

Leapfrogging – “Playing up”

I recently came across this article by Dr Colman Noctor a Child psychotherapist.

He is talking about playing children “up” a category or age group

“It’s questionable that any coach who replaces a child with a player from a younger age-group team, knowing that it’s damaging to the older child, should be coaching children in the first place” notice the word **REPLACE**

So here is some background..

Leapfrogging occurs when a younger child displays impressive ability within their age range and is moved up to the level above. While this might seem harmless, we need to consider the impact on older players who are sidelined.

An older child is prohibited from playing in an age group below, to avoid injury and skill set mismatches. We all understand and support this rule. Yet, there seems to be no such rule to prevent younger children from playing at an age level above their allocated chronological age.

While I have not experienced this with my children, parents have described to me how leapfrogging has devastated their child who has been left on the bench because a younger player has usurped them.

It makes sense to use younger players to make up the numbers so a game can be played or go ahead, but there can be no defence of coaches playing a younger child who already has an allocated team, and leaving an older child on the sideline.

The only reason the younger player is being moved up is to enhance the team’s chances of winning, so the practice is a ‘win at all costs’ mentality, which is toxic in some

children's sports.

I wonder if coaches of children know the impact these decisions have on the child player who has been leapfrogged. Children who play for local teams often attend the same local primary school and team selection in the local club can spill over into the school. For example, a fifth-class child whom a fourth-class child has leapfrogged will often be the butt of jokes in their school and taunted.

Leapfrogging tells the child they 'are not good enough' and says winning is more important than their game time or feelings.

Winning not everything

Parents are often angry when they see their child so upset, but many fear tackling the coaches about it, in case it will disenfranchise their child further, which leads to even less game time. Some explain their inaction by saying the coaches are 'only volunteers'.

"But volunteering does not give anyone the licence to victimise a child, nor should it be a reason for parents to do nothing about it."

There is never a scenario in which winning an underage sporting game is more important than any child's wellbeing. It's questionable that any coach who replaces a child with a player from a younger age-group team, knowing that it's damaging to the older child, should be coaching children in the first place. Winning is not that important.

Undoubtedly, there will be those who argue that 'sport is a lesson for life' and 'tough love' is a part of life, but this is nonsense. It is unfair to make a child miss out on a place in their team just to have a younger player who might increase the chances of winning a game. These are not elite athletes or Olympians: They are children.

While I appreciate that 'equal game time' is not enforceable in the older age groups and sport may inevitably become more serious and competitive, parents must push back on the damage caused by relentless competitiveness.

It's hard enough for a child to miss out on a place in the team when others in their age group are stronger players, but being left out because the coaches pick a player from the younger age group, to achieve a better result, is humiliating and unnecessary.

Parents must demand that every attempt be made to fill the squad places with children from that age bracket, before any child is brought up to play from a younger age group. Only after all options to fill the available spaces with children from the correct age group – regardless of ability – have been exhausted should a younger player be contacted and asked to play.

There may also be an argument for such practices in older age groups, but I disagree and would suggest that as long as there is an age limit, no player should lose game time to a player from a younger age group.

Someone loses out

Childhood and adolescence involve a prolonged period of being streamed, graded and included/excluded far more regularly than throughout adulthood. It is the period of their lives when they experience the most intense scrutiny, and many feel vulnerable. A 2021 report from Sport Ireland stated that adolescents are vulnerable because it is 'a time of great change and upheaval'.

During adolescence, sports should be an outlet for teenagers to get respite from the many stressors they face, not a source of further stress. Today's children are acutely aware of the need to care for their mental health, but often have limited means to do so. The adults in their lives have a

responsibility to support their emotional and social journey and not act as obstacles to their development.

This is not to say that they should grow up in protective bubbles. It is essential that children experience surmountable levels of stress and disappointment – friendship fallout, exclusion or falling short of their expectations – as they are often important learning moments that are necessary for children to develop frustration tolerance and coping skills.

Perhaps we need to see children's sports not as a metaphor or rehearsal for life's adversity, where children learn to cope with humiliation and exclusion, but, instead, as an opportunity for adults to support and nurture children's physical, social and emotional development. Our responsibility as adults is to create well-adjusted young human beings, not simply an impressive trophy cabinet.

A further thread that came from Stuart Armstrong

“I experienced ‘leapfrogging’ last year – what made it worse was the younger players played their matches on a different day so they got to play in their own age group as well.”

The older players had to ‘rotate’ which meant that they had less matches to play.

But everyone still had to pay the same subscription fees!!

There is another danger to ‘leapfrogging’ (beyond the obvious injustice and lack of inclusivity)

It can create a social and cultural environment that sends out signals to young people about how they are valued.

It is a ‘socio-cultural relative age effect’ – in reverse I wrote about this some years ago when I came across an article by Hancock, Adler and Côté that explored these effects

The article outlines 3 effects working together to create a negative experience for young people...

1. The 'Matthew Effect' where those who have ability are given extra support and opportunity which increases that ability which in turn prompts more support...and so on.
2. The 'Galatea effect' is a social experience where an individual's own opinions about their ability and self-worth is influenced by their evaluations of themselves against the other individuals around them – which influences their performance.
3. The 'Pygmalion Effect' refers to the phenomenon in which the belief in an individual's potential articulated by those around them drives higher achievement.

All of these effects have a negative reversal for those that don't benefit – it's a 'double edged sword'

1. Non beneficiaries of the Matthew effect are marginalised and have less opportunity or support
2. Non beneficiaries of the Galatea effect are presented with further proof that they are not good enough (because now younger kids are taking their place!)
3. Non beneficiaries of the Pygmalion Effect pick up on the ways that adults are valuing them by seeing the way that the adults are happy to displace them for 'something better'.

I watched all of this play out last year in a club that I had given a lot of my time to as a volunteer coach for several years only to see the kids that I had been nurturing for years to be treated like this and one by one – walk away.

Including my son!

The irony is that I would hear the leadership of this club lamenting the fact that they can't get teams out at the weekend – that 'young people of today just aren't committed'.

Why should they be committed to a club that treats them like commodities?

My advice to anyone in any kind of leadership role in any community sports club...

If you care about young people, and you care about their experiences, and you care about growing your club and retaining them and nurturing their potential...

Do not allow 'win at all costs' coaches to do this kind of thing. It will undo all of your hard work.

1. It will damage your reputation
2. It will limit the playing pool (and the talent pool)
3. It will see players becoming increasingly transactional
4. It will limit the potential of kids
5. It's a lose-lose proposition