

Coaching “High Energy” Kids

By Nell Phillips, PCA Coaching Education Manager

“High-energy” kids. Don’t all kids fall into this category? As coaches, haven’t we all marvelled at one time or another, at the seemingly endless supply of energy that our kids possess? In fact, it seems that the natural makeup of young athletes includes a love of movement and constant activity.

There are, however, kids whose energy level regularly surpasses what we’ve come to expect as typical. These youngsters have great difficulty standing still, staying in line, and generally speaking, become very uncomfortable with even short periods of inactivity.

Managed poorly, these “high-energy” kids can quickly become disruptive, often frustrating coaches and team-mates alike by displaying short attention spans and not following directions. On the other hand, if a special effort is made to accommodate them, players with uncommonly high levels of energy can fit in well with the team’s regular practice and game program.

What can coaches do to deal successfully with high-energy players? First, we may need to shift our overall approach to practice planning. Rather than asking high-energy kids to fit into lower-energy practices, think about how we can raise the energy level of our sessions. Here are some thoughts:

1) Start practice with a drill, not a lecture.

Many of us have gotten in the habit of starting all of our practices by getting the team together and addressing them as a group. In this state, it doesn’t take long for kids to become distracted as they tune us out and search for other sources of stimulation.

Establish an opening practice ritual that involves moderate physical exertion to get players active. Keep in mind because it’s the beginning of practice, any drills you choose should have players moving at a controlled, comfortable “warm up” pace to prevent injury.

2) More lines = shorter lines

Most young athletes have a difficult time standing in line. Whereas older athletes look at this as a good rest opportunity, younger players tend to feel like they’re missing out on the action. As a result, they often stray from their lines in search of something to occupy their energy. During drills, try to keep lines as short as possible (working in pairs is ideal). For instance, rather than having two lines of five players waiting for their turn to shoot on goal, consider pairing players together, and having the non-shooter stand as a “dummy” defender that the shooter must elude.

Keep in mind, with shorter lines, players will be getting more repetitions and will become fatigued more rapidly. This will enable them to practice executing skills while they are tired and will also allow them to get more out of a drill in less time.

3) Encourage talking during drills

Good teams are loud, not in a confrontational sense, but in an enthusiastic, communicative and supportive way. Most kids have a very hard time being quiet, especially in an athletic setting. Try scrimmaging with an additional scoring element. If the defense is vocal and communicative, add a goal to their score. If

they're quiet, deduct a goal. This emphasis on chatter will serve the team well throughout the course of the season, in practices and in games, because communication breeds closeness and closeness breeds teamwork.

4) Let players choose drills

Part of the reason kids get restless is, throughout the course of practice, they're often not doing exactly what they'd like to be doing. We want to run a drill, they want to scrimmage. We want them to stand in line, they want to run around. Allowing players to choose a drill, or a skill to work on, can help get their attention and often makes them more committed to the activity. You don't need to spend a lot of time on the activity that the players choose, and you'll likely find that the give minutes you do spend on this will earn you significantly longer attention spans for the remainder of the practice session.

5) Assign "Hustle" goals

Players with high-energy aren't always the most skilled, but they are often among the most aggressive players on the team. Help them to see their energy as strength by establishing "hustle" goals for them to achieve. Examples of these are innumerable, such as being the first player back on defense or possessing all ground balls. Every team needs players that embrace these skills and take pride in their ability to help their team-mates in these ways.

6) Keep explanations brief

This may seem harsh, but generally speaking, coaches tend to talk too much throughout the course of a practice. There is so much to teach, and so little time, that we feel like we have to constantly tell our players how to play the game. Players learn the game best by playing it, not by listening to us talk about it. Identify players who perform the skill well, and have them demonstrate to the other players (note: it's important to not have the same player(s) demonstrating all the time. Try to make corrections in form and technique while players are performing the skill. This helps them feel what they should be doing, which is much more powerful than just hearing it while they are standing skill. One of the great skills that young athletes can learn through sports is self-control. The excitement and intensity of the competitive athletic environment presents tremendous challenges in terms of regulating energy and aggressiveness. As coaches, we can play a significant role in helping our players discover how to manage their physical and mental energies in ways that are suitable to the setting and respectful of those around them. The first step is recognizing how we can create a practice and game environment that maximises high-energy as a strength, working to the benefit, rather than to the detriment of the team.