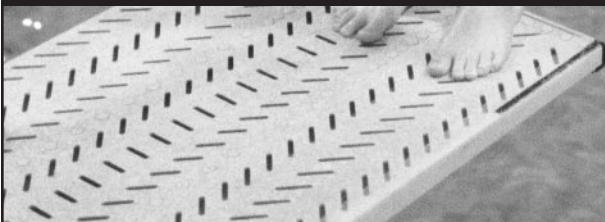




**What does success  
mean to a child? ▶**



◀ **C**hildren don't think like adults. They view success differently and these views differ with age, gender, and the type of sport they play. British researcher Dr. Jean Whitehead asked 3,000 youngsters aged nine to 16 years to describe what success in sport means to them. She received these answers from primary school children.

*"I did my first back dive ever in front of my brother and my dad."*

*"I swam a length with nobody helping me."*

*"We were practising and I was the only one who could do it."*

*"I practised and practised, then one day I did it!"<sup>1</sup>*

These replies show that children don't see winning as the only kind of success. In fact, winning is most often cited last when children are asked about their reasons for participating.

In an article in *Coaching Children in Sport* entitled "Why Children Choose to do Sport — or Stop", author Whitehead writes: "Young children are more concerned with mastering their own environment and developing skills than with beating others — at least until someone tells them that it is important to win."

Up to about age 10, children believe that success and doing well are based upon effort and social approval. Because their capacity to assess their own ability develops very slowly, they cannot have clear expectations about how successful they will be in sport. They believe that those who try hard are successful, and if you are successful, you must have tried hard. Children in this age bracket tend to think of success as finishing the race, regardless of whether they placed first, second, or 20th.

At about six to seven years of age, children start to compare their skills with other children. They start to wonder whether others can do the same things they can. Things that are 'hard' are those few others can do. It is not until about 12 years of age that children are able to tell the difference between skill, luck, effort, and true athletic ability.

Because children are not good at judging their own ability, they depend on others to tell them how well they are doing in developing skills and how they compare with their peers. This places enormous responsibility on parents and coaches not to set standards that are too high.