

Why Child's Rights Matter

Reflections on a child-first
approach to coaching



WHY CHILD'S RIGHTS MATTER

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Senior Lecturer Sports Coaching: Practice and Learning, Dr Alex Twitchen has been a qualified football coach for more than 35 years. Also an experienced coach educator and coach developer/mentor, Alex has a passion for understanding and exploring how coaches learn and improve their practice.



Increasingly Alex has been exploring the application of child-rights to coaching and the extent to which rights underpin safe practice. With his knowledge of children's rights and experience of coaching, we have asked Alex to reflect more deeply about his approach to child-first coaching to offer some practical insight.

My introduction to child's rights came through my involvement in the Open University's partnership with FIFA's global safeguarding programme, the FIFA Guardians. UNICEF UK are also a partner to this programme, and the expertise of their specialists in child's rights has been integral to my own developing knowledge of child's rights. When the Play Their Way campaign was launched, I was already actively thinking about, and applying, child's rights to my own coaching.

The following is a summary of this experience and what a child-first approach to coaching means in practice.

Liphook Spiders: A new dawn

My neighbour's son played on a team at the local football club, but there was a problem. There were two teams in his son's age group and both teams contained so many children that their opportunities to participate in matches were limited. The club had decided to create a third team and he had volunteered to be the coach. The Spiders were born, and he asked if I might be willing to provide additional coaching support.

Child-first Coaching

New beginnings

It was a warm late August evening and in front of me were eight children - they were the new under-10 Spiders team. Some had previously played for the existing two teams, whilst a couple of the children were new to football. The children were organised into some 2v2 games. After a while we combined these smaller games into a bigger 4v4 game and placed four mini-goals in the corners of the area. For an hour the children played football, which was an intentional decision. From the very outset this was how the team were going to practise: the focus was going to be on playing games of football that recreated aspects of the football matches they would compete in.



Reflect

How do you want your participants to practise?

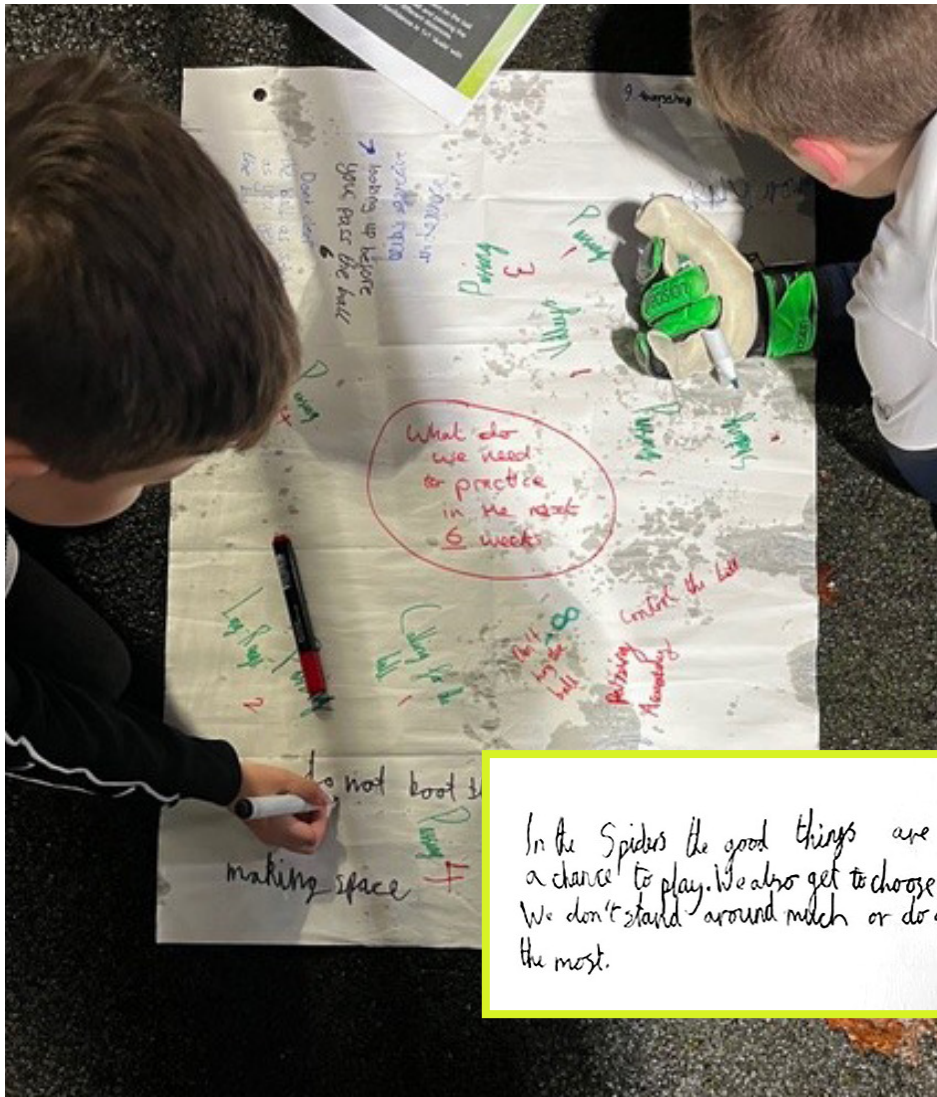
Building rapport

We focused on building rapport with the children through observing and engaging them in conversations, things like how their day at school had been, what they thought about the latest Premier League results and such like. We wanted to get to know them as the children they were and understand each child's personality and character as well as we could. By December I felt we were in a position whereby the children could be more directly involved in their own learning and development. This would start by asking the children what they thought practice should concentrate on.

Giving the children a voice: what aspects of football do you want to focus on?

Armed with flipchart paper and pens, we began the first practice session after Christmas by asking the children to identify the aspects of playing football they thought our practices should focus on. As the adults stood back, the children soon started talking and writing things onto the paper.

“We wanted to get to know them as the children they were and understand each child’s personality and character as well as we could.”



Creating a plan. What do we need to practice in the next six weeks?

Reflecting on their comments I found myself agreeing with what the children had written. The coaching team concluded that the children had provided an accurate picture of where they could improve as individuals and as a team. Taking their comments from the flipchart paper I ordered them into a 'six-week plan', which was shared with the children the following week.

This enabled us to demonstrate that **we had listened to their ideas, that these ideas were influential, that it was *their plan*, and it would be used to shape *their participation*** over the coming weeks. The plan was also shared with the parents via a group WhatsApp so they too knew what the intentions were.

In the Spiders the good things are the coaches trusts everyone and we all get a chance to play. We also get to choose what to do in practise and it's always a game. We don't stand around much or do a complicated drill. It's playing games that I like the most.



The plan created with the Liphook Spiders' players

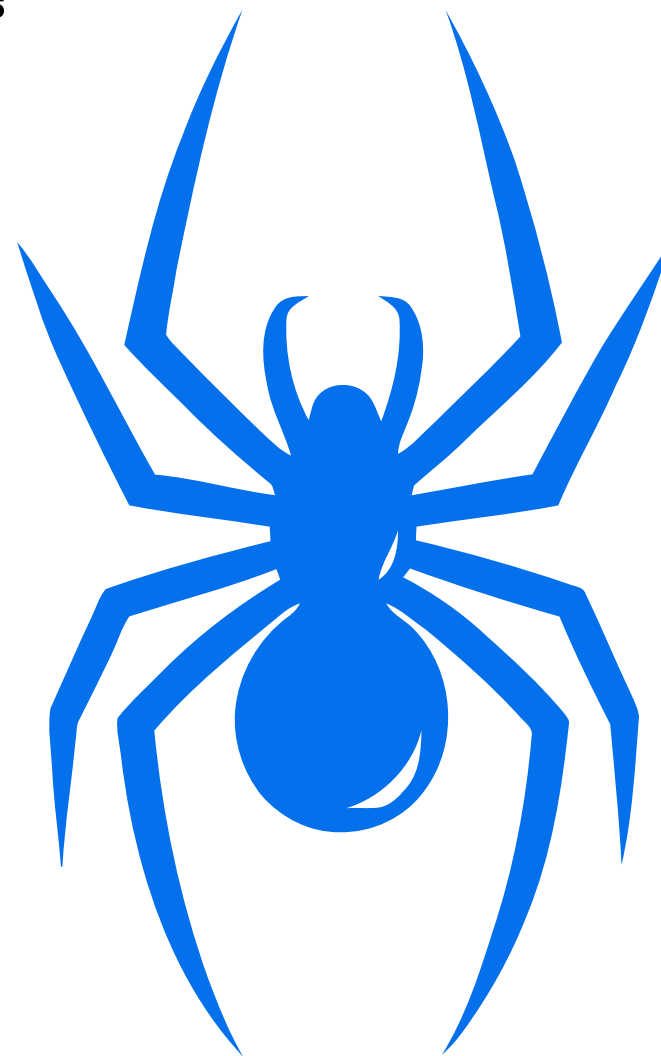
Liphook Spiders Practice Plan: January - February 2024

These are the areas we will be focusing on in practice during Wednesday nights, and evaluating in games.

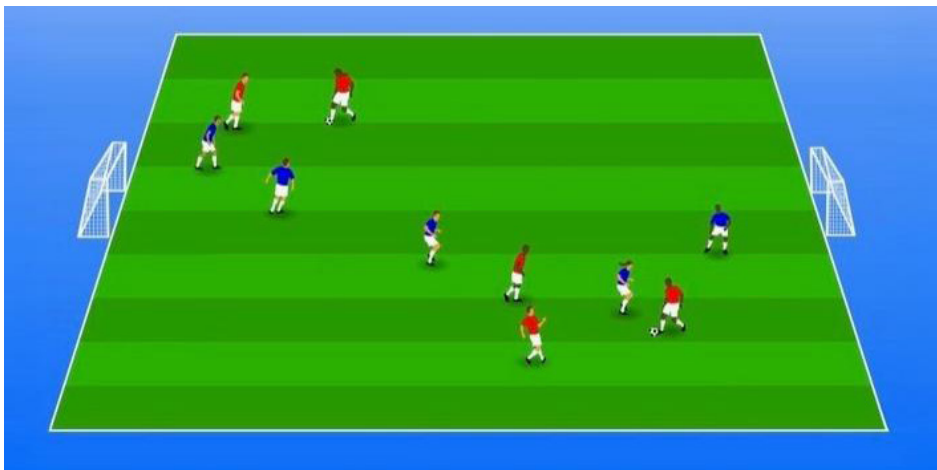
1. Being better at making and creating space (as individuals and a team).
2. Being more aware of where team-mates and opponents are (scanning).
3. Staying more composed and confident on the ball.
4. Receiving and controlling the ball and passing the ball more successfully over different distances.
5. Developing everyone's confidence in 1v1 'duels' with opponents.

A playful approach

The challenge was to implement the plan in a way that maintained a **playful and enjoyable approach to practice**, whilst developing the aspects the children had identified. What we wanted to achieve was an environment that encouraged creativity, exploration and collaboration while having a specific purpose and intention. A game-based approach was still central to this, but the games were now more carefully designed to support the plan.



Here are two examples of the practices developed to support the plan:



Example One: Two-Ball Game

A goal can only be scored (in either goal) when your team has possession of both balls.

This addresses:

- being composed and able to stay on the ball
- awareness of where team-mates and opponents are
- lots of 1v1 situations
- passes over different distances.



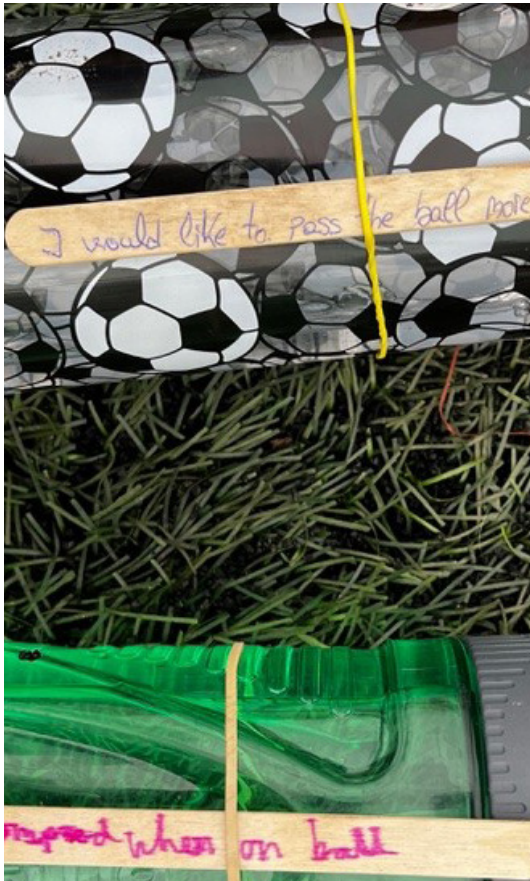
Example Two: Move The Goal

Each team can place the goal they are attacking in any part of their opponent's half. After a goal is scored the goal turns 90 degrees.

This addresses:

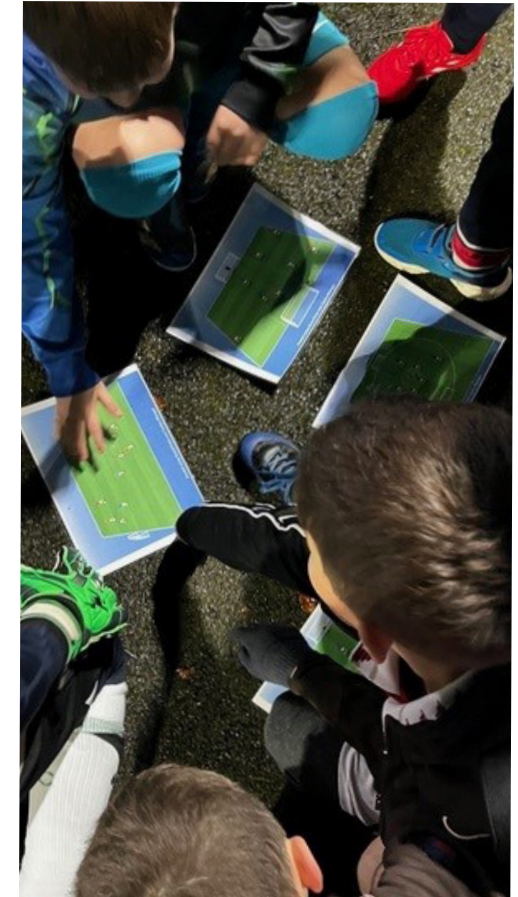
- making and creating space (because when a goal moves it changes the nature of the space being attacked and defended)
- passing over different distances
- awareness of where team-mates are.

Evaluating Progress: Lollipop Sticks



After a couple of weeks, we started to introduce the idea of how we were going to evaluate progress. First, we gave each child who wanted to participate in the activity a lollipop stick and asked them to write on it which one of the five aspects of the plan they would focus on individually. Once completed the stick was attached to their drinks bottle by an elastic band. This technique was then used to engage each player in a conversation before, during and after practice and matches about how they were applying their own focus to situations in the game. For example, how well did they recognise the moments where and why they might, or might not, 'stay on the ball'.

Towards the end of the six-week period we asked the players to evaluate, by re-visiting the original flipchart paper, where they thought the most and least progress had been made. We also asked them to identify the practices which they thought had not only been the most enjoyable but also the most helpful to their development. Based on their thoughts I devised another plan that was now ordered in priority and from which I could design games that were more deliberate in supporting those priorities.



Reflect

How could you encourage the participants you coach to evaluate their own progress?

Child-first Coaching

Scaffolding learning

By the middle of the season the environment around the Spiders had been established, and two of their rights were fundamental to this environment. They had a voice, and were encouraged to use it, while practice was always organised around games that were designed to feel like a form of their own play. Now as the spring approached, I felt the team were ready to take another step. A step whereby the support for their learning and development could be scaffolded further.

In the previous professional club where I had worked, the Head of Coaching had introduced an innovative, if not radical, player and coach development framework.

In adapting the framework for the Spiders I sought to **create a more child-friendly version of the framework** that would be aligned to their present level of skill and understanding. I also wanted them to use the framework during practice and matches.

“This framework could be more child-friendly, to align to their present level of skill and understanding.”



Player and Coach Development Framework

- Static transitions – goal-kicks, free-kicks, corners etc... Any moment where the game 'stops' and both teams can re-organise.
- Fluid transitions – A change in possession without the game stopping.
- Examples of information: What is the game-state, where is the ball, where are my team-mates and opponents and what are our, and our opponents', strengths and weaknesses?

What is the Player and Coach Development Framework?

It was developed as a method of understanding the complexity of football matches. It is not a 'game model' or a 'game philosophy', instead it is a framework that orientates learning towards the different ways that football matches can be won. Fundamentally it was designed to help players and coaches learn how to make decisions and adopt different ideas and approaches to win matches and win them well. It was also a framework which:

- aligned player and coach development into a single entity
- developed and created a common language and vocabulary
- orientated the perception of players and coaches to the same information in the game environment
- coupled the perception of information to the actions of the players
- facilitated the shift away from a single prescribed and universal curriculum towards an adaptable planning template that would meet the needs of different individuals and teams.

Child-first Coaching

As we entered Spring, we began to use the framework alongside the games being played during practice. The framework enabled us to guide and focus the children's attention and perception of the information present within these games. It would inform their decisions and associated actions in a way whereby they could translate their learning to and from practice and matches. This was central to our aim of enabling the children to make their own decisions, to recognise problems and create problems for the other teams rather than relying on us as coaches to make decisions for them. It was integral to our purpose of supporting them to become more skilful players and learning how to win matches by developing their knowledge of the game environment rather than developing knowledge about the game environment. It also required us as coaches to use a range of instructional methods, such as:

- Linking what had been learnt in a previous practice game or match to the current activity (*what did we learn in a similar situation in a previous game?*).
- Supporting the process by highlighting particular information (can you pay attention to where a team-mate might be in more space than other team-mates?).
- Sequencing the practice games by adapting them to stimulate different situations and actions (an example of this is on the next page).



“This framework would help the children translate their learning to and from practice and matches, enabling them to make their own decisions and recognise problems.”

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An example of a practice game we developed for the team

In this game the framework guided attention to the different ways that the game could be won. For the blue team (who are defending the footballs on the cones) could they defend the area to prevent goals (top picture), or go and press the opposing team to win the ball back earlier (bottom picture)?

It was through a questioning and an enquiry-based method that we explored these different approaches.



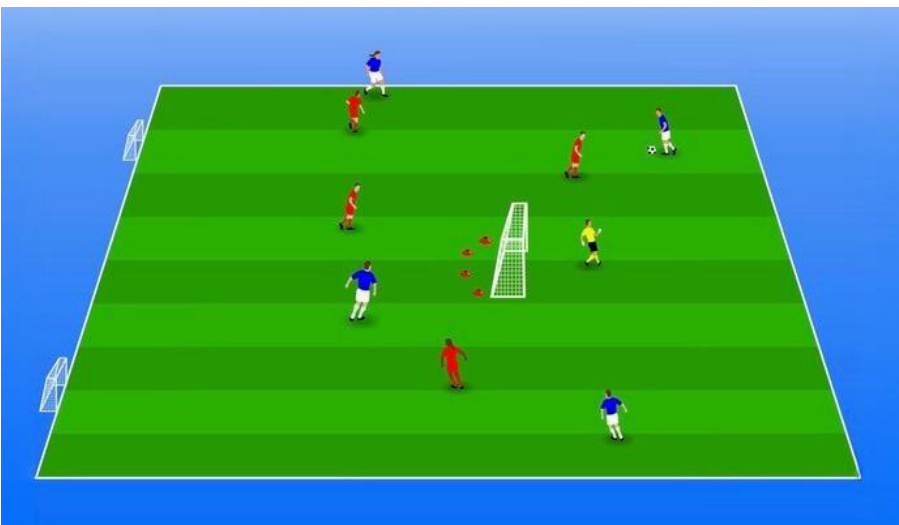
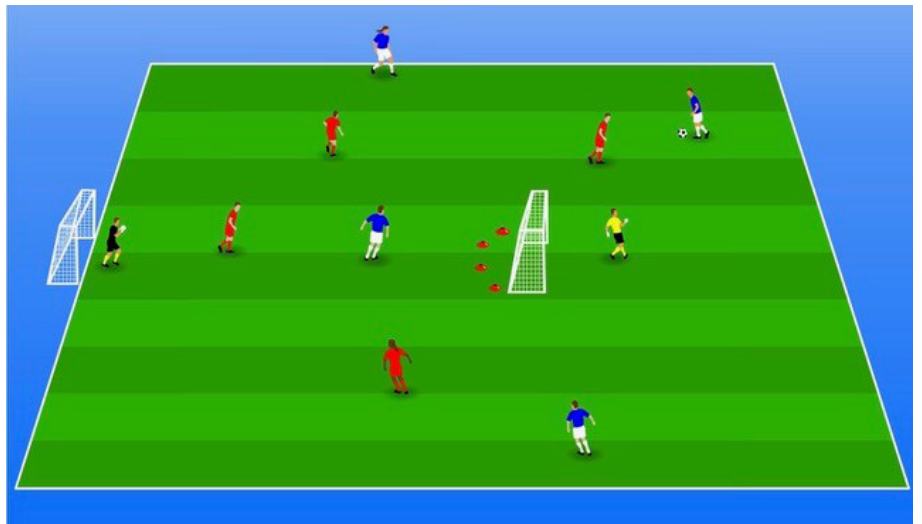
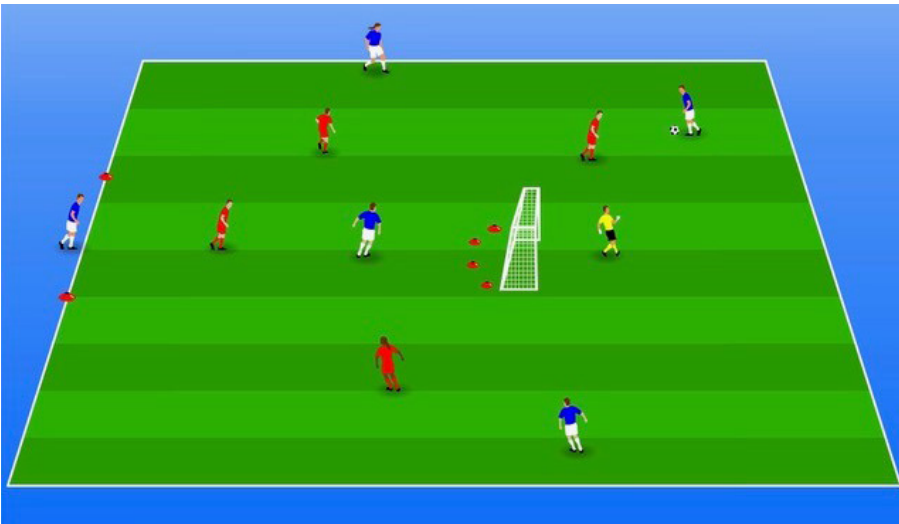
Reflect

How could you use questioning to give children a voice and support their learning in practices such as these?

For example, in the practice on this page, if the blue team decide to just defend the circle (defend the goal) how can they score themselves and therefore how can they win the game if they don't try to attack their goals?

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Four variations of a similar practice



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In each example on the previous page, the mode of scoring for one team has been changed. These modes are:

- Score in a goal (top right).
- Score to a target player (top left).
- Score by running into a zone (bottom right).
- Score into two small goals (bottom left).

Each variation changes the nature of the problem and requires the children to use different actions to score (shot, pass, run with the ball). Again, we used the framework to discuss with the children how they recognised the different situations which occurred as the mode of scoring changes, which then affects how they attack and defend. This was also related to the state of the game: how does being in a winning or losing position change the approach?

Their experiences, their journey

This process was also enabling the children to realise another right to which they are entitled, the right to develop *their personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest extent*. This is part of the text to Article 29 of the UNCRC which refers to the purpose of education and it is generally considered to be the Article that defines the right to every child's holistic development. Interpreted in this way I am always conscious that I have a duty to support every child's development as a person whilst simultaneously enabling them to develop as a player. The order of this is significant. For me it is person first, player second, but that does not mean the child's development as a player is secondary and undermined. On the contrary, every child is entitled to develop their talent and potential as a player, although not by undermining their right to develop as a person.



Reflect

Holistic development: how can you support the participants you coach to develop as a person?



Transforming experiences of sport and physical activity for children and young people.

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