



The Age of “Why”?

By Mark McClements

What is the most frequently asked question by children? In particular what difficult questions do children pose and expect immediate answers to? A quick Google search identifies life questions such as “is God real?” and “what is infinity?” However when considering questions posed in a football context many coaches are often exasperated by the same question week in week out, irrespective of what a great session they have planned or delivered, “when are we going to play a game?”

This question is completely understandable; children want to play and be involved in the game. They watch it on TV, play with their mates and spend every waking moment waiting for the next opportunity to get the ball out. The game excites and challenges whilst providing them with the opportunity to emulate their heroes. It offers the chance of glorious victory and the dreams of what could one day be. This is particularly true working with the 5-11 age groups who often are defined by their enthusiasm and where dreams still have the potential to be realised.

So should you feel aggrieved if they ask for a game during your training session? Should we not view children asking questions as a positive sign that they are choosing to voice their thoughts on their learning and how it should be achieved? Coaches may need to analyse the question further and decide if they do want to play a game or if actually it means they don't really like what they are currently doing, or don't see its relevance to the real game?

If this is the case then as coaches we are falling short of our responsibilities. Our role as coaches working within this 'golden age' of learning is to provide the right type of activities and experiences

(those that resemble the game and enthuse the participants) so they can start to ask the right questions to develop their understanding and abilities and discover a better way of playing. Important to note is that the coach is there to provide the right types of practice and not necessarily to provide the right answers. If the practice design is correct the coach's role as a facilitator will come to the fore and their own questioning skills will be key as they seek to check their players learning and understanding.

At this age and beyond questions are powerful tools in development. They are a cornerstone in all Four Corners of the Player Development Model in promoting learning and growth in an individual, on the field of play or as a responsible citizen of society. Questions will allow children to make sense of the world and help them to problem solve and achieve new heights. It is at this early age we should encourage questions and never stifle a child's mind as they start to formulate their own thoughts on how and why to play in a certain way.

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A further responsibility in fact is to assist in developing a child's ability to question so we can tap into the age of 'why' and their thirst for knowledge; (“Why can't I pass it this way? “Why can't I dribble with it here?” “Why can't I do it like this?”) in doing so we will promote a strong foundation that will benefit their future learning experiences. Scruton (1999) states that as humans our first thought is not 'What next?' but 'Why?' and by answering the second of these questions we can answer the first. Children starting out on their football journey face many new experiences each time they play, if they can develop the ability to question 'why' and gain a variety of playing experiences surely it would be an advantage to possibly know what was coming next as soon as they recognised a certain situation?

As a child develops in age and maturity and gains a 'memory bank' of football experiences the ability to question the coach, their peers and their own decisions will help develop further creativity. If they have developed the ability to evaluate what just happened compared to a similar playing experience, what could be done to improve and what is required to make these improvements it will lead to new ways to overcome problems posed and hopefully a higher quality of practice – the child will have taken ownership on how best to move forward and the greatest learning will have taken place.

Thus the coach needs to plan and create a session that is similar to the game (competitive, fun, scoring system etc) whilst still being appropriate to a child's abilities and experiences. It needs to inspire multiple questions about how, what, when and why to perform in certain ways and for the ability to do this to be developed. Also to be promoted is the need to elicit answers from each other's peers as well as guidance from the coach and try out as many different responses as possible

to help expand the 'memory bank' of playing experiences and evaluate success. If during these early years and beyond players experience this type of session and analysis on a regular occasion they may then start to demonstrate a higher level of thinking and the question will not be "when are we going to play a game?" but "how will you help me to be better today?" and this might just lead to more of those childhood dreams becoming a reality

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