



How do children develop skills? ▶

When a baby learns to walk, it goes through a natural sequence of development — creeping, crawling, standing with support, then standing alone. Finally, it will walk, encouraged by delighted parents. The loving parent and the baby learning to walk is the best model to apply to children learning sport skills, says sport psychologist Dr. Murray Smith. A parent doesn't give walking lessons; he or she simply encourages the child.

Sport skills develop slowly from primitive to less primitive. Children rarely learn a new skill correctly at the start. Adults often make the mistake of trying to teach a child to throw, kick, or catch the ball the way they do. A coach who directs a child constantly is actually impeding the learning process. When children are learning, they make lots of mistakes. But they learn by thinking things through. When they detect an error, they are taking another step in skill development.

There are generally three stages to teaching children new skills: understanding, practising, and performing.

UNDERSTANDING

In the first stage, children must understand what they are trying to achieve. Never assume that children know what you want — show them, then explain in simple terms. Good coaches demonstrate the skill themselves and then ask several team members to try it. It is better to choose someone who can demonstrate the skill correctly at the athletes' present level. Most people identify with average performers and learn best from them. Beginners sometimes find it discouraging to observe the best performers.

PRACTISING

Once children understand what is to be achieved, practice is needed to refine the skills. Keep practices short, simple, and fun. During practice, give feedback that is appropriate to the age and skill level of the players. Children simply cannot absorb feedback as well as adults. Start by asking questions and deal with one thing at a time. Children learn more if they have to recall and think it through themselves. Always find something positive to say after each skill attempt and focus on key points.

PERFORMING

When a skill can be performed almost automatically, the child can then attempt it within a more complex or modified game situation.