

# Psychological



## PSYCHOLOGICAL FOCUSED ACTIVITIES

- Little Monsters
- How to Debrief
- Freeze/Play
- State Setting
- Hot Potato
- Red Light, Green Light
- Catch it
- Set A Challenge
- Tell Me How To...
- Hula Hoop Circle

There are any number of psychological factors that can impact a young player's involvement in sport, however the factor that has one of the biggest impacts on young players is psychological safety.

Put simply, this means creating a supportive and positive environment for players - where they feel comfortable being themselves, developing new skills, and finding support if faced with a challenge. This is a cornerstone to keeping young people in sport long-term.

In terms of the wider team, psychological safety is a shared belief held by all teammates that it's okay to take risks, make mistakes, and ask questions. All without fear of negative consequences, such as getting into trouble, being laughed at or feeling embarrassed.

Building psychological safety is not an exact science, it's something you co-create with your players and may change with every team or group. Things that can help create psychological safety are:

1. Establishing clear structures and expectations
2. Focusing on the process, not the outcome
3. Reframing failure as learning opportunities
4. Ensuring all team members are valued and included

## 1. Establishing Clear Structures And Expectations

As young people grow and learn, they constantly find themselves in new and unfamiliar settings. Whether it's joining a team, going to their first game or competition, or moving up to the next age group, their lives are ever-changing. However, that doesn't mean that skill development or learning is easy for them.

That's why it's so important to establish consistent structures and expectations that lead to an environment where they can thrive. Not only will players feel more in control, they'll feel more confident and secure in themselves.

This should feed into both training and game settings. For example, before you begin a training session, give the players an overview of what you have planned, i.e. 15-minute warm-up, 20-minute drills etc. If you have an away game, give the players a rundown of

what you expect will happen - when they will warm up, where they will change, when they will have time to eat etc.

Take the time to clearly communicate with your players what their roles and responsibilities are - like having all the necessary gear, being on time, being inclusive etc. It's important that you are consistent in enforcing the 'rules'. If your players believe the rules are consistently and fairly applied, they're more likely to accept and adhere to them. When young players successfully fulfil their roles and responsibilities, they grow in confidence. It's also worth noting that different players might have different capacities for roles and responsibilities, so it is good practice to adapt these expectations based on the needs of your players.

## 2. Focusing On The Process Over The Outcome

The other thing to be mindful of, is that as humans, we have a natural tendency to give more attention to negative experiences over positive ones.

A player might have done everything really well until they fumble the ball. That one negative experience will have a greater impact on their mindset than anything that went right previously - this is called negativity bias.

Considering the significant social and emotional development in young people, they frequently experience shifting emotions at a more intense level than most adults. Therefore, it's important to reframe young people's experiences and support them to focus on the process rather than only the outcome.

Give them a chance to note what they did well, what they learned and the positive experiences that they also had. When the focus is shifted to effort and progress, young people are supported to recognise what they have learned and achieved so far. This all helps to reinforce the positive experiences over the negative ones. It also encourages young people to stay motivated, encourages them to try out new things and view making mistakes as part of the process.

## 3. Reframing Failure As Learning Opportunities

Young players are often worried about making mistakes, getting in trouble, and looking silly in front of their peers. In sports, where young players are constantly growing, developing, and learning, it's important for them to be secure in the knowledge that if they make a mistake, it is not held against them. This can be shared with them through activities (see 'Little Monsters' & 'Fear of Failure'), role modelling and verbal reminders.

It takes a big shift of mindset for players to start thinking this way, but over time, if you can show that making mistakes is part of sport, you will create a positive environment. This will then lead to better performances, happier players, and increased motivation to play and train (a big win-win!)

These 'mistakes' or 'failures' should always be reframed as learning opportunities, which will help players develop a growth mindset. Whether it's messing up a drill, or struggling to master a new skill at training, missing a free, or even losing an important game, the likelihood is that the player will experience a negative emotion: frustration, sadness, embarrassment, anger or possibly apathy.

As a coach, it's important to help players to firstly identify how they are feeling, and secondly to support them to gain some perspective and see the bigger picture (see 'How to Debrief' activity). This can give players a sense of control, as they have the power to choose how they react to different situations (see Freeze/Play activity). Every 'mistake' or 'failure' is an opportunity for that young person to develop their resilience and bounce back from these challenges.

## 4. Ensuring All Team Members Are Valued And Included

An inclusive environment creates a sense of belonging and supports players to reach their potential. Feeling part of a team is a protective factor against players dropping out.

One suggestion for ensuring all team members feel valued and included is to activate young people's voices. Offering options and flexibility in how your players participate and play will work to support individual players and their needs. To include player voices, it's important that you explain to your players why you need their viewpoint and feedback. If you, as their coach, can own up to and demonstrate how you have learned from your mistakes, it paves the way for your players. It's important to model the behaviour you want to see in your team.

Being a coach is demanding, so it's not always feasible for you to have your eyes on everything. If you start creating an open dialogue with your players and they feel comfortable sharing the challenges they experience, you can work with your players to find a solution. When players internalise problems they are less likely to overcome them, increasing the likelihood of them dropping out.

If players feel able to speak up, you can support them in navigating whatever challenges they are facing, helping them to develop a growth mindset and become more resilient.

## Hidden Hurdles

Your players will experience many different hidden hurdles throughout their sporting lives. There is no end to the list of challenges they may experience. As a coach, you can't prevent your players from experiencing challenges nor should you - that is the beauty of sport. What you can influence is the environment in which a player experiences these challenges. Your role is to try to ensure your players play and train in a psychologically safe environment by: establishing clear structures and expectations, focusing on the process over the outcome, reframing failure as learning opportunities and ensuring all team members are valued and included.