual needs of the developing player and tailor their programme accordingly?
- **The development of players appears to have been effective over many years!**
- Question - which criteria is used to accurately measure the success of long term development and learning?

14 to 16	An example of interactive elements.
Technical	<p>A challenging environment is necessary for technical development</p> <p>Bilateral technique learning may break down under increasing pressure, this may cause players to revert to the lower levels of learning recall, therefore the correct level of opposition is important.</p> <p>Establishing position specific knowledge and relationships with other positions is expected.</p> <p>Skill Acquisition (advanced) should effectively transfer into match play under pressure.</p>
Mental	<p>The execution of cognitive and physical motor control development should be evident.</p> <p>Self concept will be influenced by peer groups forming in club, school and community.</p> <p>Learning becomes more methodical and conceptual features are developed effectively.</p> <p>Imagery and mental rehearsal are suited to learning strategies in this age group.</p> <p>Information processing and evaluations of strengths and weaknesses are now operational and applied.</p> <p>Goal setting and motivation are key areas in this group and support the development programme.</p>
Physical	<p>The adolescent growth spurt is a major factor for most children.</p> <p>Children may still be metabolic non-specialists, their genetic inheritance is still immature.</p> <p>Aerobic training - Aerobic Power, <math>VO_{2max}</math>, increases with adaptations from determined activity.</p> <p>Anaerobic training - early maturers will respond as their growth activity diminishes.</p> <p><i>Plyometrics (intermediate) is delivered with caution during the adolescent growth spurt.</i></p> <p>Soft tissue flexibility in order to offset the varied growth effects is continued.</p>
Social	<p>School examinations create additional pressures.</p> <p>Alternative social activities may confuse decision making both on and off the field of play.</p> <p>Relationships with other peer group members is a feature in this changing growth period.</p> <p>The differences between individuals is becoming more apparent.</p> <p>Trends and influences in communities will be affected by social and hormonal factors.</p> <p>Lifestyle management and coping strategies are most important.</p> <p>Players have greater social awareness, like to be part of a sub culture and are driven by image.</p>