



More Than a Game: The Power of Soccer for Youth Development

A Report Sponsored by BMO Financial Group

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As the Bank of Soccer in Canada, BMO supports soccer at all levels, extending from the grassroots up to the professional level with Toronto FC, Vancouver Whitecaps FC and, most recently, the Montreal Impact. As a partner of the Canadian Soccer Association, BMO also supports Canada's Men's and Women's National teams.

BMO continuously seeks to support the game in new and varied ways, especially at the youth level. For instance, we wanted to increase our understanding of the important role of parents and coaches when it comes to youth sport, and in particular, soccer.

We approached Dr. Jean Côté, a preeminent expert on youth sports and coaching, to work with us on a report – The Power of Youth – that got to the heart of the crucial influence of those that are often on the side of the soccer pitch, cheering, encouraging, and strategizing.

The Power of Youth can be used by media, parents, coaches and policymakers alike. As the Director of the School of Kinesiology and Health Studies at Queen's University, Dr. Jean Côté is a foremost authority on youth athletics in Canada. In this report, he applies his knowledge and expertise specifically to youth soccer.

Dr. Côté underscores four positive outcomes, the "4 Cs": Competence, Confidence, Connection, and Character/Caring. He also offers invaluable guidelines for both coaches and parents on how to achieve these outcomes.

We hope that when parents and coaches go out to support their young players, they will think of the 4 Cs and the lifelong benefits that soccer provides.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Sandy".

Biography - Dr. Jean Côté



Dr. Jean Côté

Director, School of Kinesiology and Health Studies, Queen's University, Kingston, Canada

Dr. Jean Côté is a professor and the Director in the School of Kinesiology and Health Studies at Queen's University in Kingston (Canada). His research interests are in the areas of children in sport, coaching, positive youth development, and sport expertise. He has published more than 120 refereed papers on a variety of youth sport topics and given over 300 scientific presentations.

Dr. Côté holds cross appointments as a visiting professor at the Carnegie Research Institute, Leeds Metropolitan in the UK, and in the School of Human Movement Studies at the University of Queensland in Australia. He has been invited to present his research in the United States, Mexico, France, Denmark, Malaysia, Brazil, Greece, Scotland, Israel, Australia, Ireland, England, Finland, Israel, Japan, Qatar, and Taiwan. He has delivered 83 invited talks and 28 keynote addresses at major national and international conferences. His most significant keynote addresses were delivered at the AIESEP 2008 World Congress in Japan, the 13th Commonwealth International Sport Conference in Australia, The European Launch of the European Year of Education through Sport in Ireland and The North American Society for the Psychology of Sport and Physical Activity in Savannah, USA. In 2009, Dr. Côté was the recipient of the 4th EW Barker Professorship from the Physical Education and Sport Science department at the National Institute of Education in Singapore.

Through his research, Dr. Côté has developed a model of development in sport that has been adopted partially or comprehensively as a directive framework for sport organizations in countries such as Canada, Singapore, France, Portugal, Australia, Ireland, and the United Kingdom. The Developmental Model of Sport Participation presents postulates about sport participation, drop out, and performance that can be objectively verified through retrospective analyses of children's involvement in sport. Dr. Côté's research on athlete development, coaching, and parents in sport have helped inform sport policies to keep youth engaged in sport and performing better.

More than a Game: The Power of Soccer for Youth Development

Jean Côté, PhD

All over Canada this summer thousands of kids will play organized soccer. Every night of the week parents and coaches will watch, encourage, and advise young players in practices, during games, and at home. There will be plenty of joy but there will also be moments of sadness and disappointment. The challenge of coaches and parents is to create more moments of joy and fewer moments of sadness.

Data from the Canadian Soccer Association shows that soccer is the largest participatory sport in Canada with over 800,000 registered players. While organized soccer has the potential to play a significant role in contributing to young Canadians' positive development, it is necessary to recognize that positive outcomes do not automatically result from sport participation.

The potential positive and negative outcomes of youth sport involvement are well recognized. Sport participation can positively influence physical attributes such as cardiovascular fitness, weight control, muscular strength, and endurance. Further, sport experiences often foster citizenship, social success, positive peer relationships, leadership skills, and a sense of initiative in youth. On the other hand, sport participation can also lead to negative physical outcomes such as injuries and eating disorders. From a psychological perspective, youth involved in sport may feel excessive pressure to win, perceive themselves as having poor abilities, feel unattached to their teams, or feel vulnerable in the presence of teammates. In addition, certain sport situations can lead youth to display poor sportsmanship, poor moral reasoning, and even acts of aggression^{1 2}.

The Power of Soccer

Despite the potential negative consequences that can result from participation in any sport, there is compelling evidence to show that the influence of adults (parents and coaches) is the most important factor for enhancing youth experience in sport^{3 4}. We

¹ Côté, J. & Fraser-Thomas, J. (2010). Youth involvement and positive development in sport. In P. Crocker (Ed.). *Sport psychology: A Canadian perspective*, (2nd edition). Toronto: Pearson.

² Fraser-Thomas, J., Côté, J., & Deakin, J. (2005). Youth sport programs: An avenue to foster positive youth development. *Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy*, 10, 49-70

³ Côté, J., Bruner, M., Strachan, L., Erickson, K., & Fraser-Thomas, J. (2010). Athletes development and coaching. In J. Lyle & C. Cushion (Eds.), *Sport Coaching: Professionalism and Practice* (pp.63-83). Oxford, UK: Elsevier.

⁴ Côté, J., Strachan, L., Fraser-Thomas, J. (2008). Participation, personal development, and performance through sport. In N. L. Holt (Ed.), *Positive youth development through sport* (pp. 34-45). London: Routledge.

can highlight four positive outcomes that adults can impact to create a positive environment in youth sport: Competence, Confidence, Connection, and Character/Caring, also known as the 4 C's. In a soccer program these 4 C's can be defined as follows:

1. **Competence:** refers to the ability to execute sport specific skills, train, compete, and perform. In soccer, competence is achieved through the execution and repetition of creative and fun learning activities.
2. **Confidence:** refers to the belief in one's ability to succeed in specific situations. In soccer, confidence is developed in an environment which values and underscores personal progress, effort, and improvement.
3. **Connection:** refers to the ability to build positive bonds between people (e.g. coaches, teammates, opponents) and within institutions (e.g. clubs, schools, communities). In soccer, connection is developed through the promotion of relationships that are built on trust, respect, and compassion between all parties involved.
4. **Character/Caring:** refers to the respect of appropriate behaviours in sport, rules, integrity, and empathy for teammates and opponents. Young soccer players who show character display a consistent sense of fairness in their actions on and off the field. Furthermore, players with character and caring qualities demonstrate respect for the rules of the sport and for all participants, including teammates, opponents, coaches, officials, and parents.

Youth soccer programs can be the building blocks of developmental outcomes in youth that go well beyond the learning of soccer skills. We know that youth soccer programs can promote positive psychological and social development among youth. However, when the pursuit of Competence supersedes the equally important goals of developing Confidence, Connection, and Character/Caring, the extended range of positive values that can result from sport participation are limited.

“Leading Canada to victory and Canadians to a life-long passion for soccer” is a quote that introduces the 2009 annual report of the Canadian Soccer Association. Such an umbrella objective requires youth soccer programs to develop athletes who are not only competent, but also confident in their abilities, well adjusted and socially proficient, and respectful of their sport, themselves, and others. The process by which youth acquire the 4 C's in soccer results from age-appropriate training activities which are underpinned by positive and supportive relationships with coaches and parents. Coaches and parents play a pivotal role in teaching youth soccer players the foundational values that will help achieve the objectives of performance and lifelong participation in soccer.

The Four “Corners”

During a soccer game a corner kick is a method of restarting play – an essential element of any game. This summer, as youth learn offensive and defensive soccer strategies such as executing a corner kick, coaches and parents will influence youth

experiences beyond the techniques and strategies of the game by adding their “corners” to the game.

Coaching

The most important role of a coach working with young players is to keep soccer enjoyable for all athletes. Rather than placing too much emphasis on competition and performance, coaches should focus on play activities that are pleasurable and personally rewarding⁵. Below are the “Four Corners” of an effective youth soccer coach:

1. Set up safe opportunities for athletes to have fun and engage playfully in soccer. Because youth do not understand competition the same way adults do, coaches should avoid overemphasizing competition and winning with their players. The ultimate goal of youth coaches is to nurture children’s love of soccer by designing activities that are enjoyable. For example, the opportunity to play and kick the ball freely should be used with young players in practices to create an environment of fun. By encouraging free play and creativity instead of strictly organized drills and overly-structured practices, coaches can promote the development of self-regulation, decision making skills, and competence, as well as feelings of confidence and connectedness in their players.

2. Coach Tim and Susan first – the soccer player second. The most sensitive way of structuring youth soccer programs is to focus on children’s needs rather than a rigid skills-based model. Coaches should make sure that all of their young players have an equal opportunity to play and participate. This means that coaches should keep track of their players’ playing time and provide the same opportunity in practice and games to all players involved. Coaches should also allow players to take on different roles (e.g. captain) and positions (e.g. offense, defence) within their team. Sport programs that focus on meeting the needs of all players lead to greater competence and confidence, less dropout, and continued participation.

3. Create opportunities and drills for all players to be successful. Coaches should design their programs to allow all players to feel competent. Competence emerges when the skills of a player match the challenges of a situation. For instance, coaches should try to set up situations in practices and games that allow every player to score a goal, take a corner kick, do a throw in, or keep an opponent from scoring. Players that are able to meet the demands of a task set by a coach will feel more competent, confident, and connected to their teammates.

4. Teach personal and social responsibility through soccer. There are many coaching strategies that should be used for developing life skills through sport. One-on-one discussions with players to address personal and sport issues, as well as group meetings to reflect on appropriate and inappropriate

⁵ Côté, J. & Gilbert, W. (2009). An integrative definition of coaching effectiveness and expertise. *International Journal of Sports Science and Coaching*, 4, 307-323.

behaviours during games and practices are effective strategies. It is also important that coaches model upstanding moral and social values to their athletes, avoiding behaviours such as yelling at referees or opponents. Coaches that take time to discuss personal and social issues related to sport participation foster citizenship, social success, positive peer relationships, leadership skills, and a sense of initiative in their players.

Parenting

Parents are the “other adults” that play a critical role in how youth experience soccer. Parents’ supportive behaviours are an essential element of a positive youth experience in soccer. Parents can have a considerable influence on their child’s experience in soccer through their tangible, emotional, informational, and companionship support⁶. Below are the “Four Corners” of effective parental support:

1. **Tangible Support:** refers to the necessary resources that allow youth to participate in soccer. Examples of tangible support include providing the financial assistance and the time commitment necessary for practice, games, equipment, and travel associated with participation.
2. **Emotional Support:** is provided through parents’ comforting gestures. Examples of emotional support include parents giving their child positive feedback on their abilities or expressing belief in their child’s capabilities. These supportive efforts and gestures enhance a child’s sense of competence and confidence.
3. **Informational Support:** refers to parents providing advice or guidance in various situations that might occur in soccer. For example, parents can provide general information on how to handle disrespectful opponents, a referee who makes an error during a game, or a teammate who refuses to cooperate with the other members of the team.
4. **Companionship Support:** reflects the unique bond that can develop between a child and a parent when they spend time together within the sporting environment. For instance, parents can develop special relationships with their children through soccer by attending their child’s games, playing soccer in the backyard with their child, or simply by spending time travelling to and from practices with their child.

Conclusion

The soccer season can have a positive impact this summer that persists well beyond the soccer field. For coaches and parents, taking up the challenge to make soccer a positive experience for all involved is an individual commitment that can influence young people’s lives forever. It is essential that coaches and parents regularly assess the impact of their involvement through personal reflection on their behaviours and practice (the “Four Corners” of Coaching and Parenting). The best indicator of an adequate role played by adults in an organized soccer program is the enjoyment that the players

⁶ Côté, J. & Hay, J. (2002). Family influences on youth sport participation and performance. In J. M. Silva & D. Stevens (Eds.), *Psychological foundations of sport*, (pp.503-519). Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.

experience. Players' enjoyment will be determined by the ability of coaches and parents to foster their players' Competence, Confidence, Connection, and Character/Caring.