

Psychological issues when dealing with 10 & Under tennis players

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ABSTRACT

Most 10 and under play tennis because they love the sport. Coaches and parents are responsible for providing the right atmosphere that will keep them in love with tennis for their whole life. In order to achieve this properly, there are a series of psychological issues that should be taken into account. In this article we will present the general psychological characteristics of 10 & under players as well as some of the aspects that should be developed at this period.

Key words: psychology, children, 10 and under, attitude, responsibility.

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THE PSYCHOLOGY OF A 10 AND UNDER

The emotional experience of tennis is an important part of most 10 & Under players' life. Pleasure / displeasure, tension / relaxation and a plethora of other feelings are inextricably linked to the game and exact their own unique influence on each player's emotional experience.

In the following table adapted from González & Ochoa (2003) the psychological characteristics of players 4 – 10 are summarised.

AGE	INDIVIDUAL PSYCHOLOGICAL CHARACTERISTICS
4 TO 6 YEARS OLD APPROX.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Anxious, impatient.• Poor concentration span.• Selfish.• Only want to play.• Minimal social interaction.• Learn through imitation.
7 TO 10 YEARS OLD APPROX.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Greater capacity to concentrate.• More interest in interacting with groups.• Growing interest in sports.• Great disposition to learning.• Competitive tendencies.

Very small children are egocentric in nature, they think they are the centre of the world. As their body grows, they also develop emotionally and intellectually and their social skills are fostered by school. When they reach their 10th birthday they start to be more inclined to developing relationships with others. They gradually understand themselves better and their role within society. They usually dislike being alone and they need the approval of the group mates. They begin to prefer group play and interaction. Besides, they improve their ability to understand, interpret, reflect, analyze, think and respect the rules (Le Blanc & Dickson, 1997).

DEVELOPING ATTITUDE, MATURITY AND RESPONSIBILITY

Success in tennis is about much more than just winning matches; it is also about developing the right attitudes, which if done successfully can accelerate learning and improve competitive performance (Wilson, 2001). Effort, fair play, team spirit and responsibility are among them.

We should remember that by gradually giving increased responsibility to young players, coaches build up and create their independence and self-confidence, which in turn very naturally moulds the right attitude for tennis and life.

Zlesak (1995) recommends that players of different ages set basic goals to guide them in developing the adequate attitude. When the 10 &

under group he recommends the following:

- Be on time for the lesson.
- Bring their racquet, water, etc., to the court.
- Bring the necessary equipment for the lesson (balls, cones, etc.).
- Collect balls when indicated.
- Behave on court.
- After the lesson collect all the equipment used.

One crucial aspect for developing the right attitude is punctuality. Miranda (2001) recommends that being on time is an important issue for the adequate running of all tennis lessons. Even though 10 & Under players attend the lessons "to play tennis while having a good time", the coach should remind them that it is not correct to be late as a sign of respect to other peers, the coach and to oneself.

Entrusting children of all age categories with greater independence, but also responsibility, while maintaining the positive backing of their parents is optimal for their personality development and their social skills (necessary to optimise relations with coaches, peers, idols and, if need be, to the public).

BUILDING SELF-ESTEEM AND CONFIDENCE

Self-esteem, or the feeling about oneself, is one of the crucial mental qualities to be developed in children. Coaches and parents should, by all means possible, create the atmosphere to help children feel good about themselves. It is believed that the most important phase in the development of self-esteem occurs during the 10 & Under period.

Coaches can use different strategies that will increase the self-esteem of young tennis players such as: reward effort, not just ability; use inclusion and not only elimination games; provide specific, and not general feedback; give praise and smile often; ask for suggestions and finally; tell them how good they are...we all love that!

One way of adequately building self-esteem in 10 & Under tennis players is adapting the game of tennis to their characteristics. They should certainly not be playing adult tennis. If tennis equipment and rules are appropriately adapted to meet the mental and physical needs of young players, they will hit more balls, get more rallies and learn a better technique and tactics that will make them more skillful.

With adapted rules, adequate competition formats, a shorter racket, a slower ball and a smaller court players will in turn experience more success and have more fun!

HELPING CHILDREN TO TAKE DECISIONS

Where should I stand? How should I hold the racquet? When should I play deep? What is best when playing at the net? Tennis is a quick and complex decision making sport. According to Brabenec (1981) a tennis player makes 900 decisions per match.

Research has shown that experience has a role in quick decision making (Goulet et al., 1989). Ten & Under players are beginners with limited experience. They can not process information very quickly so their decision making process is slow. As stated above, the poor concentration that children show at this age does not help to make fast and good decisions.

How can coaches help in the decision making process of 10 & Under players? By adapting the game, the equipment, the competition and the rules to their characteristics, the coach will create a comfortable atmosphere that assist players in discovering the important cues and patterns where to focus as well as the process and consequences of correct and incorrect decision-making.

IMPORTANCE OF PRACTICE

For many decades it has been known that children learn most quickly and easily between the ages of 8 – 12. The human brain reaches the highest potential for learning at those ages and we, tennis coaches, have been advised to work hard and conscientiously to obtain maximum results (van Fraayenhoven, 2001).

Harwood (2000) indicated that practice is rehearsal. Kids of this age can learn quickly, but they can also learn negative skills quickly as opposed to positive ones. Some of the skills that can be learned at this period include: thinking positively, appropriate mistake management, positive body language, quality effort levels, and correct routines and rituals.

Mental effort should be consistently high at this period because children concentrate poorly at this age and they learn and develop mental and technical skills quicker. Telling is not enough...they'll forget. Some aspects that could be considered are emphasising 'watching the ball' and play games which bring their attention to the ball as well as establishing 'body language,' 'point routines' and 'positive self-talk' rules for the sessions (Harwood, 2000).

A WORD ON PARENTS

According to Sledr (2001) the detachment of a child from parents when he goes to kindergarten or school is even more augmented in tennis by the relative independence of the tennis player on the court. However, parents often expect from the child satisfying of their own needs and so put an excessive pressure on him.



Harwood (2000) suggests that coaches should work with parents in order to educate them. They are a valuable resource in the mental training of the children. Parents need to be educated about reactions to winning and losing. They need 'language guidelines' for tournaments so that they can have a function at the matches that you are unable to watch. Parents are underrated in terms of tasks and actions that they can perform which will support your on court practice.

Harwood & Knight (2009) in a study examined the stressors experienced by British tennis-parents. Results showed that parents experienced

a diverse number of competitive stressors indicating the particular difficulties they faced before, during, and after matches involving their child, opponents, other parents, and officials.

Bois et al. (2009) found that the presence of both parents in a match was associated with higher pre-match anxiety. Besides female tennis players perceived greater parental pressure than most other participants. Parenting directive behaviours and pressure were associated with pre-competitive anxiety for all tennis players.

The results of research reinforce the importance of parents possessing the necessary skills to cope with the psychological, developmental, and logistical demands of competitive tennis.

FINAL THOUGHT: KEEP IT FUN!

Play is crucial in children's life. They love it. Coaches should avoid monotonous activities during the lessons that only will demotivate children from the lessons. Coaches should recognise the relevance of the children social and mental development within tennis by programming fun sessions full of team games, cooperative skills, and fair play as the basis of their activity. We will be promoting long-term involvement in tennis by instilling a love and passion for it through fun and varied activities.

Thus, it is crucial to plan the lessons with fun activities that motivate children to see tennis as a fun and easy sport to play. Coaches should be creative and be continuously focused on the likes and opinions of their students. Then tennis will be truly an unforgettable experience for all.

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