



How do
children
think and
learn? ▶

◀ **T**eaching children new sport skills is not easy. It requires knowing how children learn, how they pay attention, remember, and make decisions.

The human brain is like a computer. It receives information by using its senses, interprets the information, and then produces a response. When children see a baseball travelling towards them, they must feel where their body is and recognize that to hit the ball, they must swing the bat at a particular time and speed. The results of the swing are stored in memory for the next time.

However, learning sport skills does not simply involve learning how to swing a bat or kick a ball. It also involves learning what to pay attention to. In a team sport, many things compete for a child's attention: teammates, opponents, the ball or puck, coaches, and parents. Parents or spectators who shout from the sidelines can create distractions for players, making it difficult for them to perform.

To play a team sport, children must pay attention to cues that are relevant and block out those that are not. It is easy for children to become overloaded with information. Keeping practices simple by giving youngsters only one thing to work on at a time improves the learning process.

Everyone has a limited amount of information that can be processed at any one time; the speed with which we can deal with the information is known as our information processing capacity. As we grow and mature, our capacity to handle information becomes more sophisticated. We can deal with more information at once, and more quickly.

To help them learn, coaches must try to reduce the information children have to deal with. Playing basketball, for example, requires the child to dribble the ball and look for a teammate — two tasks that are difficult until one of them requires less attention. To help children cope, coaches should give them time to practise dribbling alone. Then they can practise dribbling past standing players or cones. When children know how to dribble, coaches can start introducing passing techniques. When dribbling is automatic, the game is easier to learn.