

COACHING CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES – Is it really that hard?

by Kathy Tessier, Les Bee and Robyn Floyd, Victorian Disability Education Program.

The children are laughing and joking as they turn up for their weekly training session. As they greet their coach they all seem genuinely happy to see each other. Just like any other after school coaching session, or is it? One kid takes off his trousers to reveal a prosthetic leg. He takes it off, to put another one that is obviously more suited to running. This coach is coaching a disabled kid! He obviously must be a special kind of person. Surely he must have had special training.

This coach is definitely no more special than any other coach. He simply sees himself as a coach and he knows his sport, and all of his charges, well. To him, his young athlete with a disability is just that – an athlete who has his own likes, dislikes, personality and skills. Just like all of the others. This coach also knows that he has not always been the perfect coach. He has tried many different approaches to coaching this young athlete, and some of them have not worked. Most have though and he has always learned something from the failures.

If we all think back to our own sporting experiences, it is hard to imagine a team that we were in, or coached, where all team members were of the same level of ability. Good coaches cater to different abilities and get better at it as their experience and skills grow.

Is it possible that coaching children with a disability

actually improves a coach's skill level? Those coaches that have coached children with disabilities would answer a resounding yes! After coaching someone with a disability, they are much better at seeing things differently and adapting to all situations.

Equally, good junior programs cater for all levels of ability so the inclusion of children with a disability is not difficult at all. If your program does not allow for children with disabilities then how many other children whose skills are not quite up to it are missing out? Is a junior coach's job to put children off sport or to turn them on to it? Coaches of juniors are not there to win premierships or create future champions. If that happens then it is a bonus. Junior coaches are there to give children the enjoyment, skills and confidence for a life-long involvement (at whatever level) in sport.

Every child is unique, children with disabilities are no different, they have the same needs and require the same opportunities as everyone else.

It is perfectly acceptable for first time coaches of children with disabilities to feel a little apprehensive. Coaches need to work with what the child can do. If you are not sure, ask them or their parents. You cannot change what they cannot do, but you certainly can expand on what they can do!

Modifications are essential to the adult sport models to allow for greater participation, enjoyment and skill development in children. Sometimes (but not always) children with disabilities may need modification of equipment, rules, playing environment or a different method of instruction. Simple adaptations or modifications can be made by the coach to allow for greater participation

and achievement by all, although every effort should be made to keep the activity as true to form as possible.

Coaches do not need to be carers or have disability-specific knowledge — they need to know (or get to know) their young athletes and the sport. The best resource on a particular child's disability is to first ask the child and/or the parents. After all, any child who is keen enough to join a club or team will be enthusiastic and aware of their skills.

There are also lots of junior coaches that already coach athletes with a disability — it is a great idea to talk to them and get their recommendations and advice. Your relevant state sporting association will be able to assist you.

Coaching children with disabilities will expand your coaching horizons — if you are a junior coach and have not tried it, you are definitely missing out!

There are a number of agencies that can assist coaches and administrators in terms of inclusion. For those that are keen to improve their knowledge in this area the first place is your state Disability Education Program Coordinator or state Sport Education Centre. Log onto the Australian Sports Commission's (ASC's) web site at www.ausport.gov.au or call the ASC on (02) 6214 1111 to access contact details. Most national sporting organisations (and their state counterparts) have resources, sport-specific courses or just general advice.

Children's needs in sport

Satisfaction — self worth

Each child needs to feel competent in their sport to their own level of satisfaction.

Belonging — affiliation

Each child needs to feel an important and accepted part of a group.

Fun — stimulation and excitement

Each child needs to have something exciting to look forward to, such as learning a new skill or taking part in different kinds of practice sessions or striving to win competitions.

This does not differ for children with disabilities!