

Northern Plains Hockey

Coaching Newsletter

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Do What is Right for Kids!

As we begin another hockey season I would ask that we, as the adults running the youth hockey programs, remind ourselves for whom we are designing the program. Every youth hockey program should be designed for the age of the **kids** at each age-level. This seems pretty elementary- why should I even write about it? However, if we look closely at many programs we can find parts of the program that are not kid-friendly.

I believe that every youth hockey program should revolve around 3 basic concepts-

1. Age-appropriate training
2. Active practices
3. FUN!!!

I wrote the last newsletter this past Spring about an art project that I watched a 3rd grader create. It was supposed to be a baseball diamond- but when he was done he only had 3 bases. My point in the article was that when this art project was brought home it would be hung up on the refrigerator with the other projects. I think parents expect 3rd grade art to look like that project.

So why when it comes to sports do we expect practices and games to look the same from 8 years old to 18 years old. The games are often played on the same size ice surface, and practices are very often similar in nature. I think we as the adults in the program need to really ask ourselves what should an 8-year old or 12-year old practice look like.

What type of activity should be occurring? No matter what age we are talking about for youth, the focus should be on skill development. The younger the players, the higher the percentage of time that should be spent on skill development. While I'm certainly not an 'expert' on the topic, I believe that skill development up to the age of 18 should always be at least 50% of a practice- that percentage indicates it should always be the priority of the people running the program.

At 8-years old, skill development should be 80-90% of the practice. These kids need the skills- and they are at a great age to acquire and develop skills. They also are not at an age where they are ready to learn some of the concepts and systems

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related to playing hockey. That will come later when they are ready for it. Remember the art story- we don't need to teach concepts and systems to a bunch of kids who are not at that point.

I recently spoke to a group of coaches about developing players. I suggested that a practice for 15-18 year olds should include 50-60% skill development and 40-50% concepts and systems. While I really don't know the exact percentages, I threw out these numbers to signify that skill development should still occur most of the time (over 50%). This age group of players is ready to learn more concepts and systems- thus skill development time has to go down a little to allow for more time in these areas.

Skill development is the key to any player moving successfully to the next level of play. It is also the key component in making better players. And although it is not as important as we make it out to be, the team with better players usually wins the game.

I have written in the past about active practices. As an athletic director at a high school in North Dakota, this is the biggest disappointment I have with every single practice I watch. There are way too many kids standing in lines waiting to participate at every age-level I watch. Skills are acquired and mastered through repetition- not standing in line. This where the adults running the programs need to change the mindset of the coaches and others in charge of these practices. Get kids involved! Repetition can occur in a variety of ways so as to keep it fun.

Statistics show that kids are only active for 12-15 minutes in a traditional 60-minute practice. That's terrible! A friend of mine timed his daughter in a 60-minute youth practice (not a hockey practice) a couple of weeks ago- only 9 minutes and 14 seconds of activity. There is a novelty to any sport- it is fun for a while. However, sports will not remain fun for kids when they spend more time standing in line than they do participating in the skills, drills, and games. My general rule is that kids should be active for at least 30 minutes in a practice- I actually believe we can do better than that and I have data to support it. Think about this- how good could our kids be if they were active for 35-40 minutes every time they stepped on the ice. I'm talking from 6 years old to 18 years old. That's long-term development. Watch your local high school players- they are at the level they are at on 12-15 minutes of activity in practice. We can do better!!!

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A couple of reminders- None of us goes to Walmart hoping to stand in line at the checkout counter. The fun part of taking your family to Disney Land is not standing in line waiting to ride. If we as adults don't like this why should kids? We need to design youth programs that take the amount of activity and what is being taught into account. Practices that are active and have age-appropriate activities going on are FUN for the kids involved! This will keep kids involved and lead to long-term development.

Blue Pucks

Just a thought on the blue pucks (lighter than the traditional black puck). If your program is not using blue pucks at practices for players who are 8 and under then there is obviously a disconnect as to what is appropriate for that age. The weight of the puck does make a difference for kids that age. Let them have more success shooting and passing a puck that is lighter. Don't do what has always been done. I would argue that you could use blue pucks at older ages to teach proper shooting technique but that is another article. Think about kids and what is age-appropriate. We have to be willing to change!!

Contact Information

Feel free to contact me if you have any thoughts, questions, or ideas. I would be more than happy to come to your association and visit about any hockey-related topic.

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Don't necessarily coach the way you were coached!! We have so much more knowledge about what kids need and how we should deliver it. We need to change!!