

How to coach the “Mental”

Stage 1: Remember developmental considerations

Before using the tool, you should consider your young players’ mental and emotional abilities to ensure the approaches you implement are age- and stage-appropriate. The team define ‘young athlete’ as 6–17 years of age, citing the psycho-social development work of Piaget and Erikson to divide developmental factors into three stages – mid-childhood (6–11), early adolescence (10–14 years) and mid-adolescence (15–17 years).

The table below provides a useful reference point for you to understand examples of developmentally appropriate coaching considerations. Understanding the nuances between the different stages will ensure you use the tool to develop mental skills that match the developmental level your young players are at.

DEVELOPMENT	MID-CHILDHOOD (6-11 YEARS)	EARLY ADOLESCENCE (10-14 YEARS)	MID-ADOLESCENCE (15-17 YEARS)
PHYSICAL	Help players gain confidence and experience with basic sport/motor skills	Help players gain perspective on pubertal/body changes	Encourage players to develop increased understanding of their bodies (eg nutrition/physiology)
COGNITIVE	Use concrete examples	Help players evaluate progress based on their own past performances rather than comparisons to others	Use abstract or open-ended examples and questions to promote more advanced problem solving
EMOTIONAL	Help players learn to cope with winning and losing	Help players understand how sport situations (positive and negative) produce strong emotions	Encourage players to express complex feelings and concerns related to competition (eg fear of facing a specific opponent or losing)
SOCIAL	Help athletes learn to cooperate and positively interact with their teammates and opponents	Help players positively interact with and respect coaches and other adults	Help athletes learn how to approach and make fair decisions in sport situation

Stage 2: Choosing the mental skills and strategies to develop in young players

The academics use Vealey’s model of mental skills and strategies as the framework for the practical tool for

coaches. Vealey defines the mental skills coaches can develop as outcome qualities such as self-confidence, attentional focus and cohesion, while mental strategies are defined as the purposeful methods coaches will use to develop these mental skills.

Vealey identifies four types of mental skills that are important for young players' success and well-being:

- **foundational**– mental qualities such as achievement drive and self-awareness that are deemed necessary for players to achieve success
- **performance**– critical mental qualities needed for successful skill execution, such as attentional focus and energy management
- **personal development**– the maturational markers that allow for high level psychological functioning – the two required for sport are identity achievement and interpersonal competence
- **team skills**– mental qualities critical to an effective team environment, including team confidence, cohesion, leadership and communication.

The logic of the model is to firstly develop foundational skills such as self-awareness before progressing to more nuanced skills like attentional focus in the same way that a football coach would teach young players to pass and shoot before they learn to head the ball.

The academics then note the four mental strategies identified by Vealey that can be used to develop these four types of mental skills:

- **Goal setting**– coaches set young players a target to reach through a series of steps, directing their attention to specific tasks, mobilising effort and encouraging persistence through adversity. It also encourages the use of new learning strategies to achieve

the goals set by the coach.

- **Imagery**– young players create or recreate experiences in their minds to help mentally practise skills, prepare for competition and cope with stress such as injury or making mistakes.
- Physical relaxation and arousal regulation – young players learn to manage their energy to match what is needed for optimum performance, including relaxing or activating their bodies as the task demands.
- **Thought control**– players are aware of and manage their self-talk, evaluating themselves, and giving themselves instructions and reinforcement.

Having already reflected on the developmental considerations in stage 1, you should now choose the mental skills most relevant for your young players to develop at a given point in time, as well as starting to think about the mental strategies that could help them develop those skills.

Stage 3: Using the practical tool

You should now be ready to use the practical tool. The tool itself is modified from Bodey et al's model of integrating life skills into coaching practices, which in turn uses Kolb's model of experiential learning as a framework.

There are four stages to successfully using the tool:

1. designing an experience to help players learn specific mental skills and strategies
2. guiding players to reflect on their learning experiences
3. helping players form generalisations regarding the mental strategy learnt
4. assisting players to apply the mental strategies learnt to other settings.

The tool itself is a worksheet for you to complete (a link to download a blank worksheet is at the end of this post). A full example using football is used below. The coach has chosen the

mental skill they wish to develop over the course of a season. In this example, it is energy management, specifically for the players to stay calm when shooting. The example is relevant to players at the mid-childhood (6–11 years) development stage.

Importantly, the mental skill aligns to the coach's philosophy and is appropriate for the developmental stage the players are at.

The mental skill and the strategy to develop it have also been integrated into an existing training activity that is a routine part of the session, giving you the opportunity to routinely develop the mental skill as part of every session you deliver.

In the example, the *red italic text* represents the sections and information you should complete. You should complete each section by answering the questions/following the guidance provided.

Practical Tool for Coaches: Energy Management for Mid-childhood Players

Step 1 – Pre-session Preparation

a Identify developmental considerations and needs:

Who are your players in terms of their cognitive, emotional, social and physical development? What are your players' mental and emotional needs?

Under-8s, concrete thinkers, basic motor skill development

b List the activity to be used:

You can use an activity already in the session plan or create a new one.

Slalom shooting through cones

c List the time allotted:

Match the time to the activity noted in step 1b above

15 minutes

Complete Steps 2–4 below in preparation for the session and then implement during the session.

Step 2 – Develop the Session Plan

a Identify and define the mental skill:

Define the mental skill in an appropriate way for the players you described in step 1a.

Energy management – staying calm when shooting

b Pair with a mental strategy:

Identify and describe a mental strategy that will develop the mental skill.

Physical relaxation/arousal regulation (ie breathing)

c Explain the activity:

Use the same step-by-step process you would use when talking to players.

Dribble through the cones set out in a slalom pattern, and shoot the ball at the goal when you reach the last set of cones. Then shooter and keeper change places.

d Briefly describe the connection between the mental strategy and the activity:

Explain how aspects of the mental strategy are reflected in the activity and promote the mental skill.

Shooting can be stressful and even scary. The ball is easier to control when dribbling and shooting if the body is under control. Breathing helps to control our body.

Remember – Before Steps 3 and 4

Players respond to reinforcement. If you notice behaviours that display the mental skill and strategy, encourage the player, to increase the likelihood of them using it again in future.

Focus your instructions on correcting technique, skill and behaviour, not what the player did wrong. Remind and reinforce players to use the mental strategy during the session.

Make the connection between the learning in the session and how it can be applied to other sports and life situations – this will help players understand learning mental skills is not an automatic by-product of sport.

a Instruct to promote action:

List comments (feedback) to promote the use of the mental strategy during the activity.

I want you to take a deep breath in, so you feel it down in your belly, just before you shoot. Then, slowly breathe out through your mouth as you shoot the ball.

b Reinforce to increase repeatability:

List comments (feedback) to reinforce using the mental strategy during the activity.

I like that you took a deep breath during shooting. I could see your ribs expand, and I even heard you breathe out when you shot! Brilliant work!

c Question to engage athletes:

Following or during the activity, what question(s) could you ask players to assess whether they made the connection between the mental strategy and activity, or the mental strategy and the mental skill?

When did you breathe during the activity? How did it help you?

Step 4: Extend the Mental Strategy (Implemented During the Session and Revisited in Subsequent Sessions and Competitions)

a Relate the mental strategy to other settings:

What questions could you ask athletes to relate mental strategy to another sport or life setting?

How can you use breathing outside of sport?

b Encourage applications to other settings:

List comments to encourage application to other sports and settings.

You can take a deep breath if you are stressed at school.

c Follow up on applications:

In subsequent sessions, ask questions to see how players used the mental strategy elsewhere.

How did you use deep breathing outside of sport this week?

d Remind and reinforce use of the mental strategy during future sessions and competitions:

During sessions and competitions, what could you say to or ask players to remind and reinforce their use of the mental strategy?

We practised breathing during this activity so it can help you take a deep breath before you shoot in a game.