

Cognitive and emotional characteristics of tennis players in the discovery stage (4 to 6 years old)

Lucía Jiménez

Global Tennis Team, Spain.

ABSTRACT

The imprint that the coach leaves on a child in their first interactions with the racquet is crucial and determinant in how the child will experience the sport in later stages. Through this article we will expose the cognitive and emotional characteristics that we consider that the coach should know to contribute to a full tennis, social and emotional development of their students. All of them accompanied by suggestions for application to the court sessions.

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Corresponding author: Lucía Jiménez. Email: luciajalmendros@gmail.com

INTRODUCTION

Different former professional tennis players have shown the importance that the first coaches had in their sporting careers (e.g., Court and Laver), how they transmitted them with their example a way of living sport, competition, life... This deep imprint is sometimes overlooked, or even underestimated the importance of the child's experience at such a young age, reducing the objectives of this stage to acquire basic technical notions and "having a good time". However, being fun and enjoyment, different things by the way, priority objectives at this age, the breadth of enriching experiences and learning can be very broad, and this depends on the training and resources at the psychological and emotional level of the coach.

While the stages of initiation (10 years and older), improvement, competition... are well documented at a psychological level (e.g. Crespo, 2010; Samulski, 2006; Young, 2015), this, the Discovery stage is sometimes a mystery of which, as experienced coaches, we sense characteristics of the children, and yet, we do not know more specific aspects of their evolution, which can lead to approaches too advanced (or too little advanced!) for their age.

"The most important period in life is not college, but the first of all; from birth to the age of six." Maria Montessori.

A field of reference from which to nourish oneself to acquire training at an early age is that of Education, and in recent years educational trends have gained great recognition which, although they have been fully developed in different countries since the beginning of the 20th century -and sometimes earlier-, it is in recent years when they are experiencing greater prominence. We refer to the respectful pedagogies implemented in Active Schools whose line of intervention is based on positive discipline and respect for the evolutionary stages of the child, such as Waldorf Pedagogy, Montessori, Reggio Emilia, Pikler... These pedagogies, together with



the new discoveries of neuroscience and the experimental research of psychologists and teachers of education pioneers in their field (e. g. Piaget, 2001), provide characteristics and modes of intervention that are useful in order to apply them in mini-tennis classes.

COGNITIVE AND EMOTIONAL CHARACTERISTICS FROM 4 TO 6 YEARS OLD:

This is the emotional stage par excellence, a key moment for experimentation and sensory development. At this stage they learn to name emotions and to know their own processes. They want to learn by doing if possible by themselves, exploring the environment through their senses. Thus, environmental learning and stimulation (not overstimulation) are crucial (Bilbao, 2015; Montessori, 1915/2014; Ostroski, 2016; Siegel & Payne, 2012; Steiner, 1924). This means that from birth, the child is exploring the world, moving from a closer contact with his mother, to a more social interaction. From the age of 3-4 years, the child begins to interact more with peers as well as with adults other than parents. This openness to the

world is complementary to the fact that they spend a great deal of time playing with themselves and often do not feel like sharing games or material. This information is fundamental because knowing that it is part of their development leads us not to force acts that do not correspond to their age, since in many cases it is a matter of projections of the adult on the child ("e.g.: You must always share all your toys!"). Remember, the best example is action, as we behave with them and talk to them, so we will generate certain dynamics and ways of acting that they will absorb and eventually reproduce. This leads us to another important characteristic, their interest in imitating and their great capacity to learn by observation. Finally, highlighting the evolution in their emotional and cognitive world given the great development of language that has taken place by then, the child is able to name emotions, understand them, contextualize them and, fundamentally, experience them (UOC, 2021).

Note: We cannot reduce the evolution of the little ones to marked and static ages because each child has a particular rhythm, so we will take as a reference these characteristics that, we insist, can be given before or after in time.

LIMITS AND NORMALITY

A characteristic from the earliest years is the constant search for limits by children and adolescents. They ask, through their actions, to be told or tested how far they can go. A tennis lesson is a space of coexistence in which to harmonize moods, desires and rules within a given time. In this sense, limits and certain rules - few and clear - are important, as they save time and energy. In line with positive discipline, being kind and firm. Their participation in the establishment of certain rules is, in turn, fundamental, as they begin to develop a common vision, which looks out for the good of the whole.

On the other hand, what we understand as normality and what we take for granted is not so clear in early ages. If you want greeting, asking how you are, picking up, listening, empathizing, accepting and/or persisting for a goal, to be a natural part of your players, create that seed in your classes, now is the time.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

"Don't worry if your students don't listen to you, they are watching you all the time". modified by M^a Teresa of Calcutta

- Open and close the sessions with a ritual (and name it!): A fun way to establish the phases of a session (warm-up, main part, cool down) is through rituals that define the transition from one phase to another, the beginning and the end of a class are good times for children to learn to be in contact with their body, their sensations, how to relax, activate ... in addition to creating spaces for interaction with turns of speech or action, which give rise to basic social dynamics that will generate an inertia for later stages. Remember that it is now when the "normal" is established, and the "normal" is not stipulated externally, you create it in your sessions through the dynamics that you carry out.
- Make circles when communicating: It's an organized and equitable way of interacting that leaves an imprint on the subconscious (everyone at the same distance, everyone equally important).



- Go to where they are: Avoid shouting or raising your voice, for your sake and theirs.
- Bend down and look them in the eyes: It is a basic form of respectful communication, show them with your example the importance of eye contact and feeling listened to. It is one of the fundamental differences between contact with human beings or mobiles/computers.
- Communicate/make your request in a calm and collected tone. Remember that you are their best example.
- Establish, if they are comfortable, a gentle contact, a gesture of complicity (a ritual "bump", a hand on the shoulder showing appreciation...).
- Give them time to finish what they are doing with dedication. These are their real learning moments.
- Use practical, visual examples. Remember that they learn primarily by observation, not by word of mouth.
- Recognize their achievements: At this age they already perceive themselves as "capable or not" of achieving what they set out to do; let's try not to condition them with our preconceived ideas or limitations, let's build a mentality of confidence and openness to experimentation, beyond the result.
- Involve the family. Tennis is a collective sport that is practiced individually. If you involve the family in your philosophy of tennis, how they can give it continuity from home... learning will increase exponentially.
- Reach out your hand and invite action.

A space for reflection

Having read some basic characteristics of children of this age, you can reflect on the following:

- What could I do in my classes that I haven't tried yet?
- Have I left out, forgotten, omitted... any important ideas?
- How could I improve my classes to make them even more complete or creative?
- How would I like to be remembered? And to remember your first years in tennis?

CONCLUSIONS

We are in the stage in which the first contact of boys and girls in a tennis class takes place, what happens here and now will leave a mark that will influence the rest of their years in the sport. It is a very special and beautiful moment in their development, their creativity is sky high, and they are full of energy. To plan fun, enriching sessions, open to social interaction and experimentation, welcoming all the emotional range that invades them is a challenge that the coach can enjoy enormously, it is a matter of organization, training, and illusion.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST AND FUNDING

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