

Learning to move

Why do so many teenagers drop out of sport? Research by Sport England in 2002 suggests a significant decline in the proportion of young people who say they enjoy participating in sport upon reaching secondary school age. 73% of primary school pupils describe themselves as *sporty*, yet this falls to 65% in secondary school¹. More alarming still is that of the 65% enjoying sport at secondary school, a mere fraction will continue to participate in these activities in adult life². Despite the largest area of growth in sport participation over the past decade occurring in the 6 – 11 age range³, the General Household Survey in 2002 reported a decrease in general sports participation.

How are we to explain this shift from sporty youngsters to sedentary adults? Psychologists argue that by the time young people reach secondary school their view of sport, and more importantly their perception of their competence in sport (their *self-concept*) is already entirely established. When a young person moves into adolescence, they feel that their ability in sport is fixed, regardless of the effort they put in⁴. In other words, by this age you believe you are either good at sport or you are not and at a period in life where peer acceptance is of great importance, it is understandable that those with low sporting self-esteem choose to opt out altogether.

This strongly suggests that the primary school years are the most formative of all. Whilst you can take up and become proficient in sport at any time in your life, the most fruitful method of driving up participation rates in sport is to ensure positive experiences at the *early learning* stages, to hopefully guarantee high sporting self-esteem throughout teenage life. How then, do we envisage developing a more effective and successful introduction to sport at the early ages?

Extensive studies suggest that initial sporting experiences have either focussed predominantly on sports-specific technical development, or alternatively, adopted a *fun at all costs* approach to games and physical activity⁵. Both these introductory experiences display clear shortcomings.

Firstly, introducing an intricate skill such as a backhand in tennis or the jump shot in basketball, at a very early age is potentially overwhelming for the young recipient. Sports-specific skills are complex movement patterns that need to be broken down and introduced progressively.

All sports are made up of fundamental movement skills such as running, jumping, striking and catching. However, these movement skills are further underpinned by what is known as the fundamentals of movement, the ABC's, (Agility, Balance and Coordination)⁶. To attempt to introduce a complex sports-specific skill to a young person that is yet to master the fundamentals of movement is akin to teaching Pythagoras Theorem to someone who cannot count. If a young person bypasses the basics, they are likely to encounter what is known as a *sport skill proficiency barrier*⁷. This inability to effectively execute sports skills leads to feelings of frustration and low self-perception

On the other hand, to omit any instruction at all by simply introducing a game and allowing it to develop its natural course is equally as unproductive. This leads to a lack of accountability for learning and skill progression⁸ - in other words it involves coaches and teachers setting up various activities and games but without actually *coaching* young people within these environments.

A more logical, step-by-step approach to teaching the fundamentals of movement before advancing on to more complex motor patterns would establish the right foundations for any child to then specialise in sport at a later stage. A common misconception is that sporting ability is only naturally acquired or genetic, and is therefore fixed rather than changeable. Yet the fundamentals of movement do not generally appear naturally but are in fact developed through appropriate opportunities and environments for learning and attainment⁹ (environments often referred to as deliberate play¹⁰). This is known as acquiring *physical literacy*. Understanding that this literacy needs to be taught, rather than just developing naturally, is central to understanding that sporting ability is controllable rather than predetermined.

Of course there is no doubt that some young people enjoy sports more than others and thus quickly build up their physical literacy (it is they who become the sporty types). However, with the right opportunities and coaching, everyone can attain a base level of physical literacy that allows them to make a more *informed* choice about participating in sport, based upon real preferences, rather than ones imposed upon them as a result of failing to hurdle the barrier to successful sports skill acquisition.

The shift from theory into practice has started. This notion of deliberate play is by no means a new concept. Istvan Bayli's Long Term Athlete Development (LTAD) model¹¹, introduced to the UK sports system in 2000, advocates a six-stage approach to sporting development, the first stage of which is referred to as the *FUNdamentals* phase. This FUNdamentals phase specifically promotes the idea of deliberate play as the appropriate environment in which to develop agility, balance and coordination, under the term *multi-skill*. We are now at a transitional stage in sport, where these scientific models and research findings are leading future developments.

Numerous organisations are seeking to implement the LTAD model. Many National Governing Bodies of Sport have put together an LTAD framework, and adapted their player pathways - the path a young person would ideally follow in that particular sport from playground to podium - ensuring that young people do not specialise too early. The Youth Sports Trust, through the PE, School Sport and Club Links (PESSCL) strategy and the national network of School Sports Partnerships, are putting into effect a national Multi-Skill Clubs Programme, in which out of hours multi-skill clubs are set up at Key Stage 2 to introduce young people to the fundamentals of movement and fundamental sport skills, and therefore develop their physical literacy.

sports coach UK (scUK) is providing support to both the Youth Sports Trust and the National Governing Bodies to deliver their respective LTAD frameworks. They have developed various multi-skill training resources and workshops to enhance the quality of coaching to young people, some of which are being utilised on both the Multi-Skill Clubs Programme and the national Community Sports Coach Schemes.

Working closely with the Youth Sports Trust, Sport England and County Sports Partnerships, **scUK** also provide advice and guidance on the recruitment of specialist multi-skill coaches. Through the network of county-based **scUK** Coach Development Officers; coaches and teachers can access training and continuous professional development for multi-skill coaching.

This partnership approach is crucial in ensuring that the delivery of multi-skill sessions is high quality. A multi-skill coach should not only be able to set up fun games and activities for appropriate age groups, but also be equipped with the knowledge and skills to adapt these games to focus specifically upon balance, agility and coordination. Many of these games already exist (for example hopscotch greatly improves basic coordination); the real skill is in adapting the game to suit the participants, and then coaching them within that environment to progress. The transition from a coaching style that is generally directive and prescriptive to one that is more creative and flexible, that guides and empowers participants, is key to effective multi-skill coaching. This will provide the springboard to successful sport-specific skill acquisition, avoiding the low sporting self-esteem and lack of physical literacy so damaging to continued participation.

The shift in attitudes to sporting ability is our greatest challenge today. Young people have been turned away from sport, not as a result of choice, but of perceived failure or incompetence. Developing physical literacy is a step towards presenting young people with real and informed choices. These recent developments truly place the emphasis on the content and substance of early sports teaching, and seek to up-skill primary teachers to deliver high quality PE to young people. To achieve this, we must understand that a lack of natural talent is not irreversible. On the contrary, with the implementation of earlier structured physical education we can influence and increase our pool of talent by taking a more scientific approach to the development of sport in the early years. The basic concept is inspiring, that we are free as human beings to mould our sporting ability, rather than condemned to the body into which we were born.

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- ¹ Research Study conducted for Sport England (2002). 'Young People and Sport in England, 2002; a survey of young people & PE teachers.'
- ² Fairclough, S., Stratton, G. and Baldwin, G. (2002) The contribution of secondary school physical education to lifetime physical activity. *European Physical Education Review*, 8(1): 69-84; Game Plan, Strategy Unit, 2002, part 4.23
- ³ Kirk, D (April 2004) Sport & Early Learning Experiences – 'Driving up Participation, the Challenge for Sport'; report commissioned by Sport England
- ⁴ Lee, A., Carter, J.A. & Xiang, P (1995) Children's conceptions of ability in physical education – *Journal of Teaching Physical Education*, 14 (4), 384-393
- ⁵ Kirk, D (1992) *Defining Physical Education: The Social Construction of a School Subject in Postwar Britain*. London: Falmer
- ⁶ Jess, M., Dewar, K. and Fraser, G., 2004 *Basic Moves: Developing a Foundation for Lifelong Physical Activity*. *British Journal of Teaching in Physical Education*, Vol. 35(2), pp.23-27
- ⁷ Stratton, G., Ward, P and Smeeton, N. (August, 2002) 'Foundation Sport Skills – Top Line Report'; report by Liverpool John Moores University, commissioned by Sport England
- ⁸ See Kirk, 2004; endnote 3
- ⁹ Stafford, I (2005). *Coaching for Long-Term Athlete Development – to improve participation and performance in sport*. pp.27-33. Leeds: Coachwise Business Solutions.
Atkins, E., Handford, C & Heath, R (2005). **sports coach UK** 'An Introduction to the FUNdamentals of Movement' Workshop – supporting tutor notes
- ¹⁰ Côté, J. & Hay, J. (2002). Children's involvement in sport: a developmental perspective, In J.M.Silva & D.Stevens (Eds) *Psychological Foundations of sport*, Boston, MA: Merrill
- ¹¹ Bayli, I. (2001). *Sports System Building: Long term athlete development in British Columbia*. Paper presented at the NCTC, 6th National Coaching Forum: Pathways to success – good coaching for children, players and athletes, 8-10th June, Ireland