

Citation:
Lara-Bercial, S and Hodgson, G and North, J and Schipper-Van Veldhoven, N (2022) The 10 Golden Principles for Coaching Children: Introducing the ICOACHKIDS Pledge. Forum Kinder- und Jugendsport. ISSN 2730-7212 DOI: https://doi.org/10.1007/s43594-022-00082-9

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Document Version:
Article (Published Version)

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Forum Kind Jugend Sport
https://doi.org/10.1007/s43594-022-00082-9
Accepted: 31 August 2022

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The 10 golden principles for coaching children: introducing the ICOACHKIDS pledge

Introduction

In the European Union (EU) there are approximately between 7 and 8 million youth sport coaches (**Fig. 1**) and the majority of them hold lower-level coaching qualifications or no qualifications at all (Lara-Bercial et al. 2017). While sport includes benefits such as personal and social development as well as providing a nurturing and caring environment (Holt et al. 2017; Lara-Bercial and McKenna 2018), there is evidence across the continent that participants continue to drop out of sport, especially in the adolescent years (Emmonds et al. 2021). Sport alone therefore, is no magic bullet, and coaches need to recognise the important role they play in creating positive environments for children and young people in youth sport. Environments that not only bring children to sport, but keep them in sport as active, healthy adults. The vision of ICOACHKIDS is of a world where every child has access to positive sport experiences that foster a love of sport, play and physical activity.

ICOACHKIDS

ICOACHKIDS (ICK) is a Global Movement under the umbrella of the International Council of Coaching Excellence (www.icce.ws). It was born out of a three-year project (2016–2019) co-founded by the Erasmus+ programme of the European Commission and in partnership with Leeds Beckett University, Sport Ireland Coaching, The Royal Belgian Football Association, Netherlands Olympic Committee, Universidad Europea, the Hungarian Coaches Association and the Lithuanian Sports University. ICK aims to support the development of a specialist children and youth sport coaching workforce globally by providing a range of free and easily accessible education and development opportunities. The mission is to promote sport policy, education and practice that puts kids first, and is underpinned by three strategic pillars: 1) Develop people; 2) Drive global change; and 3) Evidence impact.

To date ICK has delivered a number of outputs including: 1) the ICK Literature Review (Fix et al. 2017); 2) the ICK European Coaching Children Curriculum (Lara-Bercial et al. 2017); 3) the ICOACHKIDS website (www.ICOACHKIDS.org); and 4) the ICK International Conference (Budapest 2017, Leeds 2018, Limerick 2019, Online 2020, Online 2021). All of these outputs are available to download from the ICK site. As a part of the strategic pillar to develop people, a key practical output for coaches from ICK Literature has been the ICOACHKIDS Pledge: 10 Golden Principles for Coaching Children. The following article aims to explore the key principles described in the Pledge, and to offer insight and practical advice into how coaches may bring them to life.

The ICOACHKIDS pledge

The ICK Pledge (**Fig. 2**) offers guidance to support coaches in creating youth sport environments that put children first. Each of the 10 principles are underpinned by the acknowledgement that one size does not fit all, and instead affords coaches the opportunity to consider how they are already fulfilling them, while also planning for how they may achieve it in their given contexts.

Principle 1—Be child-centred

Youth sport coaches should have the best interest of children at heart, and be prepared to tailor coaching to their needs (based on their stages of development) and wants (recognising the voice of the child and their motivations). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child clearly states that in all actions concerning children, the best interest of the child should be a primary consideration, with the education of the child being directed to the development of their personality, mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential (United Nations 1990). Aligned with these rights are the four elements of the Lundy model of child participation (Lundy 2007): 1) Space—Children must receive inclusive, safe opportunities to form and express their view. 2) Voice—the expression of a child's view must be facilitated. 3) Audience—the view of the child must be listened to. And 4) Influence—the view must be appropriately acted upon. It is important to remember that children are not mini-adults, so their needs are different (and these differ across developmental stages).

Published online: 05 October 2022



Fig. 1 ▲ In the European Union there are approximately between 7 and 8 million youth sport coaches. Picture: LSB NRW/ Michael Grosler

Practical implications.

- Coaches should try to see sport through the eyes of the child. It is a different view to an adults.
- They should find out children's motivation to attend your sessions: Why are they there? What do they want out of it? What do they like/dislike? What kind of sport experiences have they had before?
- They should also determine the age and stage of development of the children you coach. This will allow coaches to better decide what a child's needs are, and to tailor the sessions appropriately to maximise learning and enjoyment.

Principle 2—Be holistic

Recent studies have identified Physical, Psychological, Social, Technical and Tactical (PPSTT) characteristics of developing youth sport performers (North et al. 2014, 2016). Applied to all participants, and especially children, these PPSTT characteristics can also be understood as desirable and potential developmental outcomes of sport participation at any level. It is therefore increasingly acknowledged that coaches need to think about children as human beings first—as individuals with their own histories, personalities, ideas, preferences, strengths and weaknesses (Erickson et al. 2017). This approach need not only apply to elite or developing athletes, but to all sport participants. In fact, it has been argued that this is even more important with younger participants to guarantee their lifelong participation and interest in sport (Côté and Erickson 2015; Whitehead 2011)—holistic development is a vehicle to meeting young people's sporting, life and personal goals (Miller and Kerr 2002; Henriksen et al. 2010). Effective coaching at all levels should account for these (Côté and Gilbert 2009) Taking into account the different levels of athlete development, performance and personal development do not have to be exclusive; instead they are mutually interactive with better and healthier people making better sportspeople (Miller and Kerr 2002).

Practical implications.

- Coaches should aim to develop children's psychosocial skills and capabilities not just their physical ones.
- Coaches should give children opportunities to develop a positive sense of self by valuing each child regardless of their skills and by helping them focus on their own personal improvement and effort.
- They should also create an environment that caters for and promotes the development of children's social, emotional, cognitive and moral repertoire.
- To do this, coaches could use activities that engage the children at more than just the physical level, make the most of teachable moments and challenge them to think, problem-solve and

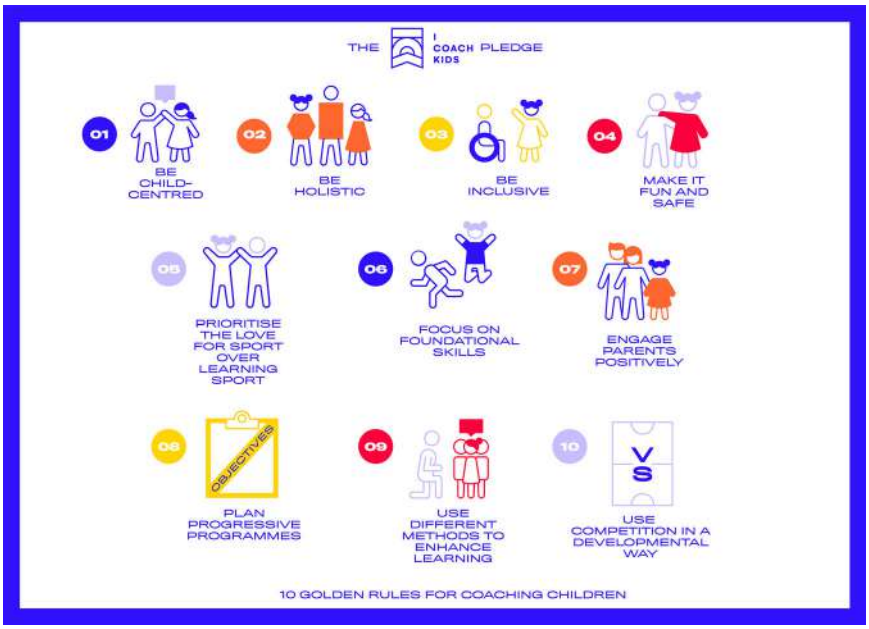


Fig. 2 ▲ The ICOACHKIDS Pledge—10 Golden Principles for Coaching Children. Figure: ICOACHKIDS

manage relationships, as well as to move.

Principle 3—Be inclusive

Coaches are encouraged to adopt and inclusive focus in their philosophy (Côté and Gilbert 2009). Catering for children of all levels and motivations is important as coaching is not one-size-fits-all. Coaches should therefore consider the specific contexts in which they coach (Camiré et al. 2012), the specific needs of each and every child (Balyi et al. 2013) and how they set appropriate short-, medium- and long-term goals for individuals (Abraham and Collins 2011).

Practical implications.

- Coaches should ensure that they remove all barriers to participation so that **every** child feels welcome.
- Especially at an early age and in grassroots contexts, this means avoiding things such as exclusive selection policies that risk excluding children and young people from sport participation.
- They should pay equal attention to all children, regardless of their ability.
- Create sessions where all children are engaged, stretched and learning is important. Effective differentiation requires a lot of planning and knowledge of the children, but it is worth it.

Principle 4—Make it fun and safe

Children in sport want to have fun and learn. To do both they need to feel safe. Coaches have to build positive relationships and enjoyable and caring climates that allow children to thrive and that keep them coming back. The most important factor in determining what children make out of sport is the quality of the relationship with the coach and other children. Coaches should endeavour to build great relationships (Lara-Bercial et al. 2017). It has been recommended that coaches should set-up safe opportunities for children to have fun and engage playfully while promoting the social aspect of sport and sampling a variety of activities (Côté and Gilbert 2009).

Practical implications.

- Coaches should think safety first. Both physically and emotionally.
- They should also ensure that children are safeguarded and protected from any potential threats to their wellbeing.
- Coaches should also ensure that the environment and the activities children do are, as much as possible, inherently enjoyable and rewarding

Principle 5—Prioritise the love for sport over learning sport

One of the main roles of the children's coach is to keep children motivated and enthused about sport so they keep coming back for more and develop a lifelong love and habit for physical activity. Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Deci and Ryan 2000) proposes that the more an activity is carried out for intrinsic or self-determined extrinsic motivations, the more likely we are to stick with that activity. Intrinsic and self-determined extrinsic motivations are thus believed to have a positive impact on children's well-being and motivation to learn and progress. In a nutshell, SDT states that human behaviour, in the main, is driven by the need to satisfy three universal psychological needs: Autonomy—being able to function without needing (much) support and making own decisions; Relatedness—feeling that one is part of something bigger that oneself and the sum of the parts; Competence—a sense of being capable of doing things which are valuable to us and those around us. Coaches can greatly impact on both the quality and quantity of the motivation of the children we coach.

Practical implications.

- Sounds counterintuitive, but don't let learning get in the way of fun. When children are having fun and are deeply engaged in an activity, they experience more positive feelings and learning happens faster and is longer-lasting.
- Make sessions fun, enjoyable, varied and novel. Make sure participants are learning, and make it a social experience. This will help coaches ensure that children want to come back.
- Fun means different things. It can be the thrill of learning something new, the exhilaration of getting it right for the first time. It can also be the feeling of competition and challenge. And

sometimes is just about being plain silly and doing an activity that is just good old fun.
- Encourage the whole family to be active: for instance, have parent and child sessions every now and again (or even always if you are dealing with younger kids) or talk to parents about how important it is for their kids to see they are active too.
- Spend time helping children understand the benefit of sport, physical activity and of leading a healthy lifestyle.

Principle 6—Focus on foundational skills

Do not be overconcerned with the specific skills of your sport. At a younger age kids need to gain essential motor skills and learn the basics of how to play games using generic tactical principles that apply to most sports. This actually leads to increased lifelong participation as well as higher levels of performance. The focus should be on the development of fundamental movement skills (FMS) from an early age (Lloyd and Oliver 2012; Gallahue et al. 2012). It is highly recommended that children should participate in multiple sports at an early age (6–12) in order to develop a range of foundational skills (Côté 1999). Even throughout a participant's adolescence, coaches should be encouraged to support the maintenance of FMS as the focus on sport-specific skills increases (Lloyd and Oliver 2012).

Practical implications.
- While sessions may have a sport specific flavour, the main ingredients should be fundamental movement skills (stability, object control and locomotion) and foundational game skills (use of space, creating advantages, anticipation, tracking others, etc).
- All of these can be worked on through fun drills and games, and within the framework and theme of a specific sport. Coaches do not have to abandon their sport to be able to coach foundational skills.
- As children grow and develop, and as their foundational skills are consolidated, you can introduce more complex movement skills and more sport-specific techniques, skills and tactics.

Principle 7—Engage parents positively

Parents are not the enemy, but the biggest resource at the disposal of coaches, schools and clubs. They want the best for their kids and so do you. Partnership is the key word (Knight and Newport 2017). Coaches must work with parents to agree and manage expectations and work collaboratively. Increasing and retaining youth participation is important, and parents have an important role to play. Parents know their children better than anyone, so should play a role in identifying key developmental outcomes of participants. Their expectations come with a knowledge of their child that the coach can capitalise on. So collaboration is essential.

Practical implications.
- Coaches will never know what parents can offer if they don't talk to them. Opening and maintaining regular lines of communication with the parents is essential.
- Tapping into parents' wealth of experience and expertise is at a coach's fingertips, but the coach has to make an effort to reach out.
- It is a coach's responsibility to support parents and help them understand the best ways they can help their kids make the most out of sport. The role of the coach as a an educator cannot be overestimated.

Principle 8—Plan progressive programmes

We are taking kids on a learning journey. Coaching children should not be about 'peaking-by-Saturday' to win a game, but more about the accomplishment of mid to long-term holistic goals. With this in mind, planning is probably the most important step of the coaching process (Robinson 2015). Planning, however, is not an exact science (Abraham et al. 2015), but it provides the framework for coaches to guide and influence development in the most effective way despite its relatively uncontrollable and unpredictable nature (Jones and Wallace 2006; North 2013). Muir et al. (2011) have used the notion of 'Constructive Alignment', developed by Biggs (2003) to propose a way to develop and plan learning objectives. A clear understanding of what we want children to experience and learn as a result of coaching is the first step of the process (Abraham et al. 2015). This needs-analysis exercise leads to the development of short, medium and long-term learning objectives from which a plan can start to emerge.

Practical implications.
- Coaches must have a good idea of the destination point for the children they coach. What skills do they want children to develop (physical, technical, tactical, mental and psychosocial)?
- Coaches then must develop short, mid and long-term goals and plans that will help the children get to the destination.
- There should be a clear link between annual or season plans (macrocycles), blocks of sessions (mesocycles), individual sessions (microcycles) and each drill or game in your sessions so you can say and see how all of it contributes to the mid and long-term goals.
- Programmes, plans and sessions must be developmentally appropriate. They need to take into account the children's age and stage of development.

Principle 9—Use difference methods to enhance learning

Various practice models have been proposed in the literature to maximize skill learning. Abraham and Collins (2011) propose that different types of practice lead to different types of learning and are suitable for different types of learners at different stages. Massed, blocked and structured practice generate short-term quick learning, are less mentally demanding and are suitable for beginners



Fig. 3 ▲ The final goal of the ICOACHKIDS Pledge is that children have positive, developmental experiences that help them develop a lifelong love for physical activity and sport leading to a healthy lifestyle. Picture: LSB NRW/Andrea Bowinkelmann

or for the early stages of skill acquisition. Random, variable and distributed practice lead to long-term learning, provide greater transfer to live situations and are more mentally demanding. This type of practice is more suitable for the refinement and transfer stages. The various types of practice are not mutually exclusive. To the contrary, coaches need to use a combination of these different methods available to them at different times to maximise learning and skill acquisition.

In addition to practice types, coaches should also consider a balance and blend of different coaching behaviours to meet the learning needs of their participants. This article particularly spotlights the different ways in which feedback may be used to enhance learning. Feedback refers all the information available to a child in relation to the performance of a skill. Feedback can be internal/intrinsic (i.e., the child can access it without help—the feeling of the movement, the outcome of the action, the sound of contact between ball and racquet, their own breathing pattern, etc) or external/extrinsic (i.e., the child needs someone or something to access it—angle of joints, speed of execution, etc). Particularly with beginners or with complex skills, coaches may also need to enhance intrinsic feedback until the athlete develops the skills/feeling to do it themselves (i.e., through video, etc). The quantity and frequency of feedback given by the coach needs to be carefully considered. Abraham and Collins (2011) state that too much feedback could result in overload and may cause a decrease in confidence to solve problems individually. More feedback encourages quick improvements as coach solves performance blocks. Less feedback, on the other hand, may slow skill acquisition but can encourage player problem solving.

Practical implications.

- There is not one single or best way to coach. Different coaching strategies are better suited for different stages of learning and have different effects.
- In addition, and whether we are using a drill or a game-based approach, practice sessions should provide opportunities for children to problem-solve, develop their own solutions to technical and tactical problems and thus develop a deeper understanding of the activity. This can also foster initiative and ownership of their development.
- In any case, it is not an 'either or' situation. The art of coaching is to know when a child or a group need to be exposed to one type of practice or another to maximise their chances of learning and retaining a skill or concept.

Infobox Hintergrund: dsj und ICOACHKIDS

ICOACHKIDS (ICK) ist ein nicht gewinnorientiertes international ausgerichtetes europäisches Gemeinschaftsprojekt, das die Entwicklung von Trainer*innen von Kindern im Alter von 5 bis 12 Jahren unterstützt. Es ist das Ergebnis eines von der Leeds Beckett Universität und dem International Council for Coaching Excellence geleiteten Erasmus+-Projekts, das von 2016 bis 2019 gemeinsam mit sechs weiteren europäischen Sportorganisationen realisiert wurde. ICK stellt eine Website für alle Kinder- und Jugendtrainer*innen, Eltern, Interessierte und Engagierte bereit, die Informationen und Materialien sowie einen Onlinekurs für ein gelungenes sportartübergreifendes „Coaching" von Kindern enthält. Alle Materialien sind kostenfrei verfügbar und können in bestehende Aus- und Fortbildungen integriert oder als Selbstlernkurse genutzt werden. Bei Nutzung der Materialien ist lediglich ein entsprechender Quellennachweis zu hinterlegen.
Die dsj beteiligt sich als Projektpartner im Rahmen des Folgeprogramms iCoachKids+, das die 13- bis 17-Jährigen in den Mittelpunkt stellt, weil ICK anschlussfähig an die Themen und Handlungfelder der dsj ist. Das Projekt stützt die „Pädagogische Trainingsqualität", das Gesamtziel, die Persönlichkeits- und Teamentwicklung im Kinder- und Jugendsport voranzutreiben, das Projekt TrainerInSportdeutschland im DOSB und das gesunde Aufwachsen von Kindern. Es hilft darüber hinaus bei der Weiterentwicklung eines attraktiven Kinder- und Jugendsports, unter anderem zur Verhinderung von Drop-out im Sport. Zudem kann die dsj so onlinebasierte, qualitativ hochwertige Lernmodule zur Verfügung stellen, ihre Expertise einbringen und ist Teil eines professionellen pädagogischen Netzwerks im Kinder- und Jugendsport auf europäischer Ebene.

Principle 10—Use competition in a developmental way

The importance of competition as a development tool has been highlighted in research (e.g., Abraham et al. 2014; Côté et al. 2013; Lyle 1997; Sotiriadou et al. 2008). Competition should, however, be developmentally appropriate (Côté et al. 2013)—not overemphasizing winning (Fraser-Thomas et al. 2008a, b). In fact, it has been found that children's enjoyment, and evaluations of their coach were more strongly related to coaching behaviours than to their team's won-lost record (Cumming et al. 2007).

Practical implications.

- Coaches should ensure that the format and the atmosphere around competition is built around the developmental stage of the kids and considerate of their needs.
- Competing and winning are two different things. The focus of matches, games and meets should be on teaching kids to compete appropriately, not on winning. Competing is about trying your hardest and giving your best all the time.
- Competition for children is just another learning tool or form of training. Particularly after a certain age, it can serve a great purpose as a 'skills benchmarking' exercise that can guided future training and foster motivation.
- Competitions can also be a fantastic way to enlarge the social circle of the children by allowing them to interact with the other team's players more like partners rather than opponents.

Conclusion

The 10 Golden Principles of the ICOACHKIDS Pledge offer a way for coaches to organise their thinking and offers clear advice about how coaches can support children through sport in their day to day practice on the ground. The final goal is that children have positive, developmental experiences that help them develop a lifelong love for physical activity and sport leading to a healthy lifestyle (**Fig. 3**).

ICOACHKIDS would like to invite all coaches, sport clubs and organisations around the world to commit to The Pledge in order to support youth sport that puts kids first. In order to help coaches to fulfil the Pledge, ICOACHKIDS have developed a number of resources, including three Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs; e-learning.ICOACHKIDS.eu), the ICOACHKIDS website and the ICOACHKIDS essentials (at www.youtube.com/icoachkidsworld).

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Funding. Open access funding provided by Leeds Beckett University.

Declarations

Conflict of interest. S. Lara-Bercial, G. Hodgson, J. North and N.S.-V. Veldhoven declare that they have no competing interests.

For this article no studies with human participants or animals were performed by any of the authors. All studies mentioned were in accordance with the ethical standards indicated in each case.

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