

TITLE

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Coach behaviours and practice structure in grassroots youth soccer

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Background/aim: Youth soccer players rely on coaches to design effective practice environments to help them acquire the skills necessary to perform successfully in competition. However, early observational analyses suggest that coaches structure practice and employ behaviours that may not promote effective skill acquisition. While a shift towards an approach more closely aligned with research evidence has been observed in performance soccer (e.g., (1)), there is little to no (recent) research investigating coaching behaviours and the microstructure of practice at the participation level of the sport (i.e., “grassroots”). The aim of this study was to examine the practice structures and instructional behaviours employed by youth soccer coaches working at the grassroots level in England.

Methods: Youth soccer coaches (i.e., U10 - U17; n = 12) working at the grassroots level of soccer at 10 different English clubs, were filmed during 36 regular training sessions. The practice structure and instructional behaviours observed within these sessions were then coded. The practice setting was split into two types of activities, “training form” and “playing form”, with the latter deemed more relevant to improve soccer match performance. Coaching behaviours were coded using a modified version of the Coach Analysis and Intervention System (2).

Results: Practice was structured such that players spent more time in playing-form activities (M = 59%, e.g., small-sided and conditioned games) than training-form activities (M = 23%, e.g., isolated skills practice), with the remaining time spent transitioning between activities (M = 18%). Coaches provided high levels of instruction (M = 42%), feedback (M = 25%), and management (M = 15%), irrespective of the activity in which players engaged. The use of questioning corresponded to 4% of total coach interactions, with only 0.8% of these being divergent questions.

Conclusions: Our findings show that there has been a shift towards an increased use of playing-form over training-from activities in youth (grassroots) soccer in England. Yet, the most frequently used coaching behaviour was instruction suggesting a direct and prescriptive approach is taken by grassroots youth coaches. Findings from this research highlight a partial divergence between research and practice in the coaching of young grassroots level soccer players.

References:

1. Roca A & Ford PR (2020). *Sci Med Footb.* 4, 263-268.
2. Cushion CJ, Harvey S, Muir B & Nelson L (2012). *J Sports Sci.* 30, 203-218.