

Biological



BIOLOGICAL FOCUSED ACTIVITIES

- Kit Checklist
- Check-In Diary
- Recovery Menu
- Mirroring Game
- Tug of War
- Filling Your Bucket
- Pillars of Health
- Tag Team Relay
- Water Sponge Race
- Check-In/Check-Out

As young people transition from primary to secondary school, they experience a lot of social and psychological shifts. And that's on top of all the biological changes that are happening.

The main driver of this is, of course, the onset of puberty, with most girls starting puberty between the ages of 8 to 13 years old, and most boys starting between 9 and 14 years old. As a coach, you don't need to be an expert on these changes, however, it is important to have an awareness that the young people you are coaching might be turning up to training in a body that feels very different to how it felt a few months ago. Your role as coach is to help young players get the basics right. These are the good habits that will stay with them throughout their sporting journey.

The Onset of Puberty

No matter what group you have, there will be differences in ability, strength, size, along with their stage of growth and development. The onset of puberty will begin at a different age for each young person and can be difficult for them to navigate. However, it can be particularly challenging for those who experience it first and last in their group. So, you might be coaching players that have gone through puberty, alongside those who haven't. As your players navigate the biological changes happening to them, you can focus on creating a welcoming and positive environment (see psychological activities) and helping your players build a solid foundation of healthy habits.

When it comes to puberty, remember that young people are experiencing huge changes in how they feel physically and emotionally. As a result of the hormonal changes, adolescents experience shifting emotions at a more intense level than most adults. This can be very challenging for a young person, leaving them feeling overwhelmed, self-conscious and unsure of themselves. It's important not to dismiss these feelings - when young people are experiencing strong emotions (to something that might seem trivial to you), it's very real for them.

Your role is to actively listen, validate and try to help them gain some perspective. As humans, it's always harder to manage our emotions if we're hungry, tired or stressed. The pillars of health framework is a useful tool to use with young people to help them manage bodily changes, and the resulting emotional and physical changes, happening to them.

The Pillars of Health

These pillars can be used to support young people as they navigate the physical, social and psychological demands of sport and exercise along with puberty, as well as provide a structure for sport and health management in general.

The four pillars are:

- Sleep
- Nutrition
- Exercise
- Stress management/fun

Let's face it, many of the challenges and demands young people face won't be sorted with a good night's sleep or a piece of fruit. However, the idea behind the pillars of health is that problems often seem more manageable when coming from a place of good mental and physical health. If a player is struggling, there's a strong chance that one of the four pillars might be off kilter. So, it's worth investigating are they getting enough sleep and nutritious food? Or might they be stressed about something?

It's also important to bear in mind that fitness doesn't equal health. This is a common misconception, that if a young person is fit, that they automatically must be healthy. This is not necessarily the case. Having balance across all four pillars is key for young people to be physically and mentally equipped to take on the demands of sport and life in general. Make sure to check out the 'Pillars of Health Activity' to explore this topic with your players.

Sleep

Sleep is one of the most pro-active things a young person can do to benefit themselves when playing sport (and their health in general). There's no replacement for a good night's sleep, as it's the time when the body and mind recharge and recover after the day. There's no harm in reminding young people that it's recommended they get between 10 - 12 hours sleep a night and that lots of the best sports people often have a bedtime before 9 o'clock.

Nutrition

Supporting young people with their nutrition is something that's incredibly beneficial to get right in the early days. You are (probably) not a nutritionist so there's no need to get bogged down in details. Your job is to reinforce the message that food is their source of fuel and they need to eat a balanced diet to feel good and have energy to play sport. Many young people can start to have a complicated relationship with food, especially as their bodies change. That's why they need adults around them role-modelling healthy eating habits and reminding them to eat well. Encouraging your players to always come to training with water and a post-training snack will go a long way.

Exercise

Exercise, training, and sports are so good for young people's minds and bodies, but it's also possible to overdo it and do too much. Encouraging young players to listen to their bodies is the best way to help them find their sweet spot between exercise and recovery. Every player is different, and so it's important that they find their balance of how much training and exercise feels right to them. Because players might be at different stages of puberty and development, try to remind them that we all exercise and recover differently, so it's not a good idea to compare themselves to others. Listening to your body is a skill that even adults struggle with. A Check-In Diary is a helpful tool that you can suggest to young players to support them to find the right balance.

Stress Management/Fun

Young people are navigating a lot between the bodily changes, shifts in friendships and academic pressure. Stress, whether psychological or physical, is something young people need to learn to manage through healthy coping mechanisms.

When a person exercises, they create physical stress on the body and little tears in their muscles. This is a good thing because when they refuel, rest, and relax after training their body repairs itself to be stronger than before. However, if young people see playing sports as something else they have to do, and not something that they get to do, they can stay in 'stress' mode which can affect their recovery. Coupled with other stresses in their life, their body can then move into fight or flight mode, transforming sport from an enjoyable activity, to something to which they don't look forward.

Stress management and having fun is so important. Your role as coach is to co-create an environment with your players, where they can relax, have fun, and leave any worries they might have on the sideline. Playing sport and exercising is an amazing tool to support young people to de-stress and have fun. However, if sport gets too serious, it can add stress to a player's already full plate. A fun and positive atmosphere keeps players involved in sport and helps protect their body from the negative aspects of long-term stress. Smiling and having the craic are powerful tools, so don't underestimate them.

The Menstrual Cycle

This can be a challenging area to manage as a coach, especially with young players who may or may not have their periods yet. However, many players have to navigate the onset of menstruation and playing sport. If we ignore the reality of this, we will struggle to retain players when they get periods, which can start for some as young as 9 or 10 years old.

Small things can make a huge difference, such as ensuring that there is toilet paper in every cubicle and a bin with a lid for discreet disposal of menstrual products as well as having hand soap available at all sinks. A quick check of the dressing room before training or matches can really make a huge difference to your players comfort levels. Stock your first aid kit with tampons and pads. This is a good opportunity to introduce the topic of periods in a natural way - let your players know they are available to them

if they need them. It might also be a good idea to have a darker colour option for shorts, as white shorts can cause a lot of anxiety around periods and leaking. Have an awareness that exercise such as jumping jacks could be uncomfortable for someone on their period. If someone is reluctant to do a specific exercise, you can always suggest an adapted version. The check-in diary is another opportunity to broach the topic of menstruation - suggesting that players could make note if they had their period or not. All these small gestures acknowledge and normalise their experience and show them that it's just a normal part of sports participation.

How We Learn

Using the Pillars of Health as a framework will not only support young people as they learn to navigate the demands of playing sport, but it can be a helpful prompt to take care of your own health and wellbeing. Young people absorb the habits, routines and structures that they see on a daily basis. So when you take action to prioritise your own sleep, nutrition, exercise and fun, it positively impacts those around you too.

What might seem like a small change to you, can really have a huge impact on a young person navigating the sometimes hidden hurdles that growing up throws at them. It could be reminding them to always have a water bottle and a snack for after training, encouraging them to rest and recover after a game, ensuring training has fun elements peppered throughout or making sure there is toilet paper - one of these could be the difference in a player staying in sport or dropping out.

Keep those drills fun, adjust strategies if needed and don't forget the power of a good pep talk!

Check-In Diary

A useful tool for any player

Players should record and track the following in a small notebook:

- Type of exercise (training, game, run, final, friendly etc.)
- How did I feel?
- How were my energy levels?
- What was my mood like?
- How am I feeling now?
- Did I drink enough water?
- Did I have enough to eat?