

Unlocking the game within the child: a youth sport pedagogy model from the U.S.

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ABSTRACT

The positive and appropriate development of children through youth sport is of the utmost importance. The quality of this experience can also have a direct effect on their life-long engagement in physical activity and sport (Newman et al., 2018). The Game in the Child Model was designed on the premise that you must first learn how to teach the child before you can teach them to play the sport and is most beneficial for children 12 years of age and younger. This foundational premise guides all other components of the model from a philosophical as well as a developmental level. These guiding factors consist of four levels beginning with child characteristics (how they think, feel, grow), coach characteristics (their past and present experiences), organizational characteristics (type and purpose). The leads to gaining a better understanding of how play can be used as a tool for growth and development within an athlete-centered environment. The final two levels address a game-based pedagogical approach that reflects the first two levels with the goal of unlocking the Game within the Child. The model also recognizes the importance of the child's social, economic, and political influences through the envelopment of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory (1975, 1977).

KEYWORDS

athlete-centered coaching; coach education; pedagogy; youth development

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INTRODUCTION

“Play may be the key to open many doors” (M. Torbert, personal communication, March 16, 1985). This simple phrase acknowledges a core element for the delivery of physical education, coaching and youth sport programs. Without the play element, which may or may not involve competition, a child’s learning and development may not get the start that it requires. Additionally, the need for unstructured free play is crucial and greatly limited today giving rise to declines in psychological well-being. Given that free-play has been so dramatically reduced over the last 60 plus years (Devereux, 1976; Elkind, 2007), community-based sport organizations must provide a structured child-centered learning environment. Further, Torbert (1980) states: “It has been my experience that well-planned play may increase a child’s willingness to become involved, and in turn more ‘ready’ for experiences that follow. Activities that allow a child to solve problems, make a viable decision, to feel personal success seem to increase a child’s active efforts to cope and his or her willingness to take chances” (p. 1). The challenge is that youth sport organizations generally don’t have clear developmental and/or instructional models for coaches to follow (Fawver et al., 2020; Gilbert & Trudel, 2004).

Long-term athlete development models generally act as holistic pathways for an athlete’s first sport experience and continued progress to mastery and life-long sports participation (Balyi & Hamilton, 1995; Balyi & Way, 2010). Long-term athlete development models have also taken a national athlete development approach, such as the American Development Model (*USOPC American Development Model*, n.d.) and the Canadian Sport for Life (*Long-Term Athlete Development Framework*, n.d.). However, Ford et al. (2011) caution that LTAD Models have mainly been viewed along a physiological “windows of opportunity” framework that has yet to be empirically supported. To this end, LTAD Models have highlighted the importance of viewing athlete development more holistically through a life span continuum. More recently the United States Department of Health and Human Services launched a National Youth Sports Strategy (*HHS Launches the National Youth Sports Strategy – News & Events | Health.Gov*, n.d.) with the purpose of increasing and maintaining youth sports participation through coaching, mentoring, and teaching. The National Youth Sports Strategy has a wealth of information and recommendations to improve the youth sport environment for all stakeholders.

What most coaches, coach educators and developers may not be familiar with is the model-based instructional approach found in physical education pedagogy (Gurvitch et al., 2008; Metzler et al., 2008) such as Teaching Games for Understanding (TGfU) (Griffin & Butler, 2005; Thorpe et al., 1986), Game Sense (Lauder, 2013) or the Tactical Games Approach (Mitchell, 2003). These are all applicable for the youth sport setting and have been used in various settings (see, Chatzipanteli et al., 2016; Cláudio Machado et al., 2021; Gréhaigne et al., 2010; Gubacs, 2004; Gubacs-Collins, 2007; Harvey et al., 2020; Light & Robert, 2010; Lindgren & Barker, 2019; Ramos et al., 2021).

Youth sports have been part of the American culture since the late 19th century with formal educational programs for coaches beginning in the 1970s (Albrecht & Strand, 2010; Wiggins, 2013), however the coaching practice was dominated by coach-centered practices through mostly a technical model. It was also in the early 1980s where

organized youth soccer started to grow. Traditionally, as described by (McCabe, 2017; Oliver, 2011), soccer was an ethnic sport played in urban areas by adult men and later boys teams known as juniors. Essentially, the game grew from the top down starting with Under-19 age groups and gradually over the next decade or so, to Under-6 typically in two-year grouping (i.e., Under-16, 14, 12, 10, 8, and 6). Additionally, hosting the 1994 Men's World Cup (Gerke, 2019) and the phenomenal success of the Women's National Team from 1991 on (Wahl, 2019), the game has transitioned from an ethnic sport to becoming part of the American sport culture. The youth soccer game is now firmly entrenched in almost every community of the country with a high reliance on the volunteer youth parent-coach took root in the 1980s and 1990s.

The volunteer parent-coach during this time was likely to have no soccer playing experience and was asked to coach his son or daughter or they would not have a team. Coaching education in soccer mirrored a similar adult game focus and was not relevant in the training of the youth parent-coach. This lack of quality coaching at the youth level was a concern of Timo Liekoski, US Soccer Federation director of player development who sought the advice of educators and youth soccer experts to create a new youth coaching education program specifically to address the youth game aged 12 and younger (Quinn & Carr, 1998). The aim of this article is to describe the youth coaching model that was adopted to address the parent-coach. This model is known as the *Game in the Child* (Quinn, 1990) and has been the foundation for National Youth Soccer License, sponsored by US Youth Soccer, under the auspices of the United States Soccer Federation. However, since 2020 it has become the instructional framework for the National Youth Diploma within the United Soccer Coaches, Coaching Academy. Evidence indicates that learning how to coach youth soccer using the *Game in the Child* model leads to, increased enjoyment for both coach and child, coaching confidence, and more engaged players (Quinn et al., 2012).

The Game in the Child Model – Development

As previously discussed, the development of the youth game in the U.S. followed the adult game not only in form (11v11) but also within coaching education courses. Course content was reduced with fewer contact hours so that the parent-coach would receive the “basics” to begin coaching (Quinn & Carr, 1998). The youth game mirroring the adult game followed a similar path of other American sports, i.e., baseball, basketball, football, where the youth game was a replica of the adult game. As an elementary physical educator, I observed that the youth soccer game when played did not mirror the adult game and was typically called “beehive” soccer where all players on both teams were all in once space chasing the ball. This caused coaches to force children into positions, which of course only worked until kickoff, as compared to baseball where everyone had a specific role. This led me to state two propositions: 1) The youth game does not and should not resemble the adult game, and 2) if youth soccer is different than adult soccer, then youth coaching is also different from coaching at the high school, college, or professional levels (Quinn, 1988). These propositions formed the fundamental question, do we coach the child in the game, or the game in the child? It was my belief that we needed a model that was child-centered versus adult-centered, where we learned to teach the child before teaching them how to play the sport (Quinn, 1988).

The Game in the Child Model – Description

The *Child in the Game* Player Development Model is a child-centered holistic approach to athlete development, while also addressing coach development, and its connection to organizational structure and culture. The foundational blocks frame the importance of understanding the characteristics and qualities of the child and coach, within the organizational structure. The second level acts to support the coaching pedagogy by examining how children learn and the simultaneous role that play provides as a developmental tool. Finally, Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1975, 1977) envelopes the model as an indication of the role and importance various levels of social, cultural, and environmental factors play in a person’s overall development; nothing happens in isolation. This leads to a child-centered, games-based coaching pedagogy, that opens the child/athletes to discover and enjoy of the game (Becker et al., 2018; Egan, 1994). The goal is to empower and unlock the game within the child, where a player can remain creative, seek out challenges, and internalize the game.

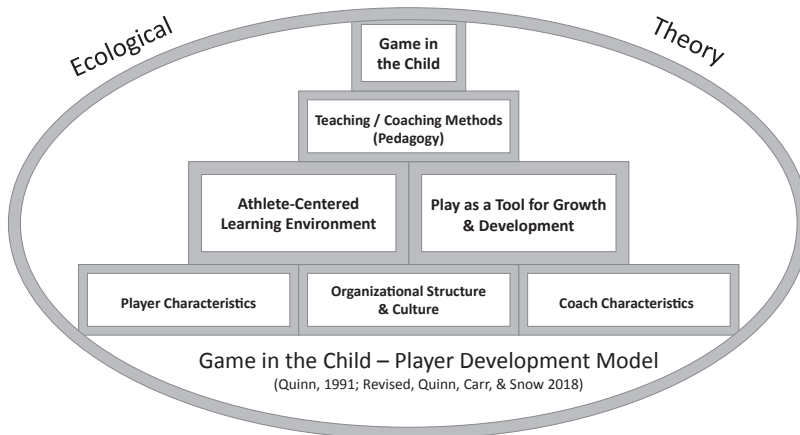


Figure 1 The Game in the Child Model (Quinn, 1991; Quinn & Carr, 1998)

Level one lays the foundation for the coach to understand athlete-centered coaching and their role. The first component is to gain a better understanding of the characteristics of the child, how they think, their physical development and their social needs. Essentially to understand the child and a child/person first, and a player/athlete second. It is also important to recognize that all these factors reside with a social, cultural, and political environment. The second component is to recognize what the coach, as an adult learner brings to the coaching process. Here we identify the coach’s goals, needs, and expectations, and recognize the value of their past sport and/or coaching experiences. Finally, the organizational characteristics and policies may influence both the coach and athlete experience, and their philosophy, structure, and purpose need to be clearly stated.

Level two has two components that connects athlete-centered learning with the role that a play element needs to play. The athlete-centered environment involves six principles of youth coaching as development by Fleck et al. (2008) and include:

developmentally appropriate activities, *clear, concise and correct* information (not long winded instruction), ensure a *safe and secure environment*, create progressive challenges that move from *simple to complex*, while providing opportunities for the athletes to *make decisions* (also a skill), and finally to ask in all activities what are the *implications for the game*. The second component sees play as a tool for growth and development. It is here where game-based instruction is implemented and presented utilizing Torbert's play concepts (Torbert & Schneider, 1993) expansion, equalization, and interactive challenges within three activity classifications known as body awareness, maze games and target games (Fleck et al., 2008). Expansion strives to modify the activity as to increase the number of opportunities to participate, this could include increasing or decreasing the space or adding more balls or goals. The goal of equalization is to make sure that every child has an equal opportunity for success, and not just the 'good' players. Finally, given the differences in ability levels within all team, interactive challenges encourage the opportunity for all ability levels to participate and interact. This can be achieved by eliminating elimination games. These three concepts are then applied to each of the game/activity classifications. Body awareness activities include any activity where the child is personally interacting with the ball, this could include stretching, bouncing, catching, or dribbling. Once such activity could be Body Part Dribbling, where the children each dribble their ball and when the coach calls out a body part, they stop the ball with that part. Maze games are activities in which children participate in a 360° environment, this would include tag games, and any activity without goals on the side. Target games provide direction to a specific target, generally a goal, but it could also be coach or another object. The outcome is encouraged risk taking and creativity and all athletes get to play as children.

Level 3, teaching and coaching pedagogy puts into practice the first two levels to emphasize the coach as a teacher/facilitator of the environment who must use evidenced based practices is the design and delivery of a practice session. This is where the coach is encouraged to design developmentally appropriate practices that keep children fully engaged to begin the process of developing game ownership and responsibility.

Level 4 unlocks the *Game in the Child* and is achieved when a coach sees children taking risks and being more creative, demonstrates improved decision-making, improved technical-tactical-physical-social/emotional growth, becomes more empowered, and learns to accept challenges. This becomes evident when players perform moves or demonstrate tactical decisions that were not necessarily directly taught, indicating an internalization of the sport. Finally, nothing happens in isolation and the coach must recognize the role that the child's home and school environment, organization, community, and society plays in athlete development. It is here that the Game in the Child Model is enveloped by Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1975, 1977), and completes the holistic nature of the Game in the Child Model.

The Game in the Child Model in Practice

Youth soccer coaches in the U.S. have been using this model for the past 25 years resulting from attending either the National Youth License or National Youth Diploma courses. Even though only two studies on the NLY have been conducted to date, I have

received many unsolicited comments from coaches regarding their coaching practice. A few of those comments have been selected that represent a paradigm shift in their coaching methodology.

“Without the course, I doubt that I would have moved on with coaching. I am having a fun time and the kids are clearly enjoying the experience. The course and over-all experience gave me the confidence in beliefs that are already part of my philosophy. More importantly, I gained a wealth of knowledge and the sense of support on how to better instruct my players in developing their soccer skills.” (T. Singer, personal communication, September 6, 2007)

“I believe I have a better coaching toolbox available to me and some new approaches to my ‘old’ coaching activities that will be invaluable to my players.” (E. Springer, personal communication, August 16, 2007)

“I have to say without a shadow of a doubt the National Youth is definitely one of the best licenses I have undergone its philosophy and its user-friendly atmosphere set it apart from all other American licenses. I am not aware if you know this or not but many people from the UK and their academies are coming to the US to undergo the license. I thank you for allowing the US to lead the world in grass roots football. Thanks for sharing your vision of releasing the game within each and every child worldwide.” (C. Panayiotou, personal communication, Sept 17, 2007)

“You most likely do not remember me as you instruct at numerous courses with many coaches, but I had the privilege of attending the National Youth License course as a participant, in which you were one of the instructors, in December of 2007, in Evansville, Indiana. By the way, the course influenced my life to an extent beyond my expectations. Not only did it change the way the I work with youth participants of all sports, but it also revised the manner in which I raise my own children! Great life lessons in the course!” (J. Jacobson, personal communication, April 17, 2009)

“I feel the NYL is the best coaching course offered – better than the ‘A’, ‘B’ or ‘C’. I was a participant in the very first one given. Tom Fleck and Ron Quinn conducted it for all the National Staff at our annual January gathering in Florida about 20+ years ago looking to sell the merits of the course to US Soccer. I was impressed then and I now make it a mandatory requirement for every staff coach in my club.” (H. Leung, personal communication, December 7, 2009)

“I actually employed many of the ideas and techniques I learned from this specific course in my first practice with my kids upon returning. Sufficed to say, my kids were quick to tell me that it was the most fun practice they had ever had with me. Although I was already confident in my abilities and skills as a youth soccer coach, the course taught me that there is always room for improvement, and that no matter how much I think I know, there is always more I can learn. Indeed, whether I end up passing this course and receive my certificate or not, I’ve already learned much about myself and coaching and am looking forward to instilling all that I have learned into my regular practices.” (M. Mir, personal communication, March 18, 2010)

The coaches’ comments above reflect the impact that the Game in the Child model through the NYL course has changed their coaching practice and methodology. Table 1 illustrates how youth coaches can make a paradigm shift from adult/coach-centered to child/athlete-centered practices.

Table 1

Formation	Traditional Approach	Game in the Child Approach
Individual Maze Game	Tag – One person is it without a ball, everyone else has a ball. The “It” tries to tag someone, and the roles change.	Everybody’s It – Each person has a ball and earns a point every time they can tag another person while still in possession of their ball.
Maze Game	Slalom Dribbling – Athletes are in lines and proceed one at a time dribbling in and out of the cones.	Individual Gates – Cones are randomly arranged as small three-meter goals. Each player with a ball attempts to dribble through as many “gates” as possible within one minute.
Pairs Target Game	Statics Passing – one ball for two players pass back and forth to emphasize inside of the foot passing.	Soccer Marbles – This is a passing game where player take turns trying to hit each other’s ball. The activity begins with one player playing their ball 5–10 meters away. The second player then attempts to pass their ball to hit their partner’s ball. Score one point for a hit. If there is a miss, the moment that the passed ball moves completely pass the target ball, that player’s turn begins, and they try to strike the other ball while it is rolling to score a point. This turns out to also be a running game. This process continues until one player earned 10 points.
Maze & Target	Passing to goal – in two lines, players pass the ball back and forth moving toward the goal and shoot.	Gates in Pairs – same as individual gates, players attempt to see how many goals they can score in one-minute.
Small Groups Maze Game	3v1 – In a circle or grid, 3 players pass the ball while the defender tries to win it or kick it out of the area. When this happens, play stops and the player who lost the ball becomes the defender.	3v1 dynamic – same formation and play, except the defender must win the ball and immediately dribble outside of the area without losing it, then immediately turns, and change’s role with the player who lost the ball. Play is continuous and allows for immediate transition from defense to attack, attack to defense.
Target Game	Pattern Passing to Goal – In groups of three or four, players pass the ball following a predetermined pattern leading to a shot on goal, with or without a defense.	4-Goal Game – In groups of 3 or 4 (could be more) in a 20×40 area, 4 goals are placed at each end. Each team defends and attacks the two end goals.
Team Target Game	Full Scrimmage. Although a very important activity, the scrimmage demands should reflect theme or emphasis of the practice.	Play a 6v6, 7v7, or 8v8 game to two goals with a condition, such as, playing 2 or 3 touches per person, a passing pattern of short-short-long, or all players on the attacking team must be on the same half of the field for a goal to count.

CONCLUSION

The Game in the Child Model encompasses all age-groups and ability levels to ensure that all children have the opportunity for success. It provides the coach, organization, and parents a long-term developmental perspective that is child-centered and evidenced-based. It conveys a philosophical perspective on youth development and coaching and strives to place children on a path of life-long physical and sport participation. The model, as discussed earlier has been part of the US Soccer National Youth License since its inception in 1994 and would like to conclude with this statement from a coach upon implementing the model with his 8U team: “I changed my practice last night to incorporate some of the games and activities we learned about this weekend. It was so hot that I intended to cut the practice short ... but the girls would not let me. They had so much fun and told me so several times. They were so disappointed when I said it was over. What a difference in their attitudes. We still accomplished the same skill sessions ... but everything was a game. Even my daughter, also 8, who has been getting a little ‘burned out’ said, “Dad, that was fun. Can we play that dribbling game again Thursday?” I told her, “Hannah, all you want to do is play games!” She replied, “Yep! All a girl wants is to have fun! Thanks for the course. The proof is in the pudding.” (J. Taylor, personal correspondence, July 22, 2008)

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