Teaching Tennis to Deaf Children: A Review of an Australian-based Program.

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ABSTRACT
This article reviews a coaching program that was conducted with a group of Australian deaf children. The program is described and practical implications for coaches highlighted. The article concludes that the fundamental principles for successfully coaching deaf children - thorough planning and preparation, effective communication, making it fun, ability to adapt and cater for all abilities and patience and empathy - are consistent with general coaching principles.

INTRODUCTION
In hindsight, it was a unique and most rewarding experience for all participants. At the time, however, we wondered about the task ahead of us and our abilities to successfully teach tennis to a group of deaf children. In this article we share our experience, detail aspects of the program and its participants and highlight some of the effective strategies we adopted. In doing so, it is hoped that our experience will assist in breaking down barriers or concerns a coach may have about working with deaf children.

THE PROGRAM

Background
To further expand its Adapted Physical Education program, Victoria University (Footscray Park campus, Melbourne, Australia) sought a community group which had had little exposure to, or opportunity to play, tennis. Discussions with community partners revealed a local school for deaf children might welcome such an opportunity. Subsequent discussions were conducted with the school principal who supported the proposed program with open arms!

Participants
Eighteen Victoria University third-year Physical Education students enrolled in a 12-week adapted coaching unit to teach tennis to a group of eighteen deaf children. To prepare for the coaching sessions, the Victoria University students completed an Orientation to Tennis Coaching certification with Tennis Victoria and attended a series of 12 lectures on a range of topics relating to coaching persons with a physical and/or intellectual disability.

The deaf children (5 boys and 13 girls) in the tennis program were aged between 9 and 13 years. These children had had little, or no, tennis playing background prior to the introduction of the tennis program.

A brief background as to each child’s hearing loss, and any other, disability was provided by the school. While all children could access sign language (Auslan), a few had residual hearing and could access spoken language.

A school class teacher attended the weekly tennis sessions. She was available to interpret for the group if, and when, required as well as answer any queries about the school and its students.

Location and Facilities
The program was conducted at a School for Deaf Children that is located in an outer suburb of Melbourne, Victoria, Australia. Although the school only has one multi-use court and adjoining brick wall, it has considerable open grassed spaces and an indoor gymnasium and dance studio.
To best utilise the available space, portable tennis nets were placed across the multi-use court and over adjoining grassed areas. The indoor gymnasium was a welcome haven when outdoor temperatures reached over 40 degrees Celsius and the dance studio provided an interesting opportunity to work on some tennis skills as will be detailed below.

**Format of Sessions**

The sessions started with a group ‘warm-up’ consisting of 2-3 games (e.g., ‘poison’ ball, tunnel ball, ‘octopus’ tag, bean bag hunt etc). The aim here was to get everyone involved, moving and interacting, including the coaches. These games were designed to take approximately 10-15 minutes.

Following these games, coaches worked on a one-to-one basis with a deaf child who had been assigned in Week 1 of the program. The basis for allocation of each child to a specific coach for the series of lessons followed guidelines provided by the school (the school had requested male students be paired with male coaches given the school had no male staff members and doing so would provide a potential opportunity for male role modelling).

The individual one-on-one coaching segment of the sessions was designed to take approximately 50-60 minutes. Each session’s content was at the discretion of the individual coach, having regard to each child’s abilities, interests and goals. A lesson plan was developed each week by the coach, and following each session, a review was completed as to its effectiveness and shortcomings (if applicable).

The sessions concluded when the school bus arrived to take children home at 3.15 pm. This was followed by a ‘debriefing’ of all coaches at which time coaches shared their sessions’ challenges and achievements with the group.

An ‘Award Ceremony’ was included in the final session in Week 12 when all children received an engraved medallion in recognition of their participation in the program.

**KEY CONSIDERATIONS FOR COACHES WORKING WITH DEAF CHILDREN**

At the conclusion of the series of sessions, coaches were asked what factors they considered important to ensure a safe, fun and productive session. The coaches’ suggestions include the following:

**Take an Individual Approach**

Each deaf child is different with respect to his/her abilities to access different forms of communication (i.e., spoken, lip-reading, written and sign language) and his/her sporting abilities, goals and interests. It is important for coaches to seek this information from school teachers, parents and/or the child him/herself prior to, or at the start of, a program. Armed with the information, coaches have a sound foundation as how best to start communications with their deaf student and also develop, implement and evaluate a suitable series of lessons.

**Prepare and Plan**

Lessons generally run most smoothly when planned. It is much easier to adapt a plan than to work from no plan! Time spent in preparing a lesson is therefore time wisely invested. In planning their lessons, coaches are often best guided by the positive responses of children when provided with a fun lesson that is both challenging and safe and from which skill development can naturally occur.

**Emphasise Correct Demonstrations**

While verbal instruction is appropriate with some deaf children (e.g., those who can lip-read), visual demonstration of activities and skills is appropriate for almost all. Accordingly, demonstrations need to be simple and technically correct as many deaf children have an exceptional ability to mimic exactly what is shown to them. When verbal instruction is provided, this should be given prior to (versus at same time as) the visual demonstration to allow the deaf child to devote full attention to one stimuli/task at a time.

**Incorporate Colour**

The use of coloured cones, balls, hoops and other equipment can make activities more fun and achievable when a child’s attention and interest are captivated. In most languages, the use of red and green flags signifies ‘stop’ and ‘start’. Accordingly, the use of red and green flags can prove to be effective tools to attract a child’s attention and also to signify the start or finish of an activity.

**Remember to Smile**

A smile is an universal way to welcome and give positive feedback and encouragement. The power of a smile should
never be underestimated and even more so in an environment where deaf children are keenly ‘reading’ and responding to, a coach’s facial expressions. Along with a smile, positive gesturing and body language from a coach can greatly facilitate a child’s motivation to learn and try new things.

Make Eye-to-Eye and Face-to-Face Contact

A coach needs to be mindful to establish and maintain eye contact with a deaf child when communicating. Even if a coach asks an interpreter to sign for him/her, facing the deaf child when speaking is respectful and appropriate. A couple of scenarios for consideration are:

• When there is sun, ensure the deaf child’s back is facing the sun to facilitate full view of the coach, racquet, ball and other individuals and objects

• If working with a group, call/signal the group in to give instructions and provide demonstrations (rather than attempt to communicate to children spread over a wide area)

• If wanting to attract a child’s attention, it is appropriate to move to ensure the child is facing you and then tap him/her on the shoulder (rather than tap the child from behind which may startle or frighten)

• When speaking, use normal paced speech with clear and concise words. Avoid yelling as this may be interpreted by the deaf child as the coach being angry. In addition, those children with residual hearing or hearing aids may not be able to hear at that frequency

Be Willing to Learn Sign Language

The response from children to coaches who are willing to learn some sign language can be phenomenal. It can help generate an extra special bond between coach and child as well as assist understanding between the parties. Here the school was most helpful in providing a ‘cheat sheet’ of signs covering a range of tennis vocabulary/actions including ‘tennis’, ‘serve’, ‘match’, ‘net’, ‘ball’, ‘racquet’, ‘court’, ‘bounce’ and ‘score’, ‘stand up’, ‘sit down’, ‘line up’, ‘try’, ‘good luck’ and ‘good’. Obtaining such a ‘cheat sheet’ should not be a difficult task for coaches with access to the internet.

Safety First and Foremost

Risk management is the responsibility of the coach. To this end, the playing area needs to be free of obstacles (e.g., loose balls and equipment) and activities and groups should be spaced to avoid collisions (e.g., when using the brick wall in ball throwing or hitting activities). Without the cue of sound, a deaf child relies heavily on the coach to alert to the wayward ball or person coming his/her way that may not be easily visible. Further, given some deaf children have balance and co-ordination difficulties, coaches should adapt activities where and when appropriate (e.g., warm-up games can be modified from running to walking activities to minimise the risk of children falling).

Patience is a Virtue

This saying is particularly true in circumstances when a coach may need to take additional time to provide instruction, demonstrate and check a deaf child’s understanding of a task. Patience is also important in situations when a coach accesses an interpreter to sign for him/her – additional time is generally required when a third party is involved in communications. Awareness of and accepting that additional time and effort may be required when communicating with deaf children are essential attributes for a coach.

Encourage and Reward Effort

Coaches need to find ways to endorse the philosophy of ‘have a go’ and ‘give it 100%’. It is not all about ‘winning’ and match/activity results but rather encouraging participation and having fun. Some suggestions here include:

• All attempts by a child to undertake and master an activity, regardless of its outcome, are positively acknowledged by a coach (e.g., with a big smile, thumb-up sign)

• Design activities where children have a realistic opportunity to feel good about their endeavours (e.g., if teaching a specific shot, place the ball where the player has a good chance of making contacting with the racquet)

• Introduce an Award Presentation at the conclusion of a program when all children who participated are given recognition

It’s Okay to Feel Apprehensive, then Lead by Example

At the beginning it is quite natural, and to be expected, to feel somewhat apprehensive about coaching a deaf child. Without being able to draw on one’s past experience in working with deaf children, what should a coach anticipate and do? A coach should know that he/she is possibly not alone in feeling somewhat unsure or uncertain at such time. Such feelings will generally pass quickly as a coach throws him/herself into the challenge. A good ‘rule’ to remember is that if you have fun, the deaf child will most likely do the same. So commit to being a positive role model and mentor and lead by example. Enjoy your own lesson and your enthusiasm will most likely be contagious!

‘Think Outside the Square’

Sometimes coaches can be limited by their own creativity. Do not be afraid to think laterally, adapting selected features of
one’s coaching environment. As noted above, a dance studio was available at the School for Deaf Children. This presented an opportunity for two of our ‘musically inclined’ coaches to conduct dance and movement sessions for their two deaf children to improve the latter’s footwork for tennis. The coaches put together a selection of music with the children sensing the music’s pulse and beat through vibrations in the sprung floor. There was great fun for all, with the children following the coaches’ enthusiastic dance and movement routines in front of mirrors that lined the sides of the studio.

CONCLUSION

There is no doubt that coaching deaf children presents challenges. But what must be remembered is that many of these challenges are common across all coaching situations. What is unique about coaching deaf children is the range of the communication methods that might be most appropriate including sign language, lip-reading, gesturing and miming (Hanrahan, 2003). Notwithstanding this consideration, ‘coaching is coaching’ such that the principles of coaching deaf children are consistent with general coaching principles (e.g., Martens, 2004) and coaching athletes with a disability principles (Coaching Association of Canada, 2005). Thorough planning and preparation, effective communication, making it fun, ability to adapt and cater for all abilities and patience and empathy are key elements for all good coaches.

The coach who has the opportunity to teach deaf children is very fortunate as it offers the potential to grow the coach. It is hoped that some of the suggestions above will provide the ‘winning formula’ in guiding a coach to focus on fun, the deaf child’s abilities and efforts and what can be achieved in a safe environment. Our experience in working with the School for Deaf Children was a ‘winner’ for everyone involved. It can also be yours but it may require a pro-active approach to introduce tennis to this specific group of player which has, to date, often been overlooked by the tennis community.

REFERENCES


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