

A grayscale photograph of a young boy with freckles, looking intently at a soccer ball. The image is slightly faded and serves as the background for the text.

YOUTH FOOTBALLERS

**CHARACTERISTICS
AND MOTIVATIONS**

1

CHAPTER

Chapter 1

Youth Footballers - Characteristics and Motivations

DEFINING ADOLESCENCE

Increasingly over the past few decades, adolescence has been seen as a developmental stage in its own right, where childhood behaviours are adapted and adjusted to adult forms. The beginning of adolescence is generally seen as coinciding with the physical changes of puberty. Where this stage of development ends is harder to define, however, since each individual moves through the tasks of development at a different rate. This is due to the influence of social, cultural and other factors which impact on the timing and nature of change over this period, including the way in which 'adolescence' is viewed in different societies.

The World Health Organisation refers to the age range of 10-24 years as encompassing adolescent growth, and further distinguishes between early adolescence (10-14 years), middle adolescence (15-19 years) and late adolescence (20-24 years).

Broadly speaking, the main tasks within these phases can be seen as:

Early	Middle	Late
Am I normal?	Who am I?	Where am I going?
<i>Transition to adolescence</i> Coming to terms with body/biological changes	<i>'Essence' of adolescence</i> Establish self among peers as a worthwhile individual	<i>Transition to adulthood</i> Vocational/educational issues and one-to-one intimate relationships

This chronological breakdown goes some way to acknowledging the need to differentiate between developmental and health issues for each 'stage' of adolescence, as opposed to viewing adolescents as an homogenous group. While it may seem to encompass a broad age range, there are various reasons why such a view is taken. This definition reflects the variety of the adolescent experience in different cultures, and recognises that opportunities such as employment and marriage, which have traditionally been associated with 'adult status', are occurring later on average than in previous years.

ADOLESCENTS IN SPORT

The period of growth between childhood and reaching one's final size, shape and sexual potential is called puberty. At this time there are increased concentrations of male (testosterone) and female (estrogen) hormones in the bloodstream of both males and females.

Coaching adolescents during puberty places unique demands on the coach. In some instances, the coach will need to modify their program to cater for changes in coordination and balance. In other instances, the coach will be required to offer words of encouragement, words that indicate to the player that the coach at least understands some of the difficulties the player experiences when passing through puberty.

Growth

At the onset of puberty, weight gain occurs before height gain. At first, girls experience enlarging breasts while boys experience enlarging testes. About one year later, the growth spurt begins and physical changes become observable to others.

Certain parts of the skeleton develop more rapidly than other parts. The extremities of the body grow before the central portions. The nose, ears and lips grow before the head and the feet grow before the legs. Often the two halves of the body do not grow at the same rate. The left side may grow ahead of the right. The visible spurts of weight and height occur before the less visible ones of muscle and organ growth.



Oil, sweat and odour glands become much more active, often resulting in problems with acne, oily hair and smelly bodies. The heart doubles in size and the eyes elongate, often causing the adolescent to become temporarily near-sighted and in need of glasses or contact lenses.

When evaluating the effects of puberty on performance, the implications for coaches include:

- Considering the growth factors as the possible cause of the player's rate of skill development slowing down.
- Delaying the introduction of resistance work until the muscle and joint skeletal growth can cope with weight gain.
- Providing the player with greater privacy and space while they learn to cope with changes in primary sex characteristics and any loss in confidence sometimes associated with increased body odour and acne.

Emotional unrest

For many adolescents the challenges of accommodating the effects of puberty on their daily lives and relationships can place them on an emotional roller-coaster. This is particularly true for late and early maturing boys and girls. For these teenagers, there are observable characteristics that signify they are different. For late maturers, the problem is achieving in a culture that applauds sporting achievement and gives attention to physical maturity. Early maturers can become sexually active before they have the emotional maturity or intellectual understanding to manage their relationships with others.

Coaches need to consider that emotional unrest may be more prevalent in particular adolescents. Therefore coaches need to be prepared to give support when there are fluctuations in attitude. On the other hand, coaches can be reassured by the accepting and focused attitude of other adolescent players.

Sex characteristics

Before puberty there is very little difference between the male and female primary sex characteristics. However, during puberty significant changes occur. Up to 50 per cent of females suffer considerable discomfort during this time of change. Menarche, which is the first occurrence of menstruation in a female, is one such discomfort and change during this period. While they can continue physical activity during menarche, they should not be expected necessarily to maintain performance levels or training efforts.

Males grow taller than females and wider at the shoulders than the hips. Females become relatively wider at the hips and develop breasts. Following these developments is the appearance of facial and body hair.

Coaches need to consider:

- The impact of an emerging interest in the opposite sex.
- Re-adjusting training and performance goals to respond to the effects of menarche.
- Developing a rapport with the players which encourages them to openly discuss difficulties they may be experiencing adjusting to the changes in sex characteristics.

PHYSICAL, COGNITIVE AND EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT BETWEEN 14-18 YEARS

The following tables developed by Canadian coaching consultant, Istvan Balyi, provides an overview of the physical, mental/cognitive and emotional developmental patterns of players between the ages of 14 and 18.

TABLE 1: PHYSICAL DEVELOPMENT

Basic characteristics	General consequence: Performance capabilities and limitations	Implications to the coach
The circulatory and respiratory system reach maturity.	These systems are generally capable of giving maximum output.	Aerobic and anaerobic systems can be trained for maximum output. Full sport-specific energy system training should be implemented.
Increase in height and weight gradually lessen. Stabilisation occurs in the muscular system.	Muscles have grown to their mature size, but muscular strength continues to increase, reaching its peak in the late 20s.	Strength training can be maximised to improve overall strength development. Neuromuscular training should be optimised during this phase.
Skeletal maturation continues in males and females.	Connective tissues are still strengthening.	Progressive overloading in training should be continued.
By age 17, girls have generally reached adult proportions, whereas boys do not reach such proportions until several years later.	Proportionally, girls gain more weight than boys during this phase.	Aerobic training for girls to be optimised as well, coaches should be aware how to deal with weight gain and its impact on figure. Players should learn how to compete, including all technical, tactical and ancillary components.

TABLE 2: MENTAL/COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT

Basic characteristics	General consequence: Performance capabilities and limitations	Implications to the coach
Generally, by age 16, the brain has reached its adult size but continues to mature neurologically for several more years.	Players can cope with multiple strategies and tactics, particularly near the end of the phase.	Coaches should ensure the refinement of all technical and tactical skills.
Critical thinking is developing well during this phase.	The capacity of self-analysis and correction is developing.	Decision-making should be developed further through technical, tactical development.



TABLE 3: EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Basic characteristics	General consequence: Performance capabilities and limitations	Implications to the coach
Peer group influence is still a powerful force.	Independent decision-making and leadership skills are becoming more developed.	Players should be given the opportunity to develop through participation in an appropriate leadership or responsible role (i.e. team captain, athlete representative, etc) but strong direction and discipline must be maintained.
Players are searching for a stable, balanced self-image.	Still very susceptible to successes and failures. Coping techniques are useful.	Positive evaluation of performances and positive reinforcement are imperative.
Activities and interaction with the opposite sex play strong roles during this phase.	Male players must be aware that female players now face a problem of femininity versus sport development. Female players must be aware that male athletes now face a problem of relating performance to masculinity.	Facilitate the recognition of the former issues through education and club programs.

Istvan Balyi, National Coaching Institute, British Columbia, Canada.

YOUTH FOOTBALLERS' MOTIVATIONS - WHY THEY DO AND DON'T PLAY

In 2001 the AFL, through Deakin University, carried out extensive research examining the key factors and circumstances associated with youth participation in football. The main factors why 10-17 year olds do or don't play are:

The motivators

- Football is fun and fast.
- It is high scoring.
- It is considered very skilful.
- It provides opportunities for social interaction and is team-based, making it more attractive.
- It is community orientated (regional).
- It improves an individual's self-esteem.
- It provides recognition.
- Its physical nature and toughness is attractive for many adolescents.
- It provides dreams of AFL glory.
- It beats boredom.

The competition

- Other team sports offered.
- Individual sports (tennis, swimming and other extreme sports).
- Duration of AFL games compared with other sports.
- The growth of informal activities such as skateboarding.

The 'PlayStation effect'

- PlayStations are one of the most serious competitors.
- The popular games.
- Reality versus fantasy.
- "It's cold outside ..."
- Some parents are alarmed by this trend while others view it as a babysitter.
- Television.
- Internet.

The coach

The coach is perhaps the most important variable influencing a player's participation in Australian Football.

- Nothing is more directly linked to quitting Australian Football than 'abusive', 'angry', 'too serious' coaches.
- Coaches seriously lack social skills for managing 10 to 16-year-olds.
- Coaching plans and preparation is critical.

Participation

- Low involvement through poorly structured participation is one of the most serious de-motivators.
- Not enough time on ground.
- No opportunity in glamour positions.
- Exclusively in the backline.
- Too many players in some teams and too few in others.

Training and games

- Games can be fun and rewarding, but if training is dull, too hard or too serious then dropout is likely.
- Games are often not competitive (more important to parents than players).
- Parents are concerned about grading.
- Dropout can occur when better players leave a club for representative footy.



Social issues

- Fewer physical education teachers in schools.
- PE diminished in size, frequency, quality and range.
- Majority of teachers are female.
- If teachers take sport outside, other sports are preferred.
- Pressures on single parent families.
- Social pressures on 14 to 16-year-olds.

Playing AFL as a motivator

- Powerful for 10 to 13-year-olds.
- Limited by realism for 13 to 16-year-olds.
- Limited in non-traditional areas.

Other factors influencing dropout

- Simply too lazy.
- Getting up early (parents also).
- Driving to games and training.
- Duration of commitment (parents).
- Violence/perception (also an issue for mothers).
- Serious injury.
- Want to play in games, but not train.
- Becoming better at an individual sport.
- School commitments.
- Natural attrition.

Motivating Youth Players

What adolescents want

- To be appreciated for themselves, not just when they are “good”.
- To feel they have some control over their lives.
- To be successful at something.
- To belong.
- To have other people other than their parents care for and support them.

Six out of 10 boys aged 14 to 17 claim that they love to do as many sports as possible. How can you, as a coach, manage this?

ACCESS CHALLENGES

What do adolescents want out of their involvement in sport? Participation, success, status, health, friends, fun, thrills, risk, challenge, order, support, access and the opportunity to be creative are some of the known reasons why adolescents play sport. The emphasis in the information that follows is on how coaches can make football more accessible to adolescents.

Access does not only relate to physical proximity but also to the individual's perceived compatibility with what the sport program has to offer.

Some of the methods coaches can use to help adolescents participate in football include:

- Using school facilities to reduce the need for adolescents to travel to the training venue.
- Providing flexible schedules to accommodate the demands placed on adolescents by study and family commitments.
- Carefully nurturing the progress of each individual player while offering the ultimate challenge for high achievers.
- Providing quality equipment and facilities.

It could be argued that the above list relates to all ages of players and not just adolescents. However, there are some unique characteristics of adolescents that can require coaches to pay particular attention to these strategies.

Parents do not necessarily provide the same level of support (transport to training and games) for adolescents as they do for younger children. This is partly because adolescents seek to display their independence by not having to rely on their parents. They no longer have a free ‘taxi’ service to get them to games and training, but they are not old enough to get a driver’s licence.

Many adolescents have disappointing sporting experiences as children and subsequently lose confidence in their sporting ability. Unless a sport can provide a beginner level specifically for adolescents, it is difficult for anxious individuals to attempt new sports. This is particularly true in team sports where a beginner adolescent often has to play in a team of people who began playing as children and have many more years’ experience.

The high school academic curriculum gives notice to young people that to make it in the adult world they must perform well in the last two years of high school. This creates problems for talented players who are constantly trying to manage the demands of school and the expectations of high performance coaches. Many parents advise their sons and daughters that they should forgo any sport involvement during these vital two years of their secondary education.

Parents require the adolescent to continue to support family activities, which can sometimes conflict with sporting interests. This problem compounds when the adolescent develops a natural interest in sex and begins to attend social activities. An ideal situation is when all members of a family share an interest in the same activities.

Adolescence is a time when individuals have:

- Many conflicting commitments.
- Limited mobility (not able to drive and less-involved parents).
- The ability to play adult games.
- In many cases, acquired anxieties about their sporting ability.
- No income to support an involvement in adult level activities.

There are many examples of organisations and coaches that have attempted to increase the access of adolescents to their sport by recognising the above problems and developing solutions. The most appealing solution to the problem of travel is to base sporting clubs at local high schools. Some schools have excellent sport programs and teachers are employed for their coaching as well as their teaching ability. Many schools have weekend sport programs for students at all levels of competition. These are examples of efforts to improve each individual’s access to adolescent sport.

THE TRANSITION TO ADULT FOOTBALL

One of the other compelling challenges for coaches is for them to develop programs that guarantee achieving desired competencies while also offering enough diversity to extend each player and/or team. The thrill of playing sport can be gained in many ways, one of which is the absolute mastery of basic skills and tactics, and another is the ability to successfully deploy a range of intuitive, high-risk skills and/or tactics. Some coaches subscribe to one or other of these approaches while others manage to include both in their coaching programs.

Adolescents are in a phase of their lives where there is a distinct shift from a playful, divergent and creative approach to sport coaching and organisation, as is typical of junior sport, to a more structured, imposed and restricted approach, used most often when in adult sport. It is usually during this period of change or transition that the trust between individuals can be tested. Players continue to seek enjoyment through the creative use of high-risk skills while their coaches demand the use of low-risk skills only. The players’ thrill may come from attempting something different, while in contrast, the coach’s thrill may be derived from a player’s conformity to a set of well-rehearsed skills and game routines.

The transition phase from junior to adult sport does not have a defined approach that guides the attitudes of participants. It is this lack of direction that can test the trust between player and coach. While in most sports the rules of the game during the transition phase are the same as for the adult game, the approach of players and coaches varies considerably. The language used can vary between commands such as “You will ...!”, “I must ...!”, “Give more!” and “Try to ...!”, “My options are ...”, “Take a risk.” Tactics employed by coaches can vary. An example is “for anyone who is clear inside 50m, it is appropriate to have a shot at goal,” v’s “always try to give the ball to players in a better position to score.”



Because adolescent sport does not have a specific set of guidelines, it relies on adopting either the children's sport or adult sport approach. In most situations, coaches seem to adopt the adult model rather than the children's model when coaching adolescents. Some of the problems created by this unique situation include the following issues:

- Adult training regimes can negatively affect immature bodies and attitudes.
- Previous freedoms are challenged by the demands for conformity.
- Coaches verbalise their frustrations and opinions in an often demeaning and negative way.
- Player skill levels may not be able to match the demands of an adult game.
- Cognitive expectations may exceed the ability of the player to link the coach's instructions with game situations.
- Coaches may question the discipline of their players because they appear to be ignoring the coach's requests.
- Players may question their coach's methods because the coach is often more dictatorial and demanding than their previous coach.

Coaches who do not give enough attention to the above situations may find that a mutual lack of trust develops between them and their players. The coach observes players who seemingly continue to ignore their instructions, and players become disillusioned when they are criticised for a lack of effort when in fact lack of skills and understanding is the problem.

There are many strategies that coaches can use to prevent unwanted tension developing between them and their players. However, before and during the use of these strategies it is essential for the coach to trust the player. Unconditional positive regard for the player is every coach's responsibility. Players also have a responsibility to trust their coach but, for many adolescents, it is too much to expect them to have the emotional and/or psychological maturity to manage the dynamics of complex human relations effectively.

IMPLICATIONS FOR COACHES

It is often difficult to know how sensitive players are to pubescent changes. Only when a coach asks the young male player to remove his top when training does the coach discover that the player is sensitive to his newly acquired rolls of fat around the abdomen. Allow variations in training attire when players are noticeably embarrassed about some of their physical developments. Next time there is a team function involving food, use the opportunity to serve a balanced meal, invite the parents, enlist the services of a nutritionist and provide the players with some understanding of the importance of each food type.

Be prepared to modify performance expectations in response to accelerated weight and height gain, eyesight adjustments, primary sex characteristic changes and muscle and organ growth. During this time there may appear to be delays in response to training efforts. In most settings, the adolescent can mask the bodily changes caused by the onset of puberty. However, in the sport setting, everyone is focused on physical matters. Even before and after activity, there is usually a need to change in public. A coach can help to redirect a player's attention away from their own anxieties about their bodies by focusing on the task of becoming a better player and team. Coaches should avoid making comments about physical changes unless they specifically relate to performance. In these cases, the matter should be discussed in private.

Coaches who choose to coach adolescents will have the pleasure of witnessing dramatic changes in their players. These changes bring with them inherent difficulties as well as times for exploration and exhilaration.

Coaches are not required to become obsessed about knowing how to cater for every individual's response to change. It is, however, important to demonstrate understanding and support while focusing on providing an enjoyable and challenging sport experience.