

How Parents Can Look To Develop Young Soccer Players

by Jason de Vos, professional soccer player, commentator and analyst

The question is this: **Why do some parents feel the need to move their child from soccer club to soccer club year after year in the hopes of joining a 'winning' team?**

Let me start by explaining where I'm coming from with this question. I view the education of young soccer players – from the time they start kicking a ball to the time they are fully grown adults – as very much like the education of young children in school.

We send our children to school in order for them to learn -- at the appropriate stages of their development -- the skills they need to succeed in their education and, by extension, in their life.

We do not expect kids in grade three to be able to do calculus, nor do we expect them to be able to go on job interviews. We do not judge them by adult standards – we judge them by age and ability specific standards for children. **Our goal, every year, is for our children to progress with their peers to the next level of their education.**

Some of those peers are more advanced for their age, and some are a little behind. That doesn't change the objectives of the school, nor does it change the objectives of the teachers. Their job is to challenge every child to advance in their education, so that they can go on to achieve long-term success.

Would a parent of a young child change schools if that child came home with poor grades? **Would they blame the teacher, or shop around for a teacher at another school who would tell them what they want to hear, that their child is, in fact, a genius that is simply misunderstood?**

While some parents may very well do that, I think most reasonable parents would instead sit down with their child's teacher to discover what they can do as parents to help their child achieve success in school. That discussion would likely involve the parents spending more time working with their child at home on the concepts that their child is struggling to understand. It would likely also involve the parents teaching their child the importance of commitment and dedication to learning.

So how does education in school relate to young players learning soccer? Just as teachers are partners with parents in the education of their children, soccer coaches are partners with parents in the education of their soccer-playing children.

While many parents understand that the goal of a student in grade three is to learn enough to graduate to grade four, **many parents fail to understand what the metrics are for success as a young soccer player.**

Many parents have only one metric for success when it comes to youth soccer – winning.

Because of this, these parents fail to understand that their child embarks on a learning process when they begin to play soccer, just as they embark on a learning process at school. It begins with learning the physical literacy skills of running, kicking and jumping, and progresses to more advanced skills like kicking a ball with multiple surfaces of both feet, dribbling the ball against opposition and interacting with teammates to attack and defend.

These parents are so desperate for their child to succeed in soccer – which, due to the parents' limited understanding, means winning games – that they fail to understand that their child first needs to learn the fundamentals of the game.

Young players need to learn to be comfortable with a ball at their feet, to pass and receive the ball, to shoot the ball with both feet. Those are some of the core fundamentals young players need in order to achieve long-term success in the game. **There is no shortcut to success in soccer; there isn't a player in the world who reaches the highest level of the game without first acquiring those skills.**

To put the process of skill acquisition into the context of education, consider this: Teachers do not ask children to compose essays before they are first taught to write the letters of the alphabet, followed by words, followed by sentences, followed by paragraphs, etc. There is a structured learning process that children go through in order to reach the stage where they are able to write complex topical essays.

Yet when it comes to soccer, many parents fail to understand that the very same process is required. How can a child be expected to be successful in the game before they are first taught to kick a ball with both feet, to dribble the ball, to pass and receive the ball - the very skills through which games can be won?

One often hears parents on the side lines yelling instructions to their children. Those parents believe that they are supporting their child's learning, and that their child will learn faster if they are given vocal encouragement. In reality, more often than not, this encouragement only serves to confuse the child.

Picture it in a different context. If a child were asked in school to add the numbers four and five, would a parent yell out from the back of the classroom, "Nine! Nine is the right answer! Say nine!"

This is essentially what those parents are doing on the sidelines of a soccer field. They are taking away their child's opportunity to learn through guided discovery, a process whereby young players experiment with new skills under the guidance of their coach, thus involving them in the learning process. **When a parent is barking orders at a child from the sidelines, they are actually detracting from their child's learning opportunity.**

Not all parents are like this, of course. The vast majority are very supportive of their children's soccer education, and understand that it isn't all about winning. But **how do we go about**

changing the culture of soccer in our country, so that all parents understand that the process of developing young soccer players doesn't lie solely in the win column?

Clubs and Academies across Canada must work to educate parents, so that those parents understand that the soccer field is their child's classroom -- where they go to learn the game. The onus is on the teacher (the coach) to make learning the game fun for the students (the players.)

As parents, you must understand your job is to support the learning of your child, not hinder it. You can play a big role in emphasizing the lessons that your child's coach is trying to teach them. Develop a comfortable relationship with the coach, so if you have any concerns about your child's understanding of those lessons, you can speak freely with the coach so you can work together to help your child learn.

If your child has a season where the losses outnumber the victories, ask yourself these two important questions, "Did my child have fun this year? Did they learn more fundamentals?" If you can answer 'yes' to both of these questions, there is a good chance your child is in a good learning environment.

And finally, don't get fixated with wins and losses. They aren't nearly as important as you might think. When it comes time for your child to try out for an elite team, be it at the university, provincial, national or professional level, trophies count for nothing. **Fundamentals are what really matter; if your child has mastered those, there is a very good chance they will find the success that they desire**