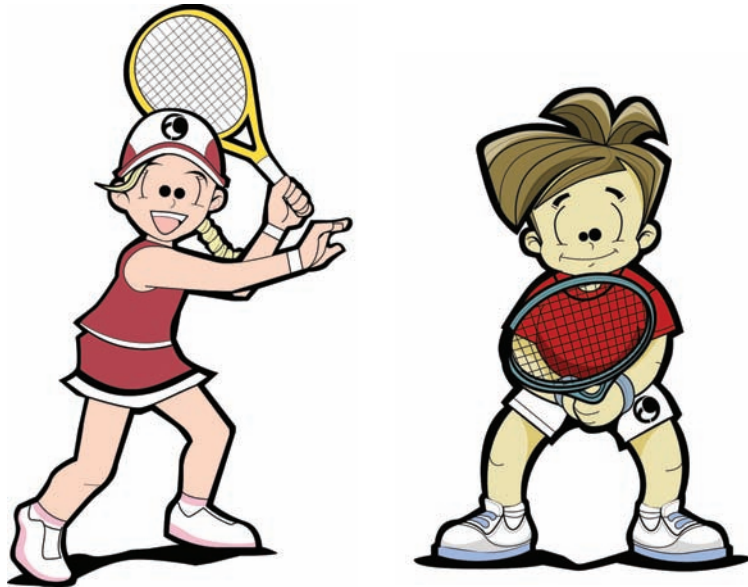


Supplement 10



Growing Kids, Growing the Game,

a Developmental Approach
to Teaching Under 10's

by Mike Barrell



Professional Tennis Registry
PO Box 4739, Hilton Head Island, SC 29938 USA
843-785-7244 • 800-421-6289 • fax 843-686-2033
ptr@ptrtennis.org • www.ptrtennis.org

About the Author

Mike Barrell is the Director of evolve9, a company which specializes in delivering coach education, developing resources and designing programs aimed at the under 10 age group. The mission of his company is to educate teaching professionals to better understand the needs and potential of young players, and through this, to present a quality approach to teaching this age group.

Based in the UK, Mike works for the LTA as one of a team of Coach Education Tutors, delivering coach education, certification and training. He also works on resources used by the LTA to help support the delivery of tennis in UK clubs. Mike has made major contributions to the LTA Ariel Mini Tennis Program, including developing the Advanced Mini Tennis Course, and co-writing resources for the program such as the *On Court Folder*, *Awards Curriculum*, and the *Mini Tennis Handbook*.

Outside of the LTA, Mike has delivered workshops for the ITF, BTCA and KNLTB (Royal Dutch Tennis Association), and continues to work as an independent consultant for various clubs and associations.

He devised and developed a multi level curriculum for TCA (Tennis Corporation of America), the JDP, Junior Development Pathway, which is used across all clubs in the group.

Mike is an LTA Level III Licensed Coach, a PTR Certified Professional, and member of both the USPTA and BTCA (British Tennis Coaches Association). In his 20 year coaching career, he has worked his way from Junior Coach to Director of Tennis to owning and running his own facility.

Mike has been a favorite speaker at several PTR International Symposia.



Copyright © Professional Tennis Registry 2006. All rights reserved.
Reproduction of any portion of

Growing Kids, Growing the Game, a Developmental Approach to Teaching Under 10's
is not permitted without written consent of PTR.

PTR logo is protected through trademark registration in the United States Office of Patents and Trademarks.

Acknowledgements

I would like to credit the following people whose influence and support has made this resource possible. Although it was very much a solo writing experience, this supplement is also the result of years of sharing ideas and information with a key group of people who have always openly given to help take tennis forward.

PTR

- Dan Santorum, CEO, for his belief in the importance of this area of our game
- Julie Jilly, Vice President Operations, for immeasurable enthusiasm
- Peggy Edwards, Super Editor, for enthusiasm, patience and being such a joy to work with

LTA

- Alistar Higham, Coach Education Manager, for continuing to provide the opportunity and support work in this area
- Sandi Proctor, Programs Manager, for believing, sharing and making things happen
- Mark Tennant, ITF & LTA, for always sharing information and opportunities
- Jenny Thomas, LTA Tutor, who can make the most complicated things seem simple

USTA

- Geoff Norton, National Manager Adult/Senior and Technical Programs for Community Tennis, for running with the ball and making this supplement happen
- Anne Pankhurst, Coach Education (former LTA Coach Education Director), for the opportunities and personal support and for continued work in growing this area of the game

Home

- Sally Barrell, my wife, for letting my tennis family take so much of Barrell family time

And to Mary Lloyd Barbera, Jane Bowen, Anne Davis, Lisa Duncan, Shane Deacon, Nigel Long, Ajay Pant, Ronald Pothuizen, Mark Reid, Carlos Salum, Butch Staples, Hvroje Zmajic and all the coaches who have been so supportive and put so much energy and enthusiasm into this area of the game.

Finally, I would be remiss not to mention, as an umbrella, the individuals and federations around the world who are all growing this end of the game and, along the way, sharing experience and knowledge.

And, undoubtedly, to Professional Tennis Registry.



Mike Barrell

Contents

Introduction	S10-3
1. The Game of Tennis	S10-5
1.1 The Growing Game	S10-5
1.2 Setting up the Courts	S10-6
1.3 Balls	S10-7
1.4 Racquets	S10-8
1.5 Scoring Formats	S10-8
1.6 Rules and Concepts	S10-9
2. Understanding Children	S10-10
2.1 Mental and Emotional Considerations	S10-10
2.2 Physical Development	S10-14
3. Teaching Skills	S10-16
3.1 Communication	S10-16
3.2 Organization	S10-17
3.3 Safety	S10-20
3.4 Coaching	S10-20
4. Structuring Practices	S10-21
4.1 Child Centered Practice Principles	S10-21
4.2 Game Development Principles	S10-23
5. Move, See, Hit, Play, Compete	S10-25
5.1 Overview	S10-25
6. Move	S10-27
6.1 Game, Player, Coach	S10-27
6.2 Activities	S10-32
7. See	S10-36
7.1 Game, Player, Coach	S10-36
7.2 Activities	S10-38
8. Hit	S10-42
8.1 Game, Player, Coach	S10-42
9. Play	S10-49
9.1 Game, Player, Coach	S10-49
9.2 Activities	S10-50
10. Compete	S10-60
10.1 Game, Player, Coach	S10-60
10.2 Activities	S10-64
11. Structuring Lessons	S10-66
12. Summary	S10-69

Introduction

At no stage in history have we been responsible for teaching so many children at such a young age. The goal of this supplement is to provide a developmental order to introducing skills, a greater understanding of tennis, of children, and what is and isn't possible or at least probable, at different ages.

While many coaches may regard teaching young children as just fun and games with little purpose or focus, this supplement aims to challenge that idea. We will look at how children learn to Move, See, Hit, Play and Compete, giving you an understanding of the key issues and practical ideas to use on court.

Increasingly, coaches who really understand the game and the needs of young players realize there is serious work to be done at this level (it's fun too!) and herein lies an opportunity to deliver skills that will enable players to make progress in the future.

By following a simple process, we can introduce young children to the game while developing fundamental motor skills, coordination and strokes. To work, it needs to be done in a logical order. The process is not new or radical, and once understood, it's not difficult to apply.

So the mission of this supplement is simple, to show you how you can build a pathway that develops and follows:

- Child growth and development principles
- Movement and coordination, building into all around athletic ability, and specific physical tennis skills
- Stroke development along side reception skills
- Tactical development, including a child's understanding of simple concepts of the game
- Ways to get children to play and enjoy the game from the start

Rather than assume that a child is just a smaller version of an adult player, we'll examine the difference and likely developmental stages, supported by practical activities and examples that will help any child to develop and any coach to understand what s/he is seeing and how best to help.

Mini Sport

The success of mini versions of the game is acknowledged by coaches and tennis associations around the world. Mini versions are an accepted practice in many sports as a way of learning and developing, not just technical skills, but more importantly, an understanding of the many attributes of the game, tactically, mentally and physically.

So why change courts and equipment for younger players?

Let's start by looking at the physicality of the court.

Imagine the challenge that you would encounter if you were asked to play on a tennis court that is a third bigger. That's over 100' long and 40' wide. It's wider than the doubles court. Now consider that a 7 year old is approximately two thirds of his adult height. So, asking a 7 year old to play on a full sized court is like asking you to play on that over 100' x 40', and that is without considering the height of the bounce of the ball, physical strength, coordination, experience and technical skill.

If you don't understand this example, then imagine a child with a full size baseball bat, on a full size soccer field, or with full length skis. The list is endless. We should mention that these concepts are not new. Sweden introduced the world to mini versions of tennis back in the 70's, spearheaded by PTR International Master Professional, Leif Dahlgren. There are even some earlier examples.

So, what's different today? Thanks to noted experts in the field of long term player development, like Bompá and Bali, and practical work in this area by many tennis nations, we now know this is not just essential to the recruitment of numbers through fun activity, but also essential basics for later sporting success.

Think of the development of a player as a process, like building a house, and these are the Foundations.

If you are paying to have a house built, how important are the foundations? The foundation affects so much of what can and can't be built. We might even suggest that when tennis becomes more physically demanding in the late teenage years, one of the key success factors may be based upon what they did in their formative years. The foundations affect how far the player can progress, and it's not a process that you can go back to! So we need to get it right the first time.

Examples of Tennis Success

We have discussed briefly the idea of mini sport as a way to maximize the potential of the player, but let's not leave this discussion without considering the attraction and retention factors so essential for the long term health of tennis.

In the UK, LTA Mini Tennis took under age 10 participation from 30,000 to more than 70,000 in just three years, while Belgium reported numbers trebling in 10 years and France nearly doubling.

Consider also that players will move through stages of participation from "tryer" (I'll give it a go) to "buyer" (I do it regularly) to "flyer" (It's my big thing). The ability to play the game and a child's and parent's perception of their competence, may be one of the key motivations to moving from one stage to the next. Mini sport can help a child feel and see this competence, and therefore feel more motivated to progress and commit.

Mini versions of tennis are not only a great way of developing all the skills that are required to *play*, they are also a way to *grow the game*.

1. The Game of Tennis

1.1 The Growing Game

The basics of these modified versions of tennis would seem very simple: smaller court, slower ball for smaller players!

But rather than see this as an introduction to tennis, these court sizes and modified equipment need to be seen as a way of supporting the progression of skill development for young players. Whether you are a coach who favors the games based approach or one who supports a more technical approach, these modifications provide the ideal vehicle for teaching our game.

This supplement focuses on this *growing approach* matched to the growth and development needs of young players. As a player grows (gets larger) and develops (gains skill / function):

- Courts get larger
- Balls get faster
- Equipment gets larger
- Matches get longer

Courts

There are various court sizes and stages recommended by different associations and organizations, including very small courts - less than the size of a service box - to start, but the main two used in competition are:

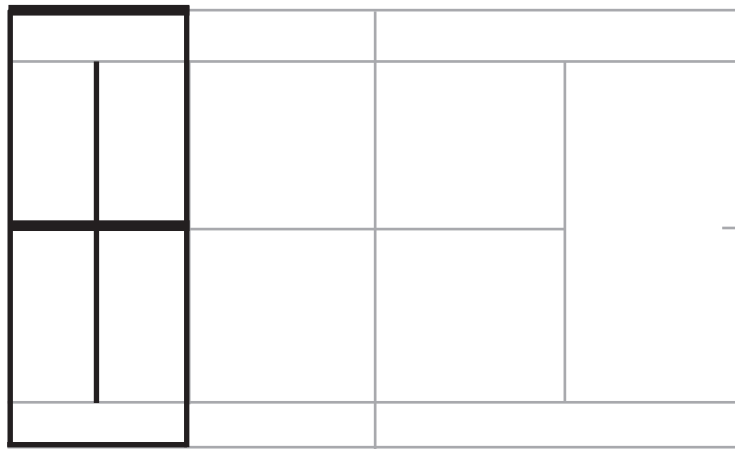
36' (12m) Court, designed as a first court size for getting players to play, with a foam ball (referred to as a RED ball by ITF, or PTR SpeedBall®). At this stage, players should learn basics like how to rally, serve, basic rules, scoring and how to win and lose a point. Player development models suggest using this court for up to the age of 7 or 8, but there is no reason why older children can't start here as well if they are new to tennis.

60' (18m) Court is intended for older players who have first developed a good basic skill set, probably on the 36' (12m) court, and can already rally and play the game. The ball used here is a transition ball (referred to as an ORANGE ball by ITF). At this stage, players get to develop some consistency in their strokes and learn to cope with a larger playing area. This will challenge them to cover the court and direct the ball away from the opponent. Equally here, with the added physical control and coordination that players have developed, the foundations of a more specific technique can be started along with the key athletic skills that are still so important at this age. This court size is recommended for children up to 9/10 years old, but also for older children and even adults who are just starting.

1.2 Setting up the Courts

36'/12m Court

The court itself can be marked out very simply and economically with up to six courts fitting on one standard court. Setting up is easy. Simply run a net or barrier tape along the length of the court, approximately 60cm high and use the inside alley as the service line and the outside alley as the baseline. For competition, a center line will need to be marked on each mini court, but this is not always necessary for coaching and practice.



60'/18m Court

The size of the next court has an accepted length of 60' around the world, however, different widths are used in different countries for a variety of reasons. Some are more practical, some encourage the use of width of shot, and some the development of an all court game. The progressive development of skill would suggest that when players progress to this level, they first deal with a longer court and then with increased width. Below and on the next page are some possible illustrations of this.

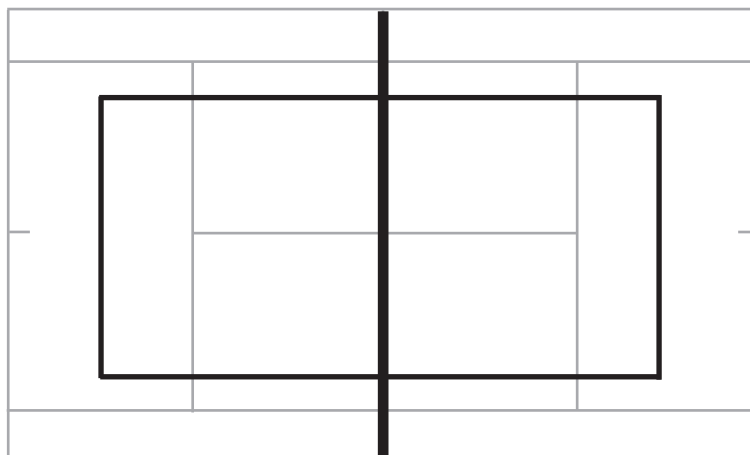




Figure 1.1 Half Doubles Court Width

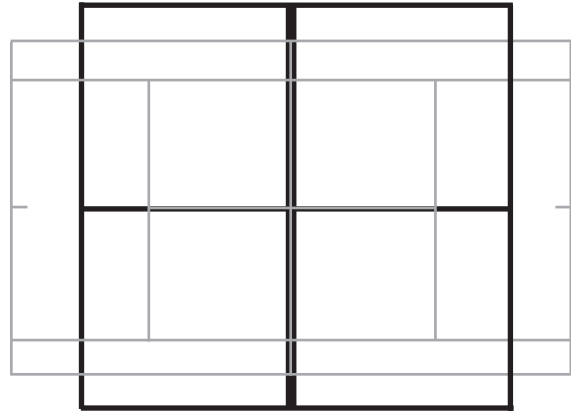


Figure 1.2 Half Extended Width

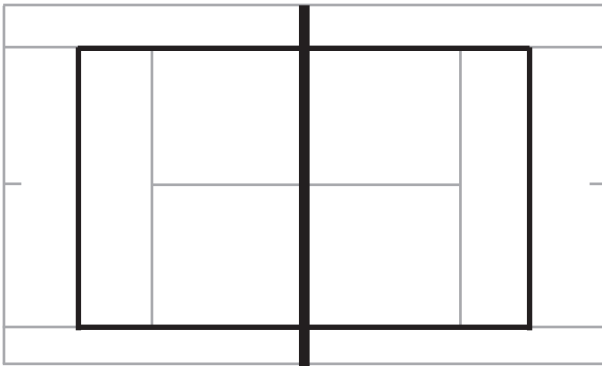


Figure 1.3 Full Court Width

For training purposes, you may find it helpful to use the standard length with a gradually expanding width as players progress. Formats in Figures 1.1 and 1.2 allow you to create two courts on every full court.

1.3 Balls

The ITF is working diligently to encourage ball manufacturers to meet set specifications for balls that are suitable for both of the aforementioned size courts, however, at this writing, there are a great many balls on the market that vary tremendously.

As a rough guide, a foam ball or similar should be used in the 36'/12m court and a transition ball should be used on the 60'/18m court. However, be aware that some foam balls actually fly faster and bounce higher than transition balls, as they were originally manufactured for introducing the game to adult beginners and not young children.

Balls that fly too fast and bounce too high may result in players developing extremes in techniques due to the high bounce, or even abbreviated techniques as they shorten the stroke in order to keep the ball in play. However, the most costly consequence could be that they will not be able to rally easily and therefore will not enjoy the tennis experience.

Note about the Mid-Ball

Some countries also have a stage of development based on a full size court with a ball that flies slower than a regular one. This is designed to help players make a smooth transition from the 36'/12m court, getting used to the physical demands of the full size court with a ball that flies slower and bounces lower than a regular one.

1.4 Racquets

The relative size of the racquet is very important, with so many junior racquets on the market it is still perplexing why some coaches and parents seem to have an obsession with getting children to use a full sized racquet.

An ideal guide for a young player is to use a racquet that is approximately one inch off of the ground when the child is standing straight holding the racquet down by his or her side. Also consider the size of the grip, which should be small enough to hold comfortably, and check that the racquet has a fairly even balance.

Here are just some of the possible problems resulting from using equipment that is too large:

- Inadequate control of the racquet through the swing
- Poor mechanics due to racquet weight and length
- Poor control of the racquet face at contact
- Lack of racquet head speed (at an older more developed age)
- Limited development of the overarm serve
- Lack of ability to control direction and distance of the shot
- Injury caused by excess leverage placed on still growing joint and muscles

Most manufacturers now give a guide to racquet size based upon height. Remember that it is there not only to get players and parents to choose the right first racquet, but also to ensure that players are able to develop technique with equipment that is relevant to their physical size.

1.5 Scoring Formats

As children are smaller and tire more quickly, scoring formats are generally shorter at younger ages. Commonly used scoring formats are:

- 1 tiebreak (often made shorter or longer based on time constraints)
- Best of 3 tiebreaks (to help players learn the best of 3 scoring concept)
- 2 short sets of 4 games with a tiebreak (getting longer as players age)
- 1 set (can be with no-ad scoring)

Scoring is really very flexible, but be aware that in a competition, it makes more sense to play more shorter matches than one long one. This helps players learn to start and stop a match, and helps them get more experience winning and losing, without investing all their energy in one match and one outcome. (More about this in Section 10, Compete.)

1.6 Rules and Concepts

Teaching the Game

Like any sport, tennis has rules and information that students need to know in order to play the game. Young players need to be taught these things in order to understand and apply them in a game. They need to be included in practices and drills to help players learn these incidentally, but you may also find that you need to spend time actively teaching them. Below are some simple points to consider.

Court Boundaries

What is in and out, including on-the-line is in. Only the first bounce counts.

Therefore -

- Always set a court area even for movement games
- Have games that include being in the court and out of the court
- Have games where players pretend to be the ball, jumping in and out
- Get players to be practice umpires

Counting and Scoring

Counting points. Scoring a tiebreak. Best of 3. Scoring games and sets.

Therefore -

- Get players to count shots, for rallying and cooperative tasks
- Create visual scoreboards with cones, clothes pins on the net, or ball in a hoop to help keep score
- Get players to always call out the score before starting the point

Ways to Win and Lose a Point

A player wins a point if s/he:

- hits the ball where the other player can't get it.

A player loses a point if s/he:

- hits the ball out.
- hits the ball in the net.
- allows the ball to bounce twice.

Therefore -

- Get players to practice being umpires for each other.
- Play an exhibition match and get players to call who they think won the point and why

Serve Rules

Two serves including double fault. Side from which to start. Let rule. Service order for a tiebreak.

Therefore -

- In practices, take two serves (first and second).
- Use colored marker cones to explain from where to serve, especially for the tiebreak
- Explain the other rules at key times during practices and drills

2. Understanding Children

Understanding Children

The quest to try to engage children in our sport as early as possible has brought the need for today's teaching professional to be equipped with a completely new set of skills.

It used to be that we only needed to understand the technical and tactical issues of the game. To work effectively with this age group, you'll need to understand how children learn, how their capabilities change, and how they develop as people, making gradual sense of the world around them.

This section is split into *Mental and Emotional* - including some information about different ages, and *Physical* - looking at key systems of the body and how they develop.

2.1 Mental and Emotional Considerations

Many of the skills required are listed in the Teaching Skills Section (S10-15) of this supplement, but it's worth noting a few key things to set the scene around the ever changing world of children.

Remember, young children don't view the world in the same way that adults or older children do.

Me, Us and You

This is a cornerstone principle to understanding kids. It's very simple really. At a young age, children understand the world only from the "me" perspective. It's all about them, their turn, what they get.

Later, they move to recognizing that there are important people around them who are part of their world, such as their partner or friend, and they start to talk about *us*.

Finally, players toward the end of the under 10 age group recognize the existence of others as part of another circle or group that they are not involved in and can start to see their point of view - the *you*.

How does this affect us as coaches working with this age group? First, you should consider that children will go through all these stages between ages 4 and 10 and that the change will be gradual. On the following page is some practical information that can help.

Organization

- Start with individual tasks.
- Move next to learning to work together (in pairs or teams).
- Then move to adding opposition.

Competition

- Start with “Can you do this?”
- Then “How many can you do?” “Can you do more than the last time?”
- Move next to “How many can you do together?”
- “Can you hit the ball over more times than s/he can?”
- Then “Can you use simple tactics to win?”

Competition is actually more complex than this explanation. Section 10 presents a lot more information to consider.

Effort vs. Ability

We’ll look at effort and ability in more detail in section 10, but young children don’t fully understand the difference between the two, and so, they need to be commended more on the effort than the ability or result. As a consequence, children are likely to believe that if they did not win or come first, that is was due to a lack of trying and not higher level of ability by other players. In short, at this stage of development, everything is personal, and if they didn’t win, they believe it is their fault or not fair.

Characteristics through the Ages

It’s useful to give an overview of children at different ages. Of course there are some cultural and environmental influences that make every child a true individual, but this should help you to understand how a child views the world and may give you a few things to consider in your coaching. You’ll notice also that the ages often span more than one description. It’s the nature of growth and development, and there will always be children who appear younger or older than their age.

At 4-5 Years Old

This age group uses simple descriptions and simple objects. For example, "I like red cars." They learn through seeing and doing, so try to avoid explanations and too much instruction. Learning takes place through games and fun things, otherwise you may find that some children just won't participate.

At 5, they can understand some basic rules and can start to take turns, but at 4, the chances are that most children are best doing things as individual skills when it is their turn, or with the help of mom or dad.

What motivates is fun, and fun here is color, activity, noise and involvement.

Routine and repetition are also keys to safety, organization and learning. The use of music, songs and stories is a great way to keep attention. Sitting these children down between activities and establishing "quiet" time or places may well help keep an order or structure to the lesson, but some in this age group may switch off and spend some of the session in their own world anyway.

Limited experience and different rates of physical growth can mean that levels of ability may vary greatly at this age. Early developers do not necessarily end up being the most advanced later, as development often happens in spurts, and there are many physical systems still developing.

At 5-6 Years Old

Listen to the language change here. There will be some use of adult words and phrasing without necessarily knowing the meaning of them. This age still learns through games, but since they have a better grasp of language, you can tell them how to do things better and they will try as long as it is fun!

Children may test the boundaries at this age, and it is not uncommon for some small emotional outbursts if the egocentric (me) nature of the child conflicts with what you want to happen in the lesson. Boundaries are still important and you should ensure that these are clear in every activity.

Imitation is big at this age, both verbal and physical, and children are still predominantly visual learners (which will continue throughout childhood). So use simple instruction and lots of demonstrations.

Remember that at this age, children have normally started formal education so they are accustomed to taking instruction. It is also worth finding out and learning from the approaches that their school teachers take.

At 7-8 Years Old

A child's view of the world at this age is much more detailed. They start to recognize the opinions and views of others, and it is not uncommon for young players to take on role models. It's worth starting to relate some of the games and activities that we play to these role models to create aspiration and a sense of what tennis is all about. They also prefer same gender friends, so although there is not a need to separate boys and girls from a physical perspective, it may be worth considering from a social one, particularly if it affects the dynamics of the group.

They are able to take instruction quite well and want to be involved in the learning process. They can respond to some basic questions, but the focus should still be on activity and play.

Piaget, one of the world's most respected experts on child development, suggested in his *Theory of Cognitive Development* that this is the age when children start to get a real grasp on terms like bigger, smaller, etc. Therefore, this is the appropriate age to start working with these concepts, including deeper, shorter, faster and slower, in terms of technical and tactical development.

This age understands competition and will compete in a non-pressure environment, but it is probably best to keep it local.

At 8-10 Years Old

Trends and media are now having a larger impact on the child's life. That red car at 4 has become, "I like a red Ferrari GTO with leather seats and . . ." They are starting to make a lot more of their own choices, and if tennis doesn't interest them, they may try something else. They like being part of the team or club, and friends are starting to be as important (and sometimes more) as parents.

They will now take quite an active part in the learning process and, given experience, can problem solve quite effectively. They can start to plan and be tactical and can, with experience, evaluate their own performance quite well.

Because children at this age are searching for acceptance in the world, it is important to keep a performance or task focus in competition. This means highlighting what players did well, and how they performed at the skills that they have been working on, much more than long discussions on the result.

There is still a definite need to be a child and, in contradiction, to be given responsibility, which they are often ready for at this age, but on their terms. This can sometimes cause conflicts. Children in today's world seem to be adopting characteristics of older children at a younger age.

You and the Child

Understanding a child's world is important, but at all ages the Golden Rule that you should never lose sight of is . . . *The number one reason for taking a tennis lesson from you is - YOU!*

Young players form strong emotional attachments to the adults and peers around them. One of the biggest fun factors is how you engage them, show empathy, communicate with them and demonstrate how you value them.

Knowing and understanding the information in this section will help, but ultimately, you will be the number one factor in shaping a young child's tennis experience.

2.2 Physical Development

The main considerations for coaches in this area are:

- Nervous System Development - related to movement, coordination and reaction
- Visual System Development - related to reaction and tracking
- Anatomical Development - related to muscles, bones and joints
- Biological Development - related to aerobic and anaerobic system

Before detailing how these factors may limit what can be done and when, never forget how truly adaptable and exceptional the human body is. Although we'll point out some keys to good practice, there will always be some exceptional children who are capable of activities beyond the suggestions. Maximizing a player's potential is about finding a challenging level.

It's also worth remembering that a physically mature (adult like) system does not mean that a child can perform the skill at that level. It simply means that there are no physical limitations to their learning if given the right experience and coaching.

Central Nervous System (CNS)

A child is born with a full nervous system in place and over the first few years (0-5), a process takes place called myelination. Myelination effectively insulates the nerves to receive messages from the brain more effectively. The insulation continues to thicken, resulting in more efficient message sending on into the early 20's.

This development of a child's central nervous system (CNS), in practical terms, means:

- Children can control first larger muscle groups (gross motor control), then smaller muscle groups (fine motor control).
- This pattern radiates outward, or in physiological terms, from the back of the brain down the spinal column and gradually outward.
- Over time, a child with the right opportunity, practice and experience, can introduce and coordinate more joints and levers to a stroke, task or action.

Vision

The development of the visual system happens from birth to a mature form around the age of 10. There are core windows of development that occur during this age. A player may struggle to track the ball simply because his or her visual development has not reached that level at a younger age.

With young children the development of vision moves to first recognizing

- what is immediately in front - largely because this is where most activity takes place in the formative years.
- to the left or right and up and down - two dimensional.
- short to deep - three dimensional.
- peripheral vision and depth perception (binocularity), based on a moving ball.

Reactions

Reactions are slow at a young age due to the fact that the main systems involved in the process [CNS, Vision and anatomical (muscles)] are still underdeveloped. But both show reasonable improvement through the age group from 6-7 and older, once good balance and motor control have started to become established. Reaction speeds are generally considered to peak in the early to mid-20's.

Anatomical

Muscles grow first in size and then in strength, so children can sometimes appear stronger than they are.

Some of the key principles here are:

- Different body systems and organs have their own unique growth patterns.
- Muscles grow first in size and then in strength, and are still immature in function throughout this age group, so children may look stronger than they are.
- During the latter part of this age group, the ligaments become firmer, but the ends of the bones are still growing, so care must be taken not to create too much stress on the body's structure through over rotation or high impact.
- Joints are gradually stabilizing and strengthening during this age group and this may affect the player's ability to change direction quickly with balance and control.

Biological

Biological growth and development is used to describe the internal systems and organs. You should note that even when children appear to be larger than average for their age, they may have a proportionately less developed heart and lungs.

Children generally have reasonable heart and lung function during this age group, although as they have an underdeveloped anaerobic system, speed work of any duration beyond 5-6 seconds is of little long term benefit. Instead, it's worth really continuing to ensure that effective fundamental movement, coordination and reactions are used to develop this area.

Summary

If we consider and understand the likely physical abilities and emotional needs of children at different ages, then we are more able to coach effectively. It is also worth considering that these factors may mean that children are more able to learn some things and less able to learn others.

Actually, when a child is fully ready to learn something they learn it quite quickly. We have all experienced this; a player who picks up something instantly, effortlessly and then the reverse; a child who really struggles to learn something.

For us as coaches, consider that all these factors may play a major part in a child's ability to learn a skill:

- Physiological systems (as detailed in this section)
- Experience - have they played before or been active?
- Prerequisite skill - is the skill that we are trying to teach made up of other simple skills?
Do they have these skills?
- Opportunity - do the people around them play with them?
- Cognitive development - does the child understand the skill? Are they motivated to learn it?
Do they have the mental capacity to take on and learn the skill that we are trying to teach?
- Natural Aptitude - the ability to be able to perform the skill with little previous experience for reasons that we simply can't measure or understand.

All the factors discussed give support to the idea of a developmental teaching approach to tennis and the associated skills. Understanding children first and then making the game fit them is the way forward, and not the other way around.

With this approach in hand we need to look carefully at the skills that we, as coaches, need to make this approach a reality.

3. Teaching Skills

This section is split into:

Communication - highlighting some keys to communicating well with this age group

Organization - covering considerations in organizing young players

Coaching - a short comment on the need to teach

3.1 Communication

Teaching young children can be a challenge, but also a real joy. There are some people who are born with a gift of being able to communicate with and understand young children. They are the naturals to whom children gravitate.

For coaches with less experience, these skills can be learned and honed, but you should remember that a 5 year old will need to be communicated with in a very different way than a 10 year old, and even a 6 year old is very different from an 8 year old.

General Principles

The Spoken Word

- Speak calmly and slowly when giving instructions.
- Be confident - children can smell fear.
- Use vocabulary relevant to the age group.
- Be excited when you speak and give feedback.
- Keep it brief - their attention spans are short.
- Be prepared to repeat key instructions.
- Speak in positives - tell them what to do and not what not to do.
- Be specific - if you say “good” or “well done” then tell them what was good.
- Use simple questions to engage them.
- Listen - their language and ideas will help you to communicate better with them.
- Above all, be consistent!

Body Language

- Be animated to show enthusiasm.
- Get down to eye level - sometimes sit down when talking.
- Young children see things as extremes, so if you are not smiling, they think that you aren't happy. You may need some practice smiling.
- Speak with your hands - clapping and using high fives or thumbs up helps you to be animated, but keep it relevant to the age group.
- Remember you are a role model, so don't underestimate the importance of dressing and behaving the part at all times.

If you need more help, watch children's TV aimed at the age groups with which you are working. Watch the way the presenters speak to their audience. Look at the way in which the programs are structured. With programs aimed at younger children, there is generally a lot of repetition of very simple messages.

The P Word

You shouldn't underestimate the role that parents will play in the decision to get children playing tennis. Therefore, consider some of the following communication tips for developing good relationships with them too.

- Make time to speak to parents.
- Keep them up to date on their child's progress.
- Have information on both the program's philosophy and pathway.
- Draw up a code of behavior for parents at tournaments.
- Get them involved as feeders, administrators, organizers.
- Be honest and communicate expectations.

3.2 Organization

Organizing young players on the court can be a challenge in itself. In order to really do this successfully, you'll need to follow some simple principles.

GENERAL PRINCIPLES - Task, Equipment, Players

- Stick to simple organizational structures
 - Pairs
 - Short lines and small teams
 - Scatter patterns (individual tasks with each player in his own space)
- Use the same organizational structure for different activities, it's easier to get kids into positions with which they are familiar
- Always define a court area for the activity
- Always demonstrate the skill and the activity - kids are visual learners
- *Teach!* Many coaches just run activities. Activity is just the shell; the coach's job is to accelerate learning, making kids learn because you taught them something not just because they played an activity.

TASK PRINCIPLES - Defining the Task

Defining the task, when using a directed approach, will result in a much better performance from your players and allow you to control and evaluate their ability. The key factors are the *what*, *how*, *when*, *from where* and *to where*, and finally *why*. Below is a simple example.

Factors	Task
What do I want you to do?	Throw a ball
How do I want you to do it?	Overarm
When do you start?	When I say, "Go!"
From where do I want you to throw it?	From behind the baseline
To where?	Over the net and into the service box
Why?	To help us develop a throwing action for the serve

It may seem like a lot of information at first, but you will quickly get this down to one or two sentences and you will benefit from being really in control of every activity.

Getting Kids to Feed to Each Other

The huge benefit of getting children to feed is that they have no stand in line time. By throwing, catching and hitting, they are developing skills they can use in the game. They can all work in their own areas, and you can get into really coaching, rather than being too focused on feeding and organizing the players.

- Refer to the Task Grid above and consider how to use it to set the task for a feeder.
- Set targets for the feeder's aim.
- Decide if there are any unsafe issues.
- Include teaching points for the feeder.
- Remember to give praise to the best feeders - this will encourage others to feed with the same quality.
- Don't worry if there is a little variation in the feeds (this is a good thing).

Other Task Principles

In more complex activities, you may want to also consider:

- Scoring systems - how you measure the success of the activity.
- Targets - how you define the court area and suitable target. Is it realistic and do your players have a chance of hitting it?
- Player flow - where will your players move from and to, and what will they do after any hitting task? You don't want lines that won't optimize the limited time you have with your players.

EQUIPMENT PRINCIPLES

- Organize equipment before you start.
- Stick with the same stuff - if you use cones in the first game, use them again in the lesson
- Demonstrate first, then distribute equipment to reduce fidgeting time
- Explain safety issues
- Have a safe zone for racquets (hugged to the chest or always in the ready position) to stop kids from swinging while waiting.
- Avoid red and green together - color blindness affects many boys and is mostly based around red and green
- Use equipment to organize - try red things to the right and "lellow" things to the left
- Equipment is fun and adds interest, but don't turn your lesson into a theme park
- Find different ways to use the same equipment or equipment patterns

PLAYER PRINCIPLES**Coaching Styles**

You may want to think about the different ways you coach different ages in this group. A 4 year old doesn't learn in the same way a 6-7 year old does, and a 9-10 year old is equally different.

We discussed this in section 2, but to summarize:

- At 4, most children learn through play and are not used to formal instruction.
- By the time they are 6-7, they have started school and are more used to taking instruction.
- At 9-10, players are used to simple problem solving, so rather than always telling, consider setting up situations and using questions with a more guided discovery approach.

Classroom education is delivered in a different way today than it was 20 years ago. Therefore, consider how your approach matches the way children are conditioned to learning. A guided discovery approach has been shown to create more long term learning and should be used when possible even at a younger age. However, the use of questioning is very much dependent upon the experience and confidence of the child, and the practicality of this as an approach is based upon time, numbers and space.

Demonstrations

- Take time to demonstrate not just the skills, but also each activity
- Do it from the relevant place on the court.
- Sit them down, if necessary, to keep their attention.
- Cover the points in the Task Grid (previous page)
- Make sure you show the skill in an appropriate way for your players.
- Focus on the positives (the way to do it).
- Point out where waiting players should stand.
- Explain safety points.

Try to use a question before you demonstrate. “Where do I finish my swing?” This will do a number of things.

- Confirm that young players understand.
- Give you a kid-friendly language teaching point.
- Help ensure that you keep their attention during the demonstration.
- Help ensure that your demos are brief and prevent you from giving too much information.

Finally, remember that you have 10-20 seconds to get this done. After 20 seconds, you have lost their attention anyway and you’ll have to move from teaching to crowd control.

Coach Player Ratios

Ratios are a complex dynamic. You want to keep them small, because this allows you to work more closely with each player, but you also have the economics of court costs and costs for each session. Finally, you have the environment factor. More children in one place can create more interaction and more energy on the court.

Using assistants can help to solve this problem so that you can have reasonably sized groups without sacrificing the quality of your coaching. With the use of assistants, the following can be reasonable coach:player ratios for different age groups.

	Coaching Alone	Coaching with an Assistant
Age 4-5	1:4	1:8
Age 5-8	1:6/8	1:12
Age 8-12	1:8	1:12

Discipline

The key to this is to establish the ground rules from the start. Have a system that children understand, e.g. yellow card, red card as used in soccer, or three strikes (chances) and you're out.

Remember that if you run a good session, kids *will* get excited and this may cause disruption. Like any good referee, you should ask yourself, "Do I need to use discipline or will a simple 'calm down' do instead? In either case, don't shout at kids or be too tough - just be fair.

It's a good idea to start by really adhering to the rules so children understand the boundaries. You can always relax more later, but just be cautious that you are consistent with all your players. Kids like to know where they stand.

When you have discipline problems, ask yourself if it is your fault. Make sure that the task is challenging. Easy means they are not maximizing their learning and boredom begins, while too difficult means stress. Both can result in a lack of attention.

Finally it's worth repeating something that we have already mentioned. Be consistent! Treat every child with the same respect, enthusiasm and consideration that they deserve.

3.3 Safety

We are going to assume that safety is always at the top of your list, but it is also worth remembering some child-specific considerations.

- Kids dehydrate quickly, so they will need frequent water and toilet breaks. Hats and sunscreen may be needed in hot climates.
- Balance is an issue at younger ages, so start slowly and build up speed and complexity.
- Supervision. Minor cuts and bumps, and the frequent toilet breaks, may mean that having an assistant or parent on standby is a good idea.
- Boundaries. Have you created a set space for each child so they are not in danger of colliding with others?

3.4 Coaching

Since we assume that if you are reading this resource you already possess the skills required to coach well, we will keep this comment brief. In a way, it is almost a commentary on what we have observed from coaches working in this age group, rather than hard concrete *musts*!

We have already highlighted that there are different ways in which children learn (in Understanding Children). However, the key point here is that the coach must ensure that *learning takes place*. Many coaches working with this age group assume that learning will happen if they do the activity. They discuss activities as if they were the things that make a child better. True they may, with much repetition, create an improvement in a performance, but if the activity were the only thing required, then we would all be out of a job. *You*, the coach, make it happen! Notice when a child needs help in performing a skill, tell them what to do, then tell them when they have done it correctly. Please *teach* them!

4. Structuring Practices

In this section we look at how lessons and practices should be structured in order to help deliver quality coaching. It is divided into:

Child Centered Principles - focused on the how to make lessons fit the child

Game Centered Principles - focused on key concepts from tennis

Structuring Lessons - what goes into each part of the lesson

4.1 Child Centered Practice Principles

These principles will help you think about how you can make practices more relevant to the needs of young children.

Fun does not exist!

Did that get your attention? Good! Okay, let's be clear, we are not saying that tennis doesn't need to be fun. Of course it does, but let's think about what fun is. You can't hold fun or see fun. Things can be fun, but fun is not a thing. Fun is always made up of other things. Think about the last thing you did that was fun. Why was it fun? Now you might start to understand.

Identifying what makes things fun is important for us to hold a child's attention and motivate him/her to play and improve!

For children fun is:

- Being active
- Learning something that interests them
- Being with friends
- Being with people who care and interact with them
- Being able to create something
- Being fully involved and included
- Belonging and being recognized
- Seeing their own progress

Learning and enjoyment are not mutually exclusive in the best games.

Me, Us, You

We touched on this principle in Section 2, Understanding Children. Practically, it means that players will find things more relevant if they are structured around skills that are:

- Solo tasks - at a younger age, players practice some skills on their own
- Partner tasks - players learn to work with a partner
- Competitive tasks - players learn to actively be an opponent

This is not a radically unique concept and follows the same route that players use to make sense of the world around them. We'll cover this more in Section 9, Play.

Progression and Challenge

Practices that hold a player's interest need to be fun, but as part of this, a player needs to see his own improvement in skill and performance in the game. Finding an appropriate level for an activity can be key in helping a young player optimize his potential, but also to fully engage him in the activity.

You are likely to find that there are different levels of ability in every group and, if you are to retain all your players, you will need to set the activity at different levels. Remember, too easy and they will get bored. Too difficult and they'll get frustrated, and it's likely so will you!

The best activities can be developed into a number of different levels, so use activities that can be progressed. Many activities can be made easier or harder by varying the court size and space used for the activity, or by allowing players to catch and hit for the exercise.

The keys to doing this well are:

- Stick to the same organizational structure.
- Use similar equipment.
- Keep a clear picture of the ultimate goal and purpose of the set of practices.
- Progress by
 - increasing the distance.
 - changing the court area and adding barriers like the net.
 - changing the target.
 - adding an extra skill or combination of strokes.

There are so many games out there in tennis that it's easy to jump from one to another from lesson to lesson. The problem with using too many games is that young players and their parents don't see if they have progressed. With a sport like tennis, it is not so easy to see how a player's skill level is developing. It's not like swimming or golf where the outcome always reflects the performance. Rather than change to a different game, make sure players succeed (improve) in the one you are currently playing.

Inclusion - No Elimination Games

Avoid games that eliminate players. If a player is less able, then they need more practice, not less. If you must use a game that eliminates players, then they should always have a way to get back in.

Observation, Teaching or Learning

Every activity should offer at least one of these opportunities. Observation activities allow the coach to see the abilities of the child and assess what might need to be taught next. Most activities are structured in such a way that they allow you to teach something within them, whether this is through a directed style or by using a guided discovery. There are also some activities, however, where the equipment or rules encourage the child to learn by performing the task in a certain way. For example, a child who catches by using an upturned cone will learn that s/he can only perform the task when the ball is falling.

Developing or Maintaining

One of the biggest failings of coaches working with under 10's on any set of skills is doing things over and over that players can already do. In this time of massive opportunity to develop skills rather than just maintain them, we need to take every chance to maximize potential. So, the next time you set up a practice or skill, you must ask yourself if your players could experience some success by doing a more difficult version. Confidence is easily lost at a young age however, so always let children experience reasonable success before progressing.

As a rough guide, if a child can do a skill 9 out of 10 times, it may be too easy; 2 out of 10 may be too difficult; and 6 or 7 out of 10 is a good challenging level.

Chunking

Young players learn best in small chunks. Activities need to be changed frequently in order to keep players' attention and also optimize their learning. Therefore, it is better to run an activity, then do something else, and then go back to the original activity.

Understanding

The best games help players to understand the game tactically. Players remember "why" more than "what", so they are much more likely to learn if you let them know *why* they are doing things. Although they'll love activities that are fun, you should let them know why you are asking them to do them.

4.2 Game Development Principles

These principles make practices more relevant to the game of tennis.

2 is the Magic Number

Tennis is a game of opposition, and that means pairs. Practices done in pairs, with two players either cooperating or competing, result in players learning sending and receiving skills, control, and it means that practices have a degree of natural variation. Practices where balls are fed with precision right to the players with no variation may help players to hit the ball, but don't help with tracking and learning to adapt to different flights.

Games Based

The game can be played at a very young age, but often the concept of the game gets lost when coaches try to apply so called *proper strokes*. The strokes, just like the game, are learned over a period of time as players develop and improve. The game of tennis can be played by rolling, throwing and catching, using a big ball, tapping upward, on a small court, over a line or barrier, with short strokes, and in a multitude of other ways.

The key to retaining players is that they get to play a game, rather than just do drills or practice strokes.

In Court

All the best games have a court or area in which to play. It helps children to understand concepts like in and out, as well as more tactical ideas like using spaces and recovering to the middle of the court. Most importantly, it requires them to learn to control the ball into specific areas, rather than hit with no thought of where the ball is actually going, and can create a need and reason to learn and develop technically.

Rules

The best games have a simple set that children need to learn and understand. Knowing the rules helps to create an understanding, as well as a belonging and ownership of the game.

Either Or

Children see things in very concrete terms, so if activities have targets, then stick to one or two and avoid using three, as more than two just makes it difficult for children to focus. In tennis, we tend to do this anyway, “short or deep”, “crosscourt or down the line”, “in or out”, so it shouldn’t be difficult. Just resist the temptation to have multiple targets, or court zones, until the end of this age group when players start making the transition to the full sized court.

Scoring or Outcome

Keeping score and dealing with the outcome is part of the sport. Despite what some people think, winning and losing is not the big issue for children, especially if they have the chance to play again and they are not judged by the outcome. The environment that you create can highlight the result or make it of little consequence. Remember, a child gets his view from you and his parents. Equally, if children compete often through little games in lessons, they learn quickly that winning and losing is a part of tennis. Just try to ensure that games give everyone the chance to compete at an appropriate level.

Where Are We?

Finally, you should consider the activity as a junction on a long journey. What needs to be achieved to move to the next junction? How does this activity add to the journey? If it doesn’t, don’t do it. Fun on its own is not a good enough reason to do something. A good coach can teach and make players have fun too. By working with children, you’re building athletic foundations for future success. If this were a house, wouldn’t you want the foundation to be of the highest quality?

5. Move, See, Hit, Play, Compete

5.1 Overview

Now let's look at the key development components needed to create a competent young tennis player. To simplify, we have called it *Move, See, Hit, Play, Compete*.

For each section, we'll look at how these skills relate to the:

- **Game** - what is needed to learn to play tennis
- **Player** - how a player's growth and development creates an order for learning of these skills
- **Coach** - additional points for you to consider and teach
- **Activities** - examples of practical activities to use with your players

These skills, of course, don't develop in isolation - just consider how rallying involves moving, seeing and hitting - and they do not always develop in straight lines, so it is worth thinking about them all together.

Move

In Move, we'll explain physical movement, including balance, coordination, speed and agility. How some skills are needed as prerequisites to others and why developing fundamental movement is so important. We'll look at not only the function of moving around the court, but also controlling the body, which is so essential in developing a foundation for effective technique.

See

In See, we'll look at one of the least taught skills in tennis, and yet one of the most important. Without the ability to track and read the ball, players can't rally or really play and tennis becomes frustrating. While some children acquire these skills naturally through experience and playing other sports, others really struggle. In either case, work in this area can make a huge difference in their progress.

Hit

Technique through this stage will develop gradually in line with tactical development, so it's essential to understand how to teach this in a way that players can quickly learn. Children of a younger age rarely have the coordination skills to *hit like a pro*, but we do want them to get there eventually. It's about creating a foundation from which we can build, and then understanding an order that will help our players develop at their own rate, while still playing the game.

Play





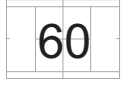
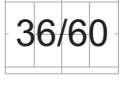
A tactical understanding of the sport is so essential, but again, a logical understanding of how children learn and make sense of the game should be considered in our approach to teaching it. We can use different teaching approaches to help children become tactically aware, while making it fun and exciting to learn.

Compete

A child's view of the world will influence whether they find competition fun and exciting or a traumatic experience. Getting it right is not easy, so this section will cover some simple guidelines to introducing children to tennis competition and creating a pathway to bigger things.

Activity Guide

The following symbols are listed by the activities to guide you.

	Pairs
	Short lines and small teams
	Scattered patterns (solo tasks with each player in his own space)
	Suitable for playing on the 36'/12m court
	Suitable for playing on the 60'/18m court
	Suitable for playing on either size court

6. Move

6.1 Game, Player, Coach

In this section, we will look at three areas.

Court Movement (*Locomotion*) - moving around the court

Controlling the Body (*Swings and Rotation*) - moving and controlling the arms, legs and other body parts to twist, swing and create shapes

Controlling Objects (*Manipulations*) - including throwing and catching

While #1 will develop into specific movement skills over time, #2 and #3 ultimately build into much of the foundation of technical skills.

Foundations

Many experts in the field of child and athletic development classify Fundamental Movements into different categories, but as coaches, we should understand that children need to perform these skills well in order to more effectively learn the tennis specific ones:

- walk, run, jump, hop, skip.
- land and balance.
- throw, catch, handle, carry.

Age 5-10 is a crucial time for developing movement. Most of our fundamental movement patterns are formed during this time, and many, like running and balance, are developed before age 7.

All are necessary at an early age and ensure that a child:

- maximizes their athletic potential.
- gains confidence through a positive active experience.
- develops the habit of being active.
- maintains health and well being.
- benefits socially through cooperation and participation in sport.

Some movement skills, like balance and running style, are ideally established early in a child's life. Some children who are naturally very active acquire these skills, while others will be lacking in this area. Providing children lots of experience and spending time *teaching* these skills in the warm up, as well as throughout the lesson, are great ways to ensure that they will develop these essential foundations.

GAME

Locomotion

On a tennis court, we move

- forward, backward, sideways and in different directions.
- to the ball, adjust around the ball, and then recover.

Once we start looking at what these component skills are, we need to consider how and in what order children are likely to learn them. Looking at them in categories will help, and a common way to look at them is:

- Balance
- Coordination
- Speed and Agility

Balance

This is the foundation of all efficient movement and is essential at every level of the game. Without it, we struggle to perform any other movements. We can define it as *the ability to control the body in various positions while holding still or in motion*. Balance as a skill moves from static to dynamic. An easy example would be to stand on one foot (static), and then hop on that foot (dynamic).

Coordination

Once children develop basic balance, they start to attempt more tasks and the *ability to combine movements into a fluid action*. This is generally referred to as coordination. Coordination is probably the most broadly used term in sport and refers to many different movement principles. To keep it clear here, we'll stick to the definition above.

In considering coordination, you need to understand that it will progress from simple movements to complex patterns. An example is running - moving from a simple running pattern (using left arm with right leg, etc.), to adaptive patterns (using a variety of step patterns), to reactive (doing all this with a racquet in hand and coordinating the run to arrive at the right time and place to hit the ball).

It is important to build patterns in a logical order so that a player has the groundwork to develop further athletic skills. Doing only tennis specific footwork patterns with young players may mean that ultimately they will lack the ability to adjust and adapt at a later age.

Speed and Agility

Now that our young player is balancing and developing coordination, s/he needs to be able to do these actions with speed and in a multitude of directions. *Speed is the ability to perform an action quickly. Agility is defined as the ability to move at speed and change direction on balance.*

At this young age, coaches must help children develop:

- speed of reaction.
- and speed of coordination.
- resulting in speed of motion over short distances.

Like coordination, agility develops from being predictive (set patterns of quick movement) to reactive (reacting to the ball or opponent) and/or adaptive (being able to change the pattern).

Controlling the Body

Movement is not just about moving from one place to another. Technique is a series of coordinated movements with a racquet in hand.

Some movements that we make are helpful prerequisites to technical skill, but may not be developed in daily life off the court. Just think about these questions.

How many times in your daily life off the court do you . . .

- use both arms together? - as on every stroke
- rotate your upper body? - on almost every stroke
- use your non-dominant arm on its own? - as for the ball toss
- reach above your head with one or both hands? - for serve and smash
- make different parts of the body do different things at the same time?

Did you struggle to find many things that you do using these patterns? As you can see, all these are key prerequisite movements to help develop sound technique. Being able to control the body in these ways is essential, and we can start working on many of these at an early age.

Laterality

Around the age of 4 or 5, children start using one hand a lot more than they use the other. Boys more than girls tend to have a stronger dominance as they develop. Since tennis is so dynamic, involving twisting and stretching to both sides, we need to consider that in all these movement activities. We must factor in a balance between the two sides of the body, and arguably the upper and lower body as well. Remember, every stroke uses both sides of the body.

Many experts in the fields of motor learning and athletic development have long suggested that we spend a degree of time using the non-dominant side to help develop the coordination and movement skills required to be a top player. There is no doubt that tennis is a two sided sport, so adding a few minutes practicing using the other side of the body can be helpful even at this young age.

There is more information on these as they relate to technique in Section 8, Hit.

Controlling Objects

Part of moving is also developing fundamental movement skills that involve working with objects. In tennis terms, we mean throwing and catching, as well as handling a racquet. We'll look at handling in Section 8.

Both throwing and catching will develop through this period, and time should be spent building these activities into warm ups to help develop the prerequisites to rallying, serving and returning.

PLAYER

We have already covered some of the growth issues in Section 2, but it will help to look at movement and consider some expectations for each age. Like all developmental information, the experiences and opportunities presented to the child must be adequate in order to achieve these skills. But, equally, these skills consider that a child has attained an average level of growth and development for their age.

Age 4-5 - Exploration Stage

With instruction and experience, children can:

- do a basic under arm and over arm throw.
- run in straight lines.
- balance well on tiptoes and on one leg.
- catch a small ball before the bounce.
- catch a big ball after the bounce.

Age 5-7 - Basic Pattern Stage

With instruction and experience of previous stage, children can:

- run coordinating arms and legs together.
- throw using a mature action.
- hop on either foot and skip.
- move using different repetitive footwork patterns like cross over steps.
- catch a small ball after the bounce.
- jump and land on balance.

Age 7-8 - Consistency and Adaptation Stage I

With instruction and experience of previous stages, children can:

- throw to different distances.
- use both sides of the body much more.
- adapt and change running patterns.
- move forward and backward to receive a ball.
- perform two actions at the same time (run and throw).

Age 8-10 - Consistency and Adaptation Stage II

With instruction and experience of previous stages, children can:

- use more complex coordination patterns, i.e., different actions with legs and arms.
- throw at different speeds, spins, directions and trajectories.
- react faster and more efficiently.
- use intricate and specific movement patterns.
- coordinate more links of the body into a movement or action.

COACH

In a lesson, movement and balance should be emphasized throughout. Delivering too many static hitting activities will leave players unable to play the game effectively.

Simple guidelines for introducing activities:

- Start with a Ready position.
- Use a ball where possible.
- Work in pairs to make activities reactive.
- Do fundamental activities before specific ones.
- Move forward, backward and sideways.
- Always define the court areas to create more situations in which players need to balance.
- Teach players how to move. Don't just assume this will happen.
- Build movement into technical practices by:
 - adding recovery.
 - feeding the ball so that the player must move to it.
 - adding some movement activity to the side of the court before rejoining the line.

To progress and move them on:

- Combine different activities.
- Add split steps and balance to the end of movements.
- Perform more than one skill at the same time, i.e., hit while moving.
- Make more changes of direction in every activity.
- Have stops and starts that involve different positions, and even on one leg.

The key for us is to ensure that we look at coaching movement skills the same way we teach technique at an early age.

Key Points to Teach

- Head still and eyes focused
- Good posture through control of the trunk (straight back)
- Lowering the center of gravity to widen the base
- Use of the knees and joints to create stability
- Position of feet to form a wide base
- Coordinated use of the arms and legs to help control the position of the upper body
- Alignment of all parts of the body in the direction of the movement
- Keep shoulders level on rotations

Make It then Break It

One of the keys to playing tennis well is the ability to be able to adapt and change patterns. We have already discussed the idea of fundamental to specific to adaptive/reactive, but this principle of coordination deserves a special mention. Once an action has been established in basic form, it should be mixed up. At the age of 7, most fundamental movement patterns are fairly well set, so at 8/9 years old, we can start thinking about adaptation.

A simple example would be once a child can run through a footwork ladder with one step in each rung, the coach can block some of the rungs. When the player reaches these, the player has to skip them, changing and then recovering his rhythm. This way of taking very set patterns and adding variation makes activities more specific, and these changes enhance motor control and develop coordination.

In summary, we have briefly highlighted the different movements that you might want to include in establishing some athletic foundations in young players. Don't underestimate the importance of this section. These skills are often overlooked and yet are crucial in preparing young players for the challenges of the game!



6.2 Activities

We have split these activities into two sections. *Warm ups* are intended for use at the start of the session to provide an opportunity for developing movement skills that are essential to playing good tennis. *Circuit activities* are designed for use along with technical hitting activities. They provide the opportunity to develop movement skills in the main part of the lesson.

You will also notice that a good many activities do not include a racquet. At first this might seem a little strange, but consider that players will often focus only on the racquet when it is used and not on learning control of the parts of the body. Don't forget that the body controls the racquet and not the other way around.

WARM UPS

Masters of the Sky



Purpose: to develop use of both arms together

Players spread out on the court. The coach shows 4 different arm movements all with both arms together.

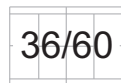
- Eagle - arms outstretched gliding around
- Hummingbird - arms move as fast as possible
- Sparrow - arms move up and down at a medium pace
- Albatross - arms move in big circles (like a service motion)

The coach calls out a bird and children jog, moving their arms for the appropriate bird without touching anyone else on the court. Change the command frequently.

Variations:

- Add different bird or animal motions
- Do tennis specific turns to the forehand and backhand side

Wind Up



Purpose: to develop balance and control through rotations

Players stand back to back and have to pass a ball to the player behind them. They start by passing it around the feet, then by the waist, and then by the shoulders. After every rotation, players take one step away from each other so that instead of passing, they must stretch and eventually throw. They can only step away if they complete the whole set of 3 passes.

Variations:

- Use racquets and pass a ball from string bed to string bed

Follow the Ball



Purpose: to develop multidirectional movement and reactions

Players are in ready position and are spaced out on the court. Standing in front of the players, the coach has a ball in his hand which he moves in different directions. Players must move in the direction of the ball: left, right, forward, backward. At anytime, the coach can shout out a player's name. As he does, he tosses the ball in the air. If that player can get to it and catch it before it bounces twice, she gets to be the coach.

Variations:

- Coach can point and call out "Change" to get players to change direction
- Add different movements like hops, cross over steps and turns
- Throw the ball to players as they move. Players throw it back while still moving.

Mirrors



Purpose: to develop lateral movement and hand eye coordination

Players face each other and move sideways across no more than the width of the court with frequent changes of direction. One player must copy in the mirror all the movements of the other, including changes of direction.

Variations:

- Players pass one or two balls in different ways back and forth as they move
- Players perform clapping patterns which can be simple or complex
- One player has her hands behind her back and each time she puts a hand out, the other player has to touch it

Race Cars



Purpose: to develop basic hand eye coordination for the very young

Players hold their racquets on either side of the racquet head like a car steering wheel. They must drive around the court lines ensuring that they stay on the line and do not bump into anyone else. If they do, they have to run to the net (which is the garage) and put their finger in the net to get repaired. Then they can join the game again.

Variations:

- Do all movements facing the net
- Do movements while balancing a ball on the strings of a racquet

Overhead



Purpose: to develop an over arm throwing action

Players are organized in two small lines across the court from alley to alley. One player at the front has a ball. She throws it over arm to the other line, then runs to the back of the line to which she threw the ball. The player who catches the ball, then throws it to the other line and runs across the court to the back of that line. Repeat.

Variations:

- Throw in different ways
- Move in different ways across the court
- Catch the ball before or after the bounce

Run 'n Ready



Purpose: to develop balance and multidirectional movement

Players space out on the court, then run around avoiding others. On the command of the coach, they stop in a ready position, move to a line and balance on one foot and shadow a specified stroke. Then they run again.

Variations:

- Balance on different body parts, i.e. one foot and one hand, one foot, knee and hand
- Perform different combinations of strokes, i.e., 2 forehands and 1 backhand

B Ball Chase



Purpose: to develop multidirectional movement and hand eye coordination

All players have a ball that is identical, except two who have a small basketball or similar. Everyone must bounce the ball at all times. The basketball players chase the others inside the boundaries of the court, trying to tag them. If they do, they swap balls. Players who finish the game with the basketballs are the losers.

Variations:

- Players must bounce in particular ways (alternate hands, non-dominant hand, etc.)
- Players balance a ball on the string bed, bouncing up or down with the racquet as they move

Circle Ball



Purpose: to develop lateral movement and hand eye coordination

Players form a circle and sidestep around. As they do, they toss a ball from one player to the other around the circle in the opposite direction to the way they are moving.

Variations:

- Add a change of direction command to either change the direction of the movement, of the ball, or both

CIRCUIT ACTIVITIES**Run the Lines Obstacle Course**

36/60

Purpose: to develop coordination through a range of different movements

Choose different activities from the Circuit Activities on the next page and place them around the court. Get players to move around the lines and as they reach each obstacle or part of the circuit, they perform the task a set number of times and then move on to the next activity.

Variations:

- Use similar activities to fit the theme of your lesson

Using one or two very simple pieces of equipment and simple organizational structures, these activities can create maximum activity and much needed development of movement skills. They are ideal for placing alongside the court so that players can hit the ball fed by the coach, then move through the circuit activity before returning to the hitting position.

Cone Ladders

These can be used to work on running style, footwork patterns, balance and other movement skills both fundamental and specific. Place a series of cones in a line (it doesn't have to be a straight line) and get players to do the following:

- Run through ladder placing one foot in each space
- Run through ladder making two steps in each space
- Run with four small steps
- Run with high knees
- Run through, but skip certain spaces
- Space the cones differently to create different size strides
- Zigzag through
- Zigzag through with a cross over step
- Run around each cone always facing forward

Down the Line

Lots of actions can be performed along a line:

- Run with every step on the line
- Moving sideways, but jumping back and forth over the line
- Hopping back and forth over the line
- Moving forward, but jumping side to side over the line
- Run fast and stop one footed on the line
- Bounce a ball along the line. How many times does it land on the line?

One Cone

Place a cone on the ground and get players to try the following:

- Run around the cone always facing forward
- Jump back and forth over the cone
- Jump side to side over the cone
- Run and do a split step over the cone
- Touch the cone with the right hand, then left foot, then left hand, then right foot

Hoop To It

Try these things with a hoop:

- Jump in it and pull it all the way over the head
- Jump in and out of it all the way around
- Run around it keeping one foot inside and the other outside



7. See

7.1 Game, Player, Coach

Let's start this section with a question. How long would it take you, a teaching professional with your skills and expertise, to teach an average 7 year old to drop the ball and hit it with a very basic forehand action after the bounce? Most pros will say, "About five minutes." If it takes only five minutes to get a child to hit a forehand, why does it take so long for them to learn to rally? The answer: Technical skills must be matched by *Reception Skills*.

GAME

Creating a great little player means understanding that they will need to:

- react at the point that their opponent strikes the ball
- accurately track and judge the ball
- move in a coordinated manner to a position so that they can hit the ball
- hit from a balanced position from a stance based on both receiving and, eventually, directing the ball

We need to develop all parts of this process. This is particularly important when working with younger players who have the potential to learn this and may lose the potential to gain these skills accurately at a later age.

Before moving on, it's worth saying that there are two parts to the reception process which are difficult for children in this age group. Although these come early in the reception process and are used before the opponent has even struck the ball, they are only used by players who have reached an advanced level and clearly understand the relationship between the opponent and the ball. These are:

- reading anticipation cues based on perception of the position of the opponent and their racquet before the hit
- combining these cues with past experience and understanding to anticipate where the shot is likely to go (anticipation)

PLAYER

The usual order in which visual development occurs is:

- perception of left and right
- perception of up and down
- perception of depth traveling away from the player
- perception of depth traveling toward the player
- perception of spin and speed

We should also remember that tracking a ball while the player is moving is more difficult than when standing still. Most children have a well developed visual system very early on, but the ability to track depth of a moving object takes longer to develop and may not be at a mature level until around 7 to 9 years old. The ability to do all this while moving may take even longer.

What does this mean to us as coaches? Players are likely to need more help judging depth than width and we should consider starting closer and gradually moving farther away to help this process.

COACH

Simple guidelines for introducing activities.

- Teaching the ready position is #1. Have a starting and finishing position.
- Big ball before tennis balls. Kids find bigger, slower balls easier to track.
- Keep the ball below eye level to start. Kids find balls harder to track if they have to move their head when following them.
- Two flights are harder than one. Kids find tracking a ball that bounces more difficult than one that doesn't, but groundstrokes are much more relevant than volleys to a young player's game.

Then also Consider

- Reception involves reaction, movement and balance. Seeing a ball and moving to it are two essential parts of the same process, so make sure players can move well too.
- Players tend to be too far away, and then get too close, then move to a better hitting position. These are three stages of normal development in judging a ball that flies and then bounces. Know which stage your player is in.
- Get players to catch to the side. Most sports have players getting directly behind the ball to receive it.
- Don't feed right to them. When feeding to young players, try to move the feeds farther and farther away to develop reception and movement. Include a variety of balls: higher, lower, slower and faster, as appropriate.
- Let kids feed to each other. Working in pairs helps players develop skills they need for play.

Key Points to Teach

- An excellent ready position has the player looking for the ball.
- Meeting the ball as it falls around waist height to start.
- Early recognition and reaction to the ball's direction.
- Coordinated movement of varying stride length around the ball.
- Balanced hitting position.
- Contact point out in front.

7.2 Activities

Every rallying activity and most hitting activities involve some degree of reception work, but these activities may be particularly useful in developing these skills further.

Start all activities with the ready position.

Note: Most of the activities listed in the remainder of this section are designed for players to work in pairs, but can be adapted for the coach to feed as a variation.

Clap the Bounce - High and Low



Purpose: to track the ball at key points in its flight

Players start with a ball in a space. Toss the ball up to eye level, let it bounce and catch it after the bounce. Then players repeat, but clap when the ball bounces. Next, clap when it gets to eye level or to the top of the flight and when it bounces.

Variations:

- Throw higher
- Do while moving around the court
- Do at different heights
- Call out “Up” as the ball rises and “Down” as it falls (Up, Down, Up, Down, Catch)
- Do it with a partner in the alley

Hockey Tennis - Left and Right



Purpose: to move to the left and right to receive the ball

Define a small court area. Players start by rolling balls back and forth to each other. Then they try to stop the ball with different parts of the body: feet, hands, knees. Then they try to stop the ball with the racquet, slightly covering the ball with the racquet face, but keeping the ball out to the side.

Variations:

- Rally the ball through a pair of cones
- Use different sides of the racquet for each hit
- Keep both hands on the racquet to help rotation
- Recover to the middle between each hit
- Be a goal keeper and defend the goal

Safety Net - Falling Ball

Purpose: to make space between the bounce and the hit, meeting the ball as it falls

Players each have an object with which to catch: upturned cone, bag, bucket, or even a pouch created with the hem of a loose fitting shirt. One player throws the ball underarm and the other must catch it using the object. S/he then throws it back for the partner to catch. See how many continuous catches the pair can make. The object is to encourage players to catch the ball as it falls and helps them judge it appropriately.

Variations:

- The coach can feed
- Increase the distance or throw over a net
- Catches must be to the side
- Catches must be made two handed and to the side (encourages rotation)
- One pair makes 3 catches, then 3 hits, then 3 catches

Three Strikes - Left and Right

Purpose: to meet the ball at the side out in front and not directly in front of the body

Players throw a big ball to each other and must catch, after a bounce, to the side and not directly in front of the belly. If they do, their partner says "Safe" and no points are scored by either player. If they catch in front, the partner says "Strike." Three strikes and the player loses the game. (No points are lost for dropping the ball and a ball that players can easily catch should be used.)

Variations:

- Play over a net
- Coach can feed
- Lower level players can roll the ball to each other
- Use a different scoring system

Big Ball Tennis - Left and Right, Short and Deep

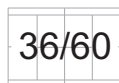
Purpose: to judge the flight and bounce of the ball, start with a bigger ball

With a small basket/soccer ball, play a game of throw and catch tennis over the net in a small court area. Explain some simple rules like in and out, and only one bounce. Get players to throw and catch two handed and from the side of their body to encourage shoulder rotation.

Variations:

- Start with a partner rally and see how many the players can make
- Coach can feed
- Coach feeds tennis balls and players have racquets and must move into position
- Players can play as doubles

Soccer Star - Short and Deep



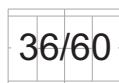
Purpose: to judge the flight of and meet a falling ball after the bounce

Players start in a ready position holding a racquet. From a feed, they must move to the ball and do one of the following skills:

- Kick the ball with one foot or the other
- Make the ball land on top of their foot as it falls
- Trap the ball with the racquet on the second bounce on the ground

Having to find a position to do one of these skills means that players learn to move into an appropriate position after the bounce.

Splat - Short and Deep



Purpose: to understand where to be to receive different balls

Players start in 2 or 3 lines. Each line is a team. The coach feeds each line in turn and players must connect with the ball in one of the following ways as the coach indicates.

- Splat - the ball must be trapped on the ground with the racquet on the 2nd bounce
- One - the ball must be hit after one bounce
- Two - the ball must be allowed to bounce twice, then hit

Each team scores one point for every shot they hit back over the net on either the “One” or “Two” command. They earn two points for successful execution of a “Splat”.

Variations:

- Players can rally with one player calling out
- Coach can use fewer or only one command
- For better players, a forehand or backhand command may be added
- A no bounce command may be added

2 Bounce Tennis - Short and Deep



Purpose: to get players to understand the appropriate distance between the first bounce and contact, avoid running directly at the bounce, and to get used to greater distances and higher bounces when moving from one court size up to the next

Players start with a simple rally over the net, but the ball must bounce twice on each side. The first bounce should be in the area specified by the coach (service box on 60' court). After a two bounce rally, players should repeat only letting the ball bounce once.

Variations:

- One player may play the ball after one bounce and the other after two bounces
- One player may call out before hitting the ball how many times the partner must let it bounce before hitting (1 or 2)
- There is a set recovery point that player must go to between each shot

This or That



Purpose: to get players to recognize where the ball will land

One player (or coach) hits and the other player must call out if the ball will land in the service boxes or the back box. If they call out correctly, they take the ball and put it to the side of the court in line with the bounce. If they get it wrong, they take one ball away from the pile within that section. At the end of 10 balls, the players swap roles.

Variations:

- Players rally and try to call out, keeping score out loud if they get it right
- Players can hit the ball back over the net and keep score out loud
- The coach feeds two teams of players who must take turns to call out

Tap and Hit - Contact Point



Purpose: to meet the ball at an appropriate contact point

Players rally, but must tap each ball up as it arrives, and allow it to bounce before sending it back. This is often thought of as an easier skill than basic rallying, but in fact requires greater accuracy as the ball must be met between the knee and mid-chest in order to control it.

Variations:

- Players can fix their hands or racquet in a set “contact point” position and then must move to bump the ball. They are not allowed to swing or to change the position of their hand or racquet.

8. Hit

8.1 Game, Player, Coach

GAME

We have already covered how young players see and move to the ball. Without these essential skills, technique will never be of use in a game, since these two elements are the primaries to be in the position to hit. And yet, many coaches spend a great deal of time on teaching technique by always feeding balls directly to the player.

Technique is used to implement tactics. Without control of the ball, technique serves no purpose. So, technique to control the ball should be emphasized throughout; short swings to make the ball move a short distance and longer swings to make the ball go farther.

Now combine this with a developmental approach to teaching and an understanding that we may be working with children whose limited coordination may make the *hit like a pro* approach both frustrating and lengthy. It's worth looking at a more Graduated Length Method (GLM) in order to get kids to play quickly. We'll still arrive at modern technique, but by going through a series of stages, we'll get to play the game all the way along.

Starting with the big muscles and joints is key. Starting with the smaller joints, like the wrist and elbow, can result in technique that is inconsistent and, at this age, often wild, whereas the reverse, recruiting larger joints and muscles and moving outward to the smaller ones follows the natural development of coordination and motor control, keeping the trunk as the driving force of any action.

PLAYER

If vision and development of the Central Nervous System, covered in Section 2, are a key part of motor control and follow a pattern of close in to farther away, then we could think about teaching along similar lines.

- Starting close to the body
- Moving to the side of the body with a short swing
- Then lengthening the swing
- Adding more segments of the body into the motion

Also, as players gain control of more parts of their bodies (bigger muscles then smaller ones), it makes more sense to work with a simple short swing on a small court and gradually increase both together.

Developmental Approach and Motivation

Some coaches argue that we should teach *pro stroke* technique from the start and sight rare examples of the talented few who are capable of learning this quickly. The reality of this for those of us who have spent a long time at this end of the game is that most children are not capable of learning to control the ball with this kind of technique as they lack the prerequisite coordination.

The result of taking the *pro strokes* model from the start is that players do not experience incremental success, and the resulting positive motivation that a developmental model brings. Equally, although they may learn the shape of the stroke eventually, they don't learn this in the context of actually playing the game. Therefore, retaining these youngsters in the program may become difficult as other sports are easier to start playing and the resulting tactical understanding of the game can be limited.

All Individuals

Because all players are different, you need to determine where is the best place for them to begin. It may not be at the first stage, and it could be that they are capable of a more developed stage, either as a result of experiences they have had or skills they have already developed.

For the purpose of this supplement, we are going to assume that all children start at the first stage, This way, we are sure that children will be able to quickly play the game.

COACH

The nature of this supplement is not to focus on very specific details of technique, but rather to consider how basic technique will develop while maintaining a player's ability to rally and play the game. The aim is to consider the methodology along with the fundamentals of technique with which you, as a coach, are already familiar.

As you read on, remember that there is little point in separating technique and tactics, and you need to ask if a player is capable of starting to play the game with the technique being taught.

DEVELOPING GROUNDSTROKES / BUILDING A RALLY

The following is a pathway of skill applicable equally to forehand and backhand. Hitting skills need to be developed in conjunction with reception skills or else rallying can't take place and children can't play. The following is a suggested order for developing those hitting skills, along with reception skills as explained in Section 7.

Hitting Skill	←————→	Reception
1. Control of the Racquet Face	←————→	Using the Ball and Racquet Together
2. Taps up with a Bounce	←————→	Judging Bounces (up and down)
3. Hitting to the side (short stroke)	←————→	Receiving the Ball (short distance)
4. Longer Stroke	←————→	Judging Bounces (farther)
5. Varying Stroke	←————→	Dealing with Different Distances
6. Multi-segmented Stroke	←————→	Increasing Width, Spin and Speed



Please remember that the activities presented at each stage merely create the situations to work on a particular skill and that the technique required to execute the skill will normally still need to be taught.

When developing the backhand, players may find it easier if their partner uses a forehand, since backhand to backhand rallies tend to be more challenging.

At each stage, players should be encouraged to become consistent, and then more accurate, before moving on to the next stage.

Stage 1 - Control of the Racquet Face

Players need to learn to handle and control the racquet and ball. This is done through rolling, balancing, bouncing, pushing along the ground, dropping off and catching on the racquet face. While grips are not important at this stage, the ability to control the racquet face to make the ball move, stop or be directed is key.





Bungee Jumping

Players spread out on the court, each with a ball balanced on the racquet string bed. They walk around inside the court boundaries making sure that they don't bump into each other. When the coach shouts "Bungee", the players roll the ball off the strings, allow it to bounce, then trap it with the other hand back on the string bed. They then continue to walk or move in a different way as specified by the coach. Build this into the next stage, Taps Up with a Bounce.

Stage 2 - Taps Up with a Bounce

By getting players to tap the ball up in the air (allowing it to bounce between hits) rather than over a net, we can introduce a rally when players still have little control. Some purists may look at this skill as contrary to the action of a forehand. However, if we ask children to rally toward their partner, their underdeveloped control of the swing results in hitting too far. Their partner's only role becomes collecting the ball and hitting it back in the same manner, only to start the frustrating process all over again. Ensure that players keep the racquet face flat, bend the knees as the ball falls, and tap to around eye height.



Save Freddie



Mark a small area in the alley around 4 feet across. Players each have a ball and racquet and try to see how many taps up they can do, keeping the ball in the area. Then players stand on either side of the area and must try to alternately tap up the ball, keeping it in the area. When they achieve 10 hits, they shout, "We saved Freddie". Then they run to the basket, get another ball and try to do it again.

Stage 3 - Hitting to the Side (short strokes)

Now we develop short strokes to the side of the body. Also at this stage, focus on combinations of forehands and backhands. Once players are successful, then starting from the ready position, have them take the racquet just to the side of the body, but with a short swing. Now they hit the ball out and away instead of up, in a more accepted stroke shape. Major focus should be placed on the contact point, short low to high swing, angle of the racquet face and very slightly open or more linear balanced stance, a ready position and small shoulder turn. At this stage, recovery should also be introduced to most activities.

Battle Cones

Place 3 cones in a cluster on either side of the alley. Players must rally across the alley trying to make the ball hit the other player's cones. Each time they hit a cone, they move a cone from their opponent's cluster to their own. The game ends when one player ends up with all the cones on their side of the alley. Progress the activity by increasing the distance, doing it over a net or barrier, adding a recovery position, or combining forehands and backhands.






Stage 4 - Longer Stroke

As control and coordination develop, the swing can be lengthened using a basic low to high swing shape. Here we can also make the court longer, to the full length of the 36'/12m court to encourage players to develop good swing length. The stance here is likely to be linear or slightly open, and a focus should still be placed on an effective contact point, shoulder turn, and smooth follow through. Continue to work with this shape on to the 60'/18m court, adding a small loop on the backswing.

Squeeze Rally

Players start behind the baseline. Each time they make a rally of 10, they make the court one racquet length narrower. Players should stay behind the baseline to ensure that stroke length is maintained. Pairs should keep going until they reach a court width that challenges their ability to rally to 10 with their partner.





Stage 5 - Varying Stroke

Until now, the swing has gotten gradually longer. To enhance control and coordination, we should start to change the length of the swing, making it shorter and longer and shorter again. This stage is very important and often missed. By practicing changing the length of the swing based upon different intentions, players get much better control of the stroke than by using one fixed stroke length. Most children will be 7 to 9 before they can effectively adapt the stroke length in this way. If recovery has been added at an earlier stage (which it should have been), add this to all activities as well.

Pick a Card

The coach places cards at the back of the court with numbers 2 through 10 written on them. The activity is rallying over the net. Players each place a cone or marker 4 racquet lengths from the net to start. This acts as the baseline. Players rally to 10 with each ball landing between the net and the marker cone. Then they go to the back of the court and choose a card. The cone is then moved to this number of racquet lengths from the net and the rally is repeated at this distance. After each successful rally, they must draw a new card. Continue until players have done a set number of rallies from different distances.




Stage 6 - Multi-segmented Stroke

At a more advanced stage, around age 8 or 9, and on the 60'/18m court, introduce a more semi-open stance when hitting crosscourt (step in the direction of the intended hit). Include a semi western grip and continue the small loop on the backswing, particularly when a child develops the need to use angles of the court, increase racquet head speed, and as a result, develop spin. At this stage, hopefully, we have arrived at a point where players are starting to use more links of the body in the coordination chain, but this shouldn't be exaggerated because young bodies are still growing and developing.

Sideline

Any kind of crosscourt activity can be used to help develop the concept of the multi-segmented swing. This activity is competitive rather than cooperative, but reflects the stage at which players should be before working on this skill. On the 60'/18m court, players play crosscourt points. They score one point for winning the point, but 5 points if they can make their opponent step over the sideline at any time during the rally. Keep score. This activity alone will not create technique, but it will create the need to learn it, so this needs to be taught and taught well.



Note: At every level, the Task Grid in Section 3 should be used. Don't forget to define the court area (starting small and getting bigger).

Using this process allows coaches to avoid teaching players a long extended swing, which results in the ball traveling a long distance and making rallying almost impossible at a young age.

Grips

Using the Growing Kids approach should help avoid extreme grips that may hamper a player's technical development and cause injuries at a later age.

Forehand

It is suggested that an eastern forehand be used at a younger age, because it aids the more linear swing that is preferred when smaller joints and muscles lack motor control. Move later to the semi western as players start to develop the coordination in more segments of the body, and then add spin and angles that the 60'/18m court demands. However, all children are individuals and if a child naturally starts with a semi western grip and can align the strings of the racquet to control the ball, then they should be allowed to continue.

Backhand

Most players starting out in tennis will opt to use a two-handed backhand in order to reduce the number of segments that are needed to be controlled in the motion. Generally, players will use a combination of a continental grip on the dominant hand and either an eastern or semi western grip on the non-dominant hand. Effective control of the racquet face and swing should be the key considerations in deciding to allow a player to continue or to change grips, again avoiding extremes that will hamper long term development of the action.

DEVELOPING THE SERVE

Similar principles can be applied to the serve. With a simple action starting very close to the body and gradually moving the contact point higher, and increasing the coordination by using the arms together, adding an increasingly bigger U shape (circle) with the arms, results in a tendency to reach higher at the contact point.

As the circle grows, encourage the player to get the elbow back so that they can develop a good throwing action. After this stage, and with the required level of coordination of the arm, start to work on use of the continental grip. Generally, this will not happen until around the age of 9.

Remember that the contact point and grip are linked, so asking a player to reach higher before they have developed the required throwing action and without making the required grip change may result in an action that lacks fluency and efficiency.

The key points to consider

- Start players in a good serving position with feet in line with the target, racquet and ball together out in front (very young children may start a little more open to the court).
- You may want to allow players to start with an underarm serve, but try to coordinate the two arms with a small split, allowing the ball to move up to around mid-chest and the racquet to swing through to hit it before it bounces just below waist height.
- Build in the coordination of the two arms early in the action.
- Spend time on overarm throwing to develop the action.
- Don't expect players to serve with a continental (serve) grip until they have developed the prerequisite coordination and strength above their head.

Players are unlikely to be able to start the process with a very high contact point, but should be encouraged to develop a smaller version of the action rather than a very mechanical action that lacks coordination.

For suitable activities for the serve and the volley, refer to the next section of this supplement.

DEVELOPING THE VOLLEY

Young players find the volley the least challenging of all the strokes. It's such a simple action, but the contact point, blocking action and starting and finishing in the ready position, should be emphasized at all levels. When secure on the 60'/18m court, start working on using the continental grip and put the volley in the context that it will be used with an approach shot before and recovery later.

Despite being easy for players to learn, consider that the volley will be one of the least used shots in a young player's game. Reaction times mean that they will struggle to use it in open play, so learning the serve, return and rally should be prioritized.

Summary

Although we haven't summarized all the sections in this supplement, it seems worthwhile to reinforce some of the key principles here.

- Technique is of limited value without considering the tactical need for what you are developing. The effect on the ball should always be integral.
- Technique should start with effective contact points, gradually moving farther from the body and adding a longer and longer action.
- Technique will usually follow the same pattern as coordination, adding more links of the body as a player's skills develop.
- Every child should be treated as an individual, so a pathway of skill will help you to place the player at the most appropriate level.

This supplement does not profess to look at technique in any great detail, but hopefully gives you some simple principles that you can use with your existing knowledge.

9. Play

9.1 Game, Player, Coach

GAME

If you have been teaching tennis for some time, then you have heard a child say, “When do we get to play real tennis?” Interesting question. If you ask kids, “What is real tennis?”, they’ll tell you that there are two players and a net and a court and they hit the ball back and forth and you win and lose points and, and, and . . . What they won’t tell you is tennis is standing in line until it’s your turn to hit, then you try to repeat a specific stroke shape one or two times, then you run to the end of a line or go pick up balls, then, then, then . . .

Today’s advancement in equipment is designed to allow players to actually play the game at a young age. Rather than just do racquet and ball skills, players can now, with slower balls and smaller courts and equipment, develop a lot more skills than were possible with a regular ball.

This section is a collection of practices and activities following developmental principles for getting young children to learn the tactical skills required to play. Just as we emphasized in the last few sections that the hitting and receiving skills are important, we also continually linked them to tactics, the game and the outcome of the shot.

These activities will create the need to teach technique in order to better perform the tactics, but just as we couldn’t separate the technique from the tactics, neither can we separate the tactics from the technique. It’s a point worth remembering, not just as you read, but as you implement these on the court.

PLAYER

Players will best learn the game if they are taught it relative to their cognitive development. We covered many of the key points in Section 2, but as a reminder, remember the following.

Me, Us, You

A child’s focus and view of the world changes through the 6 to 10 age group, and they are likely to consider any task that is:

- first all about him or her
- then about working with a partner
- then about being an opponent

Ball, Court, Opponent, but One Thing At a Time

Children at this age don’t deal well with multiple parts of the same problem. What does this mean to us as coaches? They deal with one thing at a time, and only when they are confident with one element can they add another. The ball, the court, the opponent.

Either Or

Practices that ask players to make a choice initially should be based around two alternatives. Giving players three or more choices can reduce the focus of the activity. It’s not difficult in tennis: crosscourt or down the line, short or deep, etc.

These principles might at first suggest a fairly straight line in development. In fact, this is not always the case. We are not saying that players can only work on hitting first. They can start working on moving their opponent, but they have to do it in a game that doesn’t require them to focus on another element of the process. For example, players may be able to work on moving the opponent in a game of tennis where they are throwing and catching a small basketball that they can comfortably judge.

COACH

In teaching the game, it is important that players develop a tactical understanding, which means learning to problem solve and, eventually, counter the opponent. Creating situations and using questions as a teaching method can help develop all these aspects of a player's game. Always take into consideration which aspects of the ball, court, opponent the child is actually dealing with. Asking questions about the opponent when the player is still dealing with controlling the ball will be less effective.

For every activity, remember:

- Always set a court. The outcome of the shot should be a minimum of "in the court".
- Two is the magic number. Get players to work together.
- Rules. Set the rules for the task, but also teach the rules of the game.
- The situation provides the need to perform a skill.
- Ball, then Court, then Opponent.

Ball Focus

Most activities at this stage are focused on getting children to develop skills to help them receive, control and hit the ball. Developing a simple rally should be paramount, so many of the activities listed are focused on the stages of building a rally.

Court Focus

The next set of activities focuses on hitting the ball in different ways and in different directions, so that players learn the geography, often without realizing it, of the court.

Opponent Focus

The final set of activities require the player to think about how best to beat their opponent. They involve problem solving and being comfortable with the skills of hitting a ball in a number of different ways from different positions around the court.

9.2 Activities

The activities listed include the key principles we have previously discussed. This means that players will be working together in a court area. They will not be standing in lines working only on technique with all balls fed by the coach.

The benefits of using this approach are:

- Children get to play sooner.
- Players are all actively involved throughout.
- The variety that occurs naturally when players feed to each other helps develop reception skills.
- The coach can teach in a group situation more effectively.

Before diving into all the ideas we present here, remember that the activities are just a framework and in order to really make progress, you must *teach*.

Most of the games are for pairs, but when working with a group divide your space into individual courts. Try to remember the names are merely wrappers to make games seem more interesting to players. Don't lose sight of the purpose for each activity. Finally, remember that all activities can be made easier by getting one, or even both players, to throw and catch and then progressing to both players hitting.

BALL FOCUS ACTIVITIES**Rally Activities****Alligator River**

Purpose: to develop basic racquet head control and contact to the side and in front

Players work in pairs on either side of the alley (river). They must push the ball back and forth to each other across the alley using their racquets, and counting how many times they can keep the ball going. One of the players, or the coach, is the alligator and moves up and down the alley with his racquet. When the alligator approaches, the players must stop the ball by covering it with their racquet until the alligator has gone, then they continue to rally. If the alligator captures a ball, the players must run to the basket, collect another ball and then start again. Try to ensure that players keep the ball out to the side and a little in front (contact point) and the 9 o'clock point on the racquet face is next to the ground.

Variations:

- Players must return to the ready position between shots
- Players use backhands only
- Players alternate between forehands and backhands

Tube Rally

Purpose: to develop racquet head control and contact to the side and in front with accuracy

Players are positioned 10-16' apart and start in the ready position. There is a ball tube or cone halfway between the two players. They do a floor rally along the ground, each trying to knock over the tube or hit the cone. After each shot, they must get back into ready position. Try to ensure that players keep the ball out to the side and a little in front (contact point) and the 9 o'clock point on the racquet face is next to the ground.

Variations:

- A third player stands between the players with her feet apart and the rallyers must hit through her legs. Swap with a player when they miss
- Use two cones to create a goal that players must rally through
- Players must use only forehands, only backhands or a combination of both

Pop It Up

Purpose: to develop racquet head control in a small group

Up and down ball flight only. Mark a small square approximately 3'x3'. Three to four players stand around the square and must take turns tapping the ball in the air, making sure it lands in the square. Count the number of continuous shots. When a mistake is made, start counting again from zero.

Variation:

- Players call out the name of the person who must hit the ball next



Mr. Net

Purpose: to develop a controlled rally over a short distance

Teams of four. Two players stand opposite each other and hold their racquets out at arm's length so that the ends touch and they form a net with their arms and racquets. The other two rally over this human net, counting each successful hit, until they make a mistake. Then they swap positions with the human net players. The new duo rallies keeping score from what the previous pair achieved. Each team tries to score more than the other teams performing the task.

Variation:

- Work in threes with one player being the net and three rotations
- Rather than working together in pairs, can play against each other



Rally Me

Purpose: to develop a controlled rally with various trajectories

In pairs, players must perform a rally of 10 strokes over as many different objects as possible in a given time. For example, rally over the net, over a racquet bag, over the alley, etc. Ask players to return to the ready position between shots.

Variations:

- Players can rally by throwing, or one hitter and one thrower
- List a number of different things that players must rally over in a number of weeks
- Vary the way in which players must rally - forehands, backhands, alternate shots



Back Home

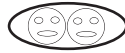
Purpose: to build a rally and include effective recovery

Place a cone or marker on the center of the baselines at each end. Players rally and must go back and touch the marker between each hit. Count the length of the rally.

Variations:

- One feeder and one hitter who must control the ball back to the feeder
- Play only crosscourt on a 60' court
- Play competitively on a small court

Rally Racers



Purpose: to develop a gradually longer and longer stroke shape

Players position a cone or marker 3 racquet lengths from the net on both sides of the net. Players must complete a 10 stroke rally with every shot landing between the net and the marker. They then move the marker back one racquet length each and rally again. The activity continues until players have completed a rally of 10 from behind the baseline. Encourage players to return to the ready position and recover between shots, and ask them to use only one ball to maintain focus.

Variations:

- Rally can be done by throwing only, or with one feeder and one hitter
- Use different strokes or combinations like alternate forehands and backhands

Quicksand



Purpose: to develop a rally from baseline to baseline using a full length stroke

Players rally, but must stay behind the baseline and not stand in the court (quicksand). Players have to start with a rally of 4 strokes. Then they take the ball and place it at the net. Then they collect another ball from the basket and must complete a rally of 5, placing it at the net. etc. Players must show a ready position and recovery between shots.

Variations:

- One player feeds and then must catch the ball the other hits. After 4 catches, change roles, then progress to 5 catches, etc.
- Players must rally using a set combination of shots
- Players rally on one of the court shapes already shown

Safecracker





Purpose: using shot combinations to rally

For this activity, you will need a set of cards each with a shot combination of 8-10 written on each in the following way FFBBFFBB (F=forehand, B=backhand). Players run to the card pile and pick a card. They take the card back to their partner and must rally using the shot sequence on the card. When they complete that sequence, they change the card. The first pair to complete a set number of cards wins.

Variations:

- Have a simple sequence for one player with one feeder from each pair, switch roles after each sequence
- Make the patterns simpler
- Change the distances from the net

Serving Activities






Tango Serving
 Purpose: to develop a longer service action

Players start close to the net and try to serve the ball over the net and in the service box. Each time they get in two in a row, they take a step back toward the baseline. Each time they miss two in a row, they take two steps forward. A second player should act as a returner at the other end of the court, either catching or returning each serve.

Variations:

- The serve can be underarm or overarm
- Players can be allowed three misses in a row before moving forward



In the Freezer
 Purpose: to direct service away from the opponent

Players set up to serve and return. The returner is not allowed to move his feet (they are in the freezer). The server needs to aim the serve away from the returner. The server gets 5 serves and earns a point for each serve in that the returner fails to get back into the court. After 5 serves, switch roles. Keep score.

Variations:

- The returner must stand on one leg, kneel or sit
- The server gets 2 serves for each point

Approach and Volley Activities

Switch Volleys
 Purpose: to develop a simple volley action

Only one player (the volleyer) has a racquet. There is a pile of 4 balls on each side of the net. The hitting player starts in a ready position near the net. The feeder must toss balls alternately to the hitter's forehand and backhand side, making sure that the hitter returns to ready position between shots. The feeder catches the returned volleys. When the feeder has caught the ball 5 times, s/he runs and puts that ball on the baseline, then returns and switches roles with the feeder. Continue until all 8 balls are on the baseline.

Variations:

- Allow the volleyer to hit only forehand or only backhand volleys
- Allow the feeder to catch the ball after the bounce
- Ask the feeder to catch the ball in a cone

4 Ball Approach



Purpose: to practice approach and volley

Players work on a simple pattern. Player 1 starts on the service line, drop hits an approach shot to Player 2 who is on the baseline. Player 2 hits the ball back for Player 1 to volley. Repeat the pattern four times, then players switch roles. Ensure that players understand and execute the split step at the correct time, as well as contacting the volley out in front.

Variations:

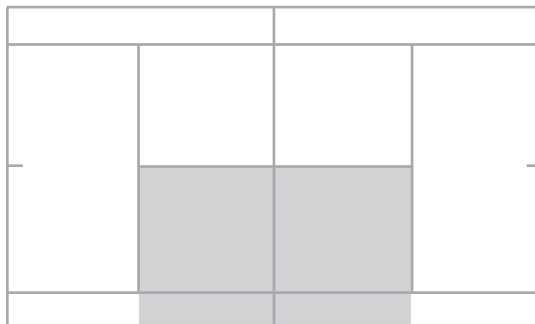
- Player 2 may feed each ball rather than hitting it back
- Use a 3 ball sequence that ends with Player 2 catching the ball after Player 1 volleys

COURT FOCUS ACTIVITIES

By changing the shape of the court and then doing partner and competitive activities, players can learn to deal with the court geography. These situations will create the opportunity to:

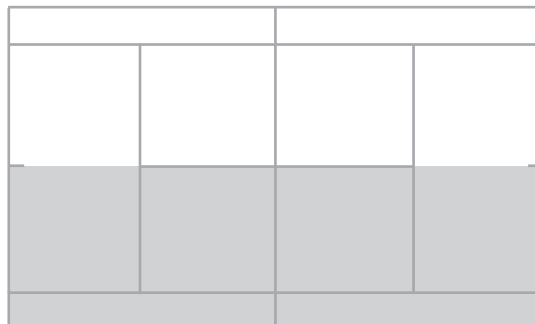
- highlight techniques that are required to play on each court shape
- develop tactical understanding in competitive situations
- create real accuracy and focus as players seek to direct the ball in different ways
- build simple patterns of play by hitting to court zones and then to the open court

Please note that the court shapes on the left should be applied to the court size indicated on the right.



Micro Court

Making the court very small can help players develop control, with a focus on contact point and a very short swing shape. This court shape is generally used for playing at a very early stage of rallying and still dealing with basic control of the ball.



Narrow Court

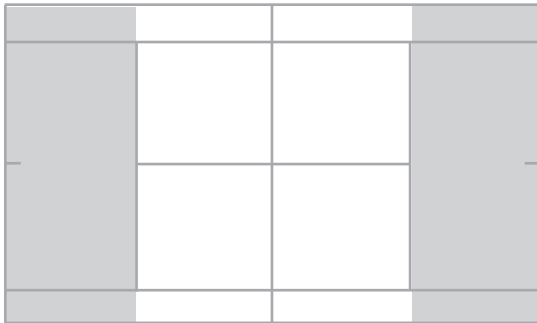
As the player's ability develops both in hitting and judging the ball, the court is made longer. The width stays narrow to promote swing length and accuracy. Don't forget to use it both on forehand and backhand.

The next set of court shapes is designed for the 60'/18m court, however the work on the court shapes above should be continued.



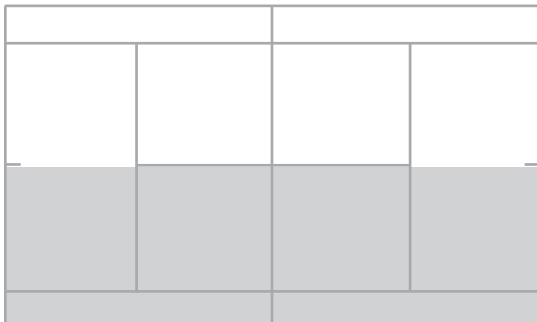
Cross Court

Once players have mastered down the line hitting, this shape promotes the need to use a more open hitting stance, develop a more angular swing shape, and receive the ball on the angle.



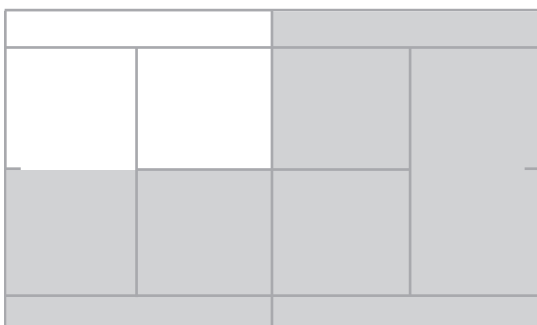
Deep Court

The deep court promotes the need to use a full swing, combination of forehands and backhands, recovery, sideways movement, and a consistent stroke.



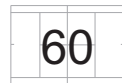
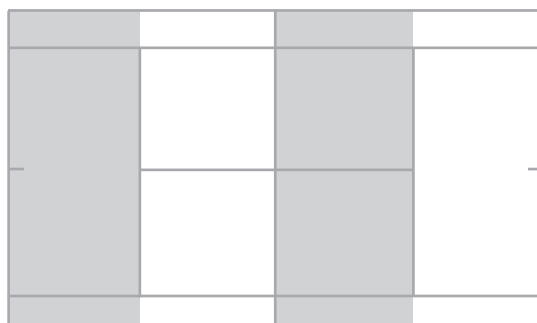
Narrow Court #2

A narrow court at this level can also be used to help players work on transitional play required to move from the baseline to the net.



Half Court vs. Full Court

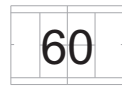
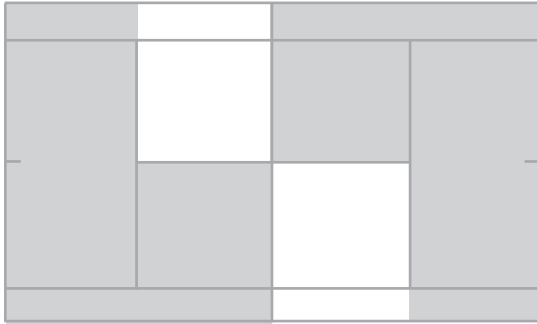
Players here are encouraged to perform one of two roles. Either to direct the ball consistently from the same place on the court to different areas of the court, or to direct the ball from different places back to the same place.



All Mixed Up

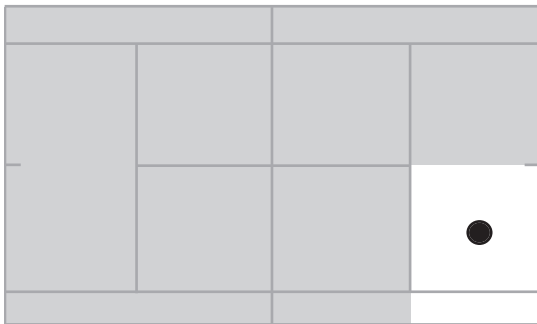
This court shape can be presented in different ways. The principle is to work on one skill from one end of the court while the other player works on another. This is a difficult task and requires players to change the characteristics of the ball.

The next set of shapes starts the process of working as an opponent.



L Court

Now that players are controlling the ball, other patterns of play can be introduced where only one quarter on each side is blocked. In this example, players are encouraged to keep the ball deep, but use the short angle with the forehand, assuming they are right handed. You will therefore need to ensure that players are starting to use topspin to make use of the angles.





The Black Hole

In moving from dealing with court geography to countering the opponent, players can create their own courts. In turn, each is allowed to block one quarter of the court based on either their or their opponent's weaknesses. Allow them to play on the full court for awhile before deciding which quarter to block.

These different activities help highlight the dimensions and areas of the court and will help players understand the angles of the court. Use them to build simple patterns of play by combining crosscourt and down the line zones and short and deep zones for example.

OPPONENT FOCUS ACTIVITIES

These activities focus on getting players to use their skills to move the opponent. They are presented in such a way as to encourage players to problem solve rather than being given direct instruction. Remember that your job in these situations is to ask players questions, to try to help them become more aware of what they and their opponents are doing.


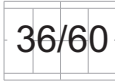



Tap Up Tennis

Once players have learned to do Taps Up with a Bounce, and have worked on this cooperatively with a partner, they can play this game. Choose an area on the court. This can be a service box, the alley, or even half the service box. In pairs, students play by tapping the ball up and allowing it to bounce in the area. The second player must reach the ball and tap it up again in the area without allowing it to bounce. The ball must always be hit upward and must stay in the area. If the ball is hit out, or the player allows it to bounce twice, then they lose the point. Players should learn to hit the ball where the opponent is not.

Variations:

- Can be players throwing and catching
- Change the shape and size of the court
- Play with one player throwing and catching and the other hitting with a racquet



Mr. Freeze

Purpose: to teach players about the need to recover

Play points. Starting with a groundstroke feed, one player must stand still after each shot they hit. The other may move as much as they wish. By using the right questions, players will understand why it is important to recover toward the center of the court.

Variation:

- Can be played on a 36' court as in Giant Ball Tennis (see next page).



No Volleys

Purpose: to teach players to understand how to move their opponent forward and backward

Play points. Starting with a groundstroke, feed one player who must allow every ball to bounce. By using questions, players will understand how to move their opponent and make them volley. Award 5 points if the opponent is made to volley and one for any other points won.

Variation:

- Play on half the court width to highlight the use of the space at the front and back of the court



No Backhands

Purpose: to teach players to move their opponents side to side

Play points. Starting with a groundstroke, feed one player who must only hit a forehand. By using questions, players will understand how to move their opponent from side to side and make them hit a backhand. Award 5 points if the opponent is made to hit a backhand and one for any other points won.

Variation:

- Play on half the court length to highlight the use of the spaces

Cliffhanger

Purpose: to teach players to move their opponent in a variety of different ways

Play points. Players must stay inside the boundaries of the singles court. If they lose the point by making a mistake, they lose 1 point, but if they step over the sideline or baseline, they lose 5 points. Players must learn that in order to make the opponent step over, they must make them run about the court and not only hit for the sidelines.

Variation:

- Only one player must stay inside the court boundaries.

STARTER GAMES OF TENNIS

The following activities can be changed to make them either competitive, as described, or cooperative as a rally activity. The purpose is to develop reception and handling skills. The size of the court should be kept small. All of these activities are most suitable for young players age 4-6 with very limited skills, but can also be used to focus better players.

Seesaw Tennis

Two players each have a cone on a small court, approximately the size of the service box. One player starts with the ball in their cone. She runs to the net and tips the ball over. The other player uses his cone to collect the ball and tip it back. The ball is allowed to bounce any number of times, as long as it does not roll along the ground. Progress this game to catching the ball in the cone after one bounce and throwing it back underarm. Keep the court size very small.

Variations:

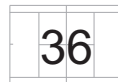
- Players take the ball out of the cone after the catch and throw it over
- Players are only allowed to let the ball bounce a maximum of two times

Giant Ball Tennis

Using a small soccer or basketball, students play tennis by throwing and catching the ball with two hands over the net. The usual rules of tennis apply. By using two hands, you can encourage rotation and getting sideways. Players learn to see spaces and can play over the net on a court with relatively little skill as they work on learning the game tactically.

Variations:

- Play with a smaller ball
- Allow players to throw it overarm if they catch it before it bounces

Splat

Using a small court, players hit the ball over the net, but instead of hitting the ball back, the opponent collects the ball after one bounce by trapping it on his racquet with his hand. Then he drops the ball, allows it to bounce before hitting it back over the net to continue the point.

Variations:

- One player catches and throws while the other traps the ball
- One player hits and the other traps
- Players trap the ball between two racquets then drop hit it back

For more information and more activities, visit www.evolve9.com

10. Compete

10.1 Game, Player, Coach

Competition among children has always been a keenly discussed topic. There may be people who argue that competition is damaging or makes players tough, but the reality is that the sport we teach is tennis and tennis is competitive. While there are many more extensive resources addressing this topic, we'll outline the main issues and provide some practical solutions.

Just as we have explored skills using a developmental approach, we can also look at a player's competitive journey using a similar approach, taking into account the demands of the game, the player's needs, both physical and emotional, the coach's and parent's behavior and role in the process.

We have to consider the immature outlook of a child and understand how competition will have a major impact on a child's enjoyment of the game.

GAME

As a sport, tennis has some unique features and challenges. At the top levels, tennis is a *fight at a distance*, it is gladiatorial and brutal, physically demanding and emotionally and tactically exhausting. It's a tough sport!

With young children, we need to match the level of these demands to their physical and emotional development.

To play the game, we have to introduce children in simple ways to:

- Scoring (tiebreak and game scoring are not the most straightforward to learn)
- Rules (like in and out, service order, where to stand)
- Winning and Losing Points

In Section 1, we discussed ways to include these in your coaching.

Tennis also has some mental challenges like:

- It's never over until it's over - you can be ahead and still lose
- There is no time limit
- There is no immediate way to tell how well you played - it's not like golf where your score is an indication of your performance irrespective of the result
- You win or lose, but often it is Best of 3
- You can win more points than your opponent and still lose - some points are more important than others

These are challenging concepts and need to be introduced gradually to children.

PLAYER

Players are at different stages of maturity and physical development. Some may be more confident, while others are more cautious. Boys and girls are different in the way they view competition, as are coaches and parents.

This section gives brief insight into what players need from competition. Don't forget that children at this age are still being shaped by those around them. The behavior of coaches and parents will impact a child's views, especially since they learn most of their fears and beliefs from adults in their world.

Jack Hutslar summed up what players need from competition in *PTR Munchkin Manual*:

- To be with friends/peers
- To experience success
- To be treated as a child (not a mini adult)
- To have their efforts/learning acknowledged
- Develop new skills (without fear of failure)
- Experience fun and enjoyment

To really understand a child's perspective, we need to consider the way in which they view competition with particular emphasis on *effort* and *ability*.

This is particularly important as young players generally cannot differentiate between effort and ability. As a consequence:

- They struggle to separate the result from their own performance or themselves.
- They believe that the result was entirely due to their own efforts or lack thereof.
- They feel that if they lose, it is their fault.
- They believe that if they lost today and try harder next time, they will win.
- They are likely to get very happy or very upset by a result.
- They may get upset when the opponent hits a great shot.

Statements like, "It's not fair; he was too good" and "Next time I'll try harder and win" are not uncommon. Listening to what children say when they speak about competition gives you a fair view of how they see it.

We are not advocating that children not compete. Rather, when we put the competition wheels in motion, we need to consider how children will view the experience and the outcome.

COACH

Managing Competition

It is important to consider the child and the game when we structure competition. The main considerations are:

- **Duration** - shorter matches fit physical needs and mean less emotional commitment to the result
- **Location** - starting in the club, which is familiar and supportive, will help players feel good about competing. Later move to more serious competitions.
- **Format** - team formats help players socialize and place less emphasis on the individual
- **Outcome and Rewards** - rewarding winning is important, but it is also important to reward skills development and social factors

Duration

There are two factors when looking at duration.

- Overall event duration
- Individual match duration

Both of these get longer as the child gets older and more confident, but some standard durations recommended by national governing bodies are:

- Event 1.5 to 2 hours at age 5-7 - matches over 1 tiebreak (7 to 11 minutes)
- Event 2.5 to 3 hours at age 7-9 - matches over Best of 3 tiebreaks (20 minutes)
- Event 3 to 4 hours at age 8-10 - matches 2 short sets to 4 then a tiebreak 3rd set decider (30 minutes)

This pathway will help players gradually get used to playing longer matches and start to include concepts like Best of 3, and move from tiebreaks to game scoring.

It's worth noting that shorter matches are possible (with some of the activities suggested in this section) to help players really have fun with competition. If a child loses a very short match, but is quickly playing another, she doesn't have time to dwell on the result. It makes competition the positive, fun experience it should be.

Location

Location is not a complicated issue. Think of it as geography with the club at the center of the circle. This is a familiar environment and should be where players feel comfortable and happy. They will regard regular low key competitions at the club as playing rather than competing, as long as factors like parents and prizes are not allowed to turn a small two hour event into something it is not. It's your job to control this and make the message loud and clear.

Remember, at the center of the circle are club based team events. As players become more confident and compete more regularly, the distance traveled can increase slowly. Finally, players move to more singles events. Make it a simple, gradual pathway and you'll find a lot more children enjoying competition.

Format

In 10.2 Activities, we will introduce a number of simple formats for running team competitions. Teams are the way to go at this young age. Not only do children prefer them, but they are likely to retain more players for your program.

Team competitions have a number of benefits:

- They reduce the focus on one child and his results, but still allow him to be recognized, providing a wider focus for parents and coaches.
- They do not impact the self worth of the child, which may not be judged on team results.
- They develop social interaction (friendships), team support and belonging.
- They help defocus the outcome of the match by focusing on collective winning and losing.
- They help provide more energy through larger groups of players.

The key things that define a team competition over an individual one:

- There is more than one player competing
- The score is the sum total of all the points from the players.

Most competitions that have traditionally been run as individual events can be run as team events.

Remember that all the way through this supplement, we have been building a gradual orientation toward competition by advocating a pathway that includes:

- Starting with individual tasks. Can you do it? Can you beat your last score?
- Cooperative and skill based tasks. Can you work together to do more than other pairs?
- Competitive tasks. Can you beat your opponent?

When relating these to young children they are cumulative, so don't stop doing individual and cooperative skills just because your players are now competing. Maintaining a focus on continual skill improvement is essential.

Dealing with Outcome

What deserves reward or praise? These are inherent in most team sports and help children understand skill and social development as well as winning and losing. Ideas for club based junior event rewards:

- Tour Pro Award - for regular participation and commitment
- NGU, Never Give Up Award - for effort and determination
- Pro's Pro Award - for sportsmanship and fair play
- Most Improved or Hot Shot Award - for performance or improvement
- Little Pro or MVP - for team work or being organized and prepared

By age 7 or 8, children can easily distinguish between a real prize and one that has been given only to give every player something. While it's fine to give younger children (age 5 or 6) some of the fun prizes, after that age, you want to encourage a climate of genuine rewards for winning events.

At the end of every event, try to give awards with equal enthusiasm and ceremony. At this age, a child who is committed to improving is far more likely to keep playing than one who is only interested in winning. You want to send a strong message to your players and their parents that all these things are important to the ethos of your program.

Summary

Young children need competition that:

- gradually introduces rules and scoring systems.
- meets their physical needs in terms of duration.
- starts at a very local (club) level and gets wider as players get more confident and competent.
- provides guidelines for players, coaches and parents.
- rewards and focuses on skills and performance, as well as outcome and key life skills.
- emphasizes social interaction.
- provides close and exciting matches.
- provides the opportunity for as many players as possible to play.

Young children need good coaches who:

- focus more on improvement than results.
- understand the emotional needs of children at different ages and stages.
- create a fun and exciting atmosphere in which to learn.

10.2 Activities

The activities included are team based and include ideas for formats, durations and numbers. They are all for club based competition. These activities get progressively more challenging and include:

- Skill based competition - How many can you get?
- Team based - playing against others on a team
- Performance focused - working on skills within a match
- Dealing with winning and losing alone.

The following are only a few ideas, you can take elements of format, scoring and themes and mix them to make your own events.

Little Olympics

36

Divide the group into pairs. Each pair must choose a country to represent, but not the country you are in. A circuit of activities is laid out around the court and each pair has 2-5 minutes on each skill station. After completing each station, they go to the coach or scoreboard and have the number of times they performed the skill recorded. Then they go to the next station. Some ideas for young players:

- Hockey Tennis Rally
- Balance a ball on the string bed as they run up to the net and back (take turns)
- Throw into a bucket or hoop (take turns with partner)
- Bounce a ball back and forth with partner

Any activities can be used, but the best are those that have already been introduced in lessons.

Scoring: 1 point for each time the task is performed successfully. Can be recorded as a pair or pairs can be placed into teams and the scores can be added together.

Super Team Shootout

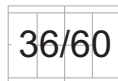


Divide the court into 6' x 36' courts. Players are divided into two teams. If possible, have a different number of players on each team. This allows the line up system to sort the order of play. Each team lines up at the net post. When they reach the front of the line, players go on to a court and play someone from the other team. At the end of the match, they report the score to the coach and return to the end of the line. When they reach the front of the line, they play again. Team with the most wins at the end of the event wins.

Scoring: Short tiebreaks to 4 points

Note: This activity can handle a large number of players due to the quick matches.

Tag Team Tennis



Tag Team Tennis is played using a round robin doubles format. Each team of 2 or 3 players competes against another team in round 1. Players play their opponent for 2 points (kids can add by 2's), then switch with the waiting player and the match continues. After the next 2 points, players switch again. Keep switching every 2 points until the end of the tiebreak, then switch places so that in the 2nd and 3rd tiebreaks, players have a different opponent. If using the 2 player per team option, spin a coin to see who plays whom in the 3rd tiebreak.

Scoring: Best of 3 tiebreaks

Mission Possible



Players play an event in a round robin format. Each player is given a secret mission (task) written on a piece of paper in an envelope and a number of points for each time she performs the task during a match. As you pass her the envelope, tell her, "Your mission should you choose to accept it is . . ."

Each mission is specific to the player and based on her level of skill and how many times the coach thinks she can perform it. Therefore, if the player's mission is to volley more, she earns points for each volley.

Scoring: Players get a point for winning a match. They also earn a point for each time they accomplish their mission. Special prizes can be awarded for players who earn the most mission points.

Stick or Swap



All players are dealt a playing card. They must not show their card to anyone. All players' names are placed in a bag. Players draw an opponent from the names in the bag and play a timed match for 10 minutes using tiebreak scoring. After 10 minutes, the coach blows a whistle and the winner can choose to stick with the card they have or swap with the losing player. The aim is to get the highest value card. Players then return to the organizing area, draw another opponent and play again.

Scoring: Timed using tiebreak scoring. Matches finishing even (tied) play a sudden death point.

11. Structuring Lessons

Basic lesson structure will depend on your coaching philosophy, but keep in mind the importance of teaching good fundamental movement and reception skills. This means that you will need to consider how to integrate them into your lessons. Also consider ideal durations for sessions.

Age 4-5 = 30-45 minutes

Age 6-9 = 60 minutes

Age 10+ = 60-90 minutes

Think of the structure as:

- Warm Up, including movement and coordination
- Revision and Repetition, lessons need to be woven together to work with previous lessons
- Main Content, including technical and tactical work
- The Game, some version of tennis, which may be very limited, but will bring players back to the main concepts of the game.

To do this well, think about what you are trying to achieve. This will involve developing all of the key skills: Move, See, Hit, Play and Compete. Let's look at each stage of the lesson and think about how we can develop these skills.

Warm Up

First remember why we warm up.

- Warm up and stretch the muscles to prevent injury.
- Prepare the body for competition.
- Raise the heart rate.

All fairly standard and all valid to a point, but a warm up can serve very different purposes with young players and the following should be considered.

Environment

- to energize children who may be lethargic
- to calm children who may be over excited at the start
- to get them focused and teach them to concentrate

Habit Forming

- to get children used to physical activity at the start of the session for later in life

Skill Building and Teaching

- develop fundamental movement skills
- develop coordination
- develop and improve reception skills
- work on speed and reaction activities

The warm up is one of the most important parts of the lesson, for the following reasons:

- children learn more at the start of a lesson when they are fresh
- the coach sets the climate for the entire lesson
- the skills worked on at this stage (Move, See) form the foundation of the child's ability to learn the skills of the sport.

Revision and Repetition

Variety may be the spice of life, but ask a child and s/he may want to play a game that s/he knows and loves. As coaches, we often live under the misunderstanding that children need to do lots of different things, so we add loads of new things, and are always searching for new games and activities.

The reality is that children have short attention spans - even an adult's limit for effective learning is about 20 minutes - but that doesn't mean that we have to use different activities each week. Just remember to chunk activities, and even be prepared to leave an activity and revisit it within the same lesson.

Main Content

Here you have to deliver your technical and tactical teaching. Remember, the two are interlinked and that one of a child's favorite words is *why*. Make sure you tell them *why* they are doing a task.

The chances are you'll be teaching Hit and Play at this point, but don't forget that you can also work on:

- **Move** You may want to include a motion circuit with your technical teaching here. You'll find some activities in Section 6.2 that are suitable for use with small lines to help you work individually on technique for a few shots with a player, then send them through a circuit of movements before returning to do some more technical work. This is not only a great way of keeping all players involved, but also a really good way of using chunks of activity to help players learn more effectively.
- **See** Reception work can be done with a racquet in hand too. It's not all about throwing and catching.

So, again here, we have to integrate Move, See, Hit and Play.

Before leaving this part of the lesson, it's worth reiterating that children learn best in chunks, and therefore it's better to spend short blocks of time on different topics, some new and some repeated from previous weeks, rather than sticking to one topic for the whole session. The trick here is to stay focused on where each topic fits into the big picture, and not let the session dissolve into a random set of activities with no purpose or direction.

The Game

Here, the focus should be on Play and Compete, depending upon the player's age, level and confidence. It's about putting the skills worked on back into the game of tennis, even if in a very limited way, but with some idea of:

- creating a rally.
- directing strokes and shots.
- getting players to play and problem solve.
- getting players to compete and learn the game.

Purpose is everything, and if the players and parents cannot see where tennis lessons are going, we stand little chance of hooking young players into our sport for life!

Rule #1

The role of the coach is to accelerate learning

You have to create the climate and really teach. What do we mean by this? To teach is not just to give instruction, but also to compare the performance of the player and provide feedback. Anyone can say, "Turn early, turn early!", but does it make your player do it? When they do it, how do you keep them doing it and make them do it better?

Rule #2

You must know the destination and the map

For every program or set of lessons, you should write down what you are trying to achieve with your players. Be very specific, and if you are confident that you will achieve it, share it with the players and parents. For every task you do during that set of lessons, you must ask yourself if it fits into the plan and goals you established. If it doesn't, don't do it.

If you don't do this, it's like driving around looking for a house without a map. You have a vague idea where you are trying to go, but you'll get lost along the way. If you have a map, you'll get there quicker, and you'll be following Rule #1.

12. Summary

Teaching this age group presents some unique challenges. As a coach of young players, you have a huge responsibility.

This stage of a player's development can be equated to building the foundation of a house. Without great foundations, your players will not optimize their potential. You are building in a specific order, and if you don't get it right, it will be very difficult to go back and put something right at a later stage.

Teaching this age group is not a role that will ever bring you glory, or probably even much respect, except from the children you teach. If any of your players go on to make it in the pro ranks, no one will thank you for your input. You won't see your name in the media, but that isn't why we do it. Is it?

It takes a special kind of coach with a special set of skills to teach children well. You need to inspire, teach and entertain. The art is to do them all at the same time.

You need to do what is best for the players, ignoring short term results and focusing on the skills that will serve the player in the long term. At the same time, you have to get them to play quickly, to motivate them to stay in the game and work to improve their skills.

You need to ask yourself often if the child is ready to learn what you want to teach them or if there are prerequisite skills that should be developed first. Ask yourself if the way you teach suits the way in which they learn. You can't ignore their physiological growth and development and you must understand how this might limit their ability to learn, or the rate at which they learn.

You need to teach them to play the game and deal with the many skills we take for granted when teaching older juniors and adults. This supplement categorized these skills as Move, See, Hit, Play, Compete, but there are many crossovers between these sections, as there will be when you implement them on the court.

Think of how top players move. Consider how body control, coordination and reception skills work together toward the development of technique. And remember that technique only exists to make tactics happen. Getting competition wrong at this age can mean that players are lost to the game for life, but not having competition is likely to mean they'll choose other activities. You have to walk a fine line.

The technological strides in equipment and a greater understanding of what is possible have meant that *playing tennis* has become a reality for young children. No longer does it have to be racquet and ball skills only. The work of notable experts like Bompas and Bali, and the subsequent work of many people to bring this information into tennis, has given us a better understanding that players need to learn so much more than just hitting a ball.

Finally, remember, the activities just provide the structure and that it is your job to *teach*.

Other supplements:

Successful Doubles
by Pete Collins

Two-Handed Backhand
by Dennis Van der Meer

Instructing Wheelchair Tennis
by Dennis Van der Meer, Rich Berman, Nancy Olson & Bill Trubey

Backboard Drills for Individuals & Groups
by Mike Bachicha & Dennis Van der Meer

PTR Drill Exchange

Professional's Assistant

Teaching Advanced Groundstrokes
by Michael Christmass & Bruce Elliott

Teaching Advanced Net Play
by Michael Christmass & Bruce Elliott

Teaching Advanced Serve & Return
by Michael Christmass & Bruce Elliott

Books, manuals, supplements and instructional videos
are available through PTR International Headquarters



Professional Tennis Registry

PO Box 4739, Hilton Head Island, SC 29938 USA

843-785-7244 or 800-421-6289

fax: 843-686-2033

ptr@ptrtennis.org • www.ptrtennis.org