



Principles of adult learning.

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ABSTRACT

The recent launch of the ITF Tennis Xpress programme for adults requires us to consider and perhaps even review the way in which we teach adults to play tennis. In doing so, we must balance the reasons why adults play tennis with the achievement of personal goals, whilst at the same time recognising that they are different to children, and helping them to play and love the game.

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INTRODUCTION

Even though we are adults ourselves (and therefore we surely should understand adults better than anyone!), we often struggle to succeed in our adult coaching in the same way we do with children. How are adults different and what does that mean for the way we coach them?

We know that:

- Learning is about a permanent change in behaviour (Delaigue, 2007).
- Learning a technique is about learning an action, but learning a skill is about how to apply the technique at the right time in the right way.
- People learn in different ways.
- Teaching doesn't guarantee learning!

When teaching adults:

- Learning should be active, not passive. In other words, the way to learn tennis is to play tennis, and not just to hear the coach talking about it!

TIP: Adults need to hit lots of balls to learn to play the game, so make sure that a large amount of the instruction is given individually whilst adults are playing.

- Learning is individual and personal (Rogers, 1996). One player might want to learn to serve, while another wants a better forehand. When the subject is of little interest or personal relevance to the player, the player is less likely to learn! This is

easier to do with smaller groups, so think about coach; player ratios to improve the learning environment.



TIP: individualise your coaching so that everyone leaves every lesson having worked on a personal goal or teaching point related to your group objective for the lesson.

- Learning is voluntary, not compulsory. I bet that at school you were probably best at the subjects which most interested you, or where the teacher made the subject interesting? Adults choose to come to tennis and choose to walk away from your programme if it does not interest them or meet their expectations.

TIP: People like choice and not everyone wants coaching. Offers coaching as one of a range of different options. Organised play, Tennis Xpress, team training, Cardio Tennis and competition are also important aspects of an adult programme (ITF, 2009)-

CHARACTERISTICS OF ADULT LEARNERS

Adults and children are very different in almost every respect, so we need a different approach to coaching. We know that adult learners:

- Are over 18 (although some tennis programmes start at 16).
- Are continuing a process of personal development, rather than being at the beginning of the process.
- Come with a package of experiences and values, both good and bad.
- Often have expectations and pre-conceptions about the learning process.
- Have competing interests.
- Already have their own set patterns of learning.
- Adults are not on the same upward developmental curve as children. As we get older, we tend to slow down, put on weight and become less mobile!

Now let's look at some of these in more detail. As you read through them, ask yourself how these characteristics vary from what you know about teaching children.

Adults are continuing a process of personal development (Starr, 2003).

- Many, though not all, adults have been through formal education and have learnt through continuing experiences in life and in work.
- Many (but not all) have set ideas about what they like, what they want to do, and even how they want to do it.
- It is important for the coach to discuss goals and objectives with the player, to establish motives, intentions and possible outcomes.
- Fundamental to this is why the adults are there in the first place, and whether they are looking for game improvement, exercise and fitness, competition or a social environment.
- Coaches should help players achieve their personal goals

Adults come with a package of experiences and values (Starr, 2003).

- Some of these experiences may come from sport, and others from outside sport. Some experiences may be positive and some may be negative. Take two typical scenarios:

1. School lapsers – those who played at school or college, and then stopped playing to pursue a career or to start a family. Such players may be apprehensive because they have not played for so long.



2. Expectation of a teaching style – the way we were taught as children has a significant effect on the way we expect to learn as adults. Given that tennis has traditionally been taught from a very technical perspective, this is what many adults will expect, but not necessarily what is best for them.

Expectations – “if I pay for coaching, I expect to improve!”

- They expect (quite rightly!) to play – it is up to the coach to ensure that groups are of sufficiently small numbers to allow everyone to play. Many adults will pay more for a smaller group if they know it will offer them more individual attention and a better learning environment.
- They expect (quite rightly!) to learn, although many do not know what exactly. They will reasonably assume that they will become better tennis players.

Adults have competing interests.

- We know that many adults are busy with work and children.
- Some may play other sports which complement or contradict what they will learn when playing tennis. Just think about teaching a squash player a topspin backhand or teaching a footballer to back away from the bounce of the ball!

Adults already have their own set patterns of learning.

- The job of the coach is to recognise this where possible, and to adapt the teaching approach to suit the learning style of the student.

As adults get older, they tend to slow down, put on weight and be- come less mobile (Rogers, 1996)!

- Slower balls and smaller courts can help older adults and those who are less mobile to play tennis in a less demanding environment.

ADULT LEARNING AND CHILD LEARNING

Whilst adults may occasionally enjoy behaving like big kids, they are actually adults. This means that they:

- Learn differently
- Move differently
- Think differently
- Act differently

So we need to coach differently! Compared to children:

Adults are more intrinsically motivated.

- Parents tend to organise and pay for children's activities, so they often end up having a key role in deciding which sports a child will play. A significant element of the motivation of a child's learning will therefore be imposed and extrinsic.
- Adults are more likely to decide which activities they participate in, when, where and how often, on the basis of an interest in, and an enjoyment derived from, their own participation.
- These factors are significant in shaping the relationship between the coach and the player and the approach that the player takes to their own learning.
- TIP: Choice is important, but it must also fit with lifestyle, jobs and family. Try to offer flexibility in the adult programme where possible.

Adults have greater experience (Bothorel, 2000).

- Adults have life experience, but don't assume that experience in tennis is proportionate to age; it depends how long the player has been playing. It is possible that a 10-year old child has more tennis experience than a 45-year old man!
- This experience could be physical experience (how long has the player played the game? who with? at what level?). Greater

experience of older players may mean that adult learners are better able to pace themselves, displaying greater patience and understanding that learning may take time.

- Learning experience (has that player been taught? if so how? is the player self-taught?)

TIP: use analogies and examples for their experience. Use examples from a squash court to teach slice, or from badminton to teach a serve.

Adults are more patient.

- Older athletes often display greater patience than do younger ones. They know that learning takes time, and they are more patient in achieving their goals.
- Adults are often more interested in detail. They like to understand what they are learning, so take a little more time to explain things.

TIP: encourage adults to set longer term goals for themselves. If you think about it, it happens in other areas of life, for example with career ambitions, quitting smoking or fitness regimes.

Adults communicate better (Bothorel, 2000).

- Better communication helps feedback. Encourage adults to feedback and discuss their own progress.
- It is often to easier to discuss strategies, goals and a more individualised approach as a result.
- Consequently, a more democratic approach can be taken with adults

TIP: remember that you are teaching a game, and that technical improvement will be limited with many adults. Work on tactics and strategies, and link technical information to those areas.

CONCLUSION

Next time you are on court, think about how you vary your coaching in recognition of the difference between adults and children. It is vital you take into account these differences in order to be a more efficient and better coach. In turn, this will allow the player to enjoy the sport more and also improve as a player.

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