This week's Coaches Corner is a special guest post by Nick Levett (ie I Copied it from his blog that used to be at <http://youthfootballdevelopment.blogspot.co.uk/2012/03/children-and-some-reasons-behind-play.html>).

Children and some reasons behind 'Play' - Part 1

One of the interesting discussions I have around the country, often with coaches and other adults involved in grassroots football, is why do children play football? When I share my views this often traverses into tangents from adults, denying the belief in research we have done or thinking that, for some reason, their children are ‘different’.

Well, I’d like to use this first part of a two-part blog post to share some of the views from the research we have done with children, and share a couple of stories from a recent coach education course and hopefully leave you a few things to ponder.

When we first started this research into the whole youth football debate it made perfect sense to start in one place - what do the children think. After all, it is their game, they are the ones that play and know more about being a child today than an adult does. Our childhood was very different you see; You Tube hadn’t been invented, there wasn’t access to football on loads of TV channels from loads of different countries and playing football on a computer consisted of waiting ages for the tape on the Commodore 64 to load up. Now there is instant access to FIFA12 to play virtual opposition from the other side of the world. So who should decide what a 10-year old’s game looks like?

The focus group interviews with the children were built on the following methodology - get a dozen or so children together to talk about their views on football, on the game they play. Build the presentation into being about them, a few questions to prompt them talking and then listen. Let’s just pause on those few words, read them again, “and then listen”. They are important. Because, when you give children the opportunity to talk about what they want and to listen to what they think, it’s fascinating.

Another key aspect was the environment - let’s keep away anyone that could influence their views. So the coach of the team? Sorry, you’ll have to wait outside. Parents? You can sit and chat in another room too. This was because they can influence the views. For example, the coach picks the team (is often a mum or dad anyway) and the child wants to play so they aren’t then going to speak honestly for fear of damaging this opportunity.

The first question for them to discuss was very simple - why do you play football?

You won’t be surprised at some of the responses:

“Because I love the game”

“Because it’s really fun”

“Because I get to hang out with my mates”

These reasons are common and consistent with children across the country. No matter where we speak to children, whether from professional teams or grassroots teams, boys or girls, rural or urban, top of the league or bottom of the league, typically the responses all correlate. Why? Because they are children. They think like a child. What motivates a 10-year old child, motivates a 10-year old child, whether you are in Devon or Durham and I’ve done focus groups in both those places and many in between!

We then talk about the things they don’t like. Can you guess what they say? Here’s a few things that children don’t like; getting injured, not playing, bias referees, adults shouting at them.

It gets interesting when you start talking about parents and their views on winning and losing but I’ll save these for future blogs.

After a few more questions we then get on to an interesting task. We provide the children, in small groups, 16 pieces of paper that have a host of different statements on, from intrinsic motivators to the extrinsic. They are as follows:

1. I love scoring or stopping goals
2. I like meeting new friends through football
3. I like to show off my skills
4. It’s a really good game and I love it
5. I like skilling people
6. It helps keep me fit and healthy
7. It’s important to me I win the league
8. I like learning new skills
9. I play because it makes my parents happy
10. Trying my hardest is more important than winning
11. It’s important to me I try to win matches
12. It’s important to me I win trophies and medals
13. I like playing football with my friends
14. I love playing football because it’s fun
15. Winning is more important than trying my hardest
16. I like playing matches against other teams

The task for the children is to select the ‘Top 9’ most important things for them about why they play football, discard the ones that aren’t important, and then organise those 9 into order of importance, with 1 being the most important.

Reckon you can predict the Top 6 the children pick? Have a go now. Get a pen and write down the numbers of the top statements that are the most important for children. What did you have as the top one? I’ve completed this with over 50 groups of children and the results are very consistent and when I have done this with groups of adults, to predict the kids responses, they never get them all right!

So, the top answer by far is number 10. By a long way. Did you get it right? Trying their hardest is more important to the children than winning. Now, marry that up against the values that an adult brings to game day. Do they match or are they different? Read that again, do the adult values match what the children want from their game? They should do.

The next five you could probably have a good guess at - numbers 2, 4, 6, 13 and 14. The children, aligned with academic research too, are driven by internal motivators. That’s what gets the children there in the first place. It could be said that children come to training motivated and our job as coaches is to maintain that motivation when in fact some of us are probably good are minimising their motivation through unexciting drills and boring standing in lines.

And the ones right at the bottom of the list? Number 12 and 15 have NEVER been picked by any group of kids amongst over fifty that have done this task. Number 7, winning the league, has been picked once and finished low down their list. They just simply aren’t important to the children. Who are they more important to?

On a recent coaching course delivered by one of my colleagues he shared this list, to which a couple of candidates strongly disagreed. He set them the challenge - send a group text to your teams’ parents and get them to ask their kids ‘why do you play football’ and see what they come back with. One coach that disagreed also did this with his own three children, ranging from 8 to 13 years old. Unsurprisingly, the results matched up, virtually identical! One of his own son’s even talked about trying his hardest being more important than the outcome. The next day the coach came back to the course, his head in his hands and apologised, not only for disbelieving the research but more importantly, for putting his own needs before those of the children.

A question to finish... Where do some adults place their emphasis? How much money do we spend on trophies and medals? Why do we do a top goalscorer trophy every year that tends to go to one of two kids? Why do we spend thousands on them when we still put U11 kids in adult full-size goals and don’t have enough balls for one each at training? Where are the adults priorities? I’m not saying don’t buy them but maybe think differently.

One U12 lad in Hull said to me “I’d rather have a decent match ball for every game than a trophy at the end of the year”. Poignant.

So let’s see if we can think outside the box, do something different, do something that meets their needs. Take them to a Premier League or Football League game. Buy them all a new boot bag. Or a football pencil case for school. Ask them if they want anything different.

If you are sitting there reading this now questioning what you have read, do me a favour, send a group text out to your parents and get them to ask their kids one question - why do you play football?