PARENTS ARE IMPORTANT TOO!

Some thoughts for helping your children in tennis

Introduction

Today more children than ever are taking part in tennis. Most do so for fun. Some take the sport more seriously and spend many hours every week training and competing to become better players. Whatever the level of participation PARENTS play an important role. They are naturally interested and want to help as much as possible. Indeed the support and interest of one or other parent is crucial to a child's participation. Yet, it seems that for many parents, the dilemma is how best to help their child.

This guide is aimed at tennis parents who want to maximise their contribution, whilst at the same time ensuring that they, as well as their children, enjoy their involvement in the sport.

Playing the Game

First then, let's consider what tennis is all about and what parents can do to help children starting the game and then continuing to play.

Tennis is a sport for all ages, but the majority of beginners are children. Many of them will start Mini Tennis at the age of 5 or 6. At this age children are beginning an activity which introduces them to a number of different skills. Indeed sometimes parents cannot quite see how these skills relate to tennis! However, different physical skills (running, jumping and throwing, for example) must be learnt at an early age since they are fundamental to all sports. Mini Tennis coaches also teach movement, co-ordination and balance, simple racket and ball skills and the basics of meeting challenges and competition with other children. Important skills and attitudes learnt at this age are vital to the child's future sports – and tennis – development. Without them children are unlikely to develop any potential they have.

Tennis is an individual game, although doubles and more team competitions are being introduced. Some children (and young girls, in particular) find playing in a team much easier to cope with. Mini Tennis and many junior club competitions recognise this and teach children the important elements of competing through team competitions.

However, tennis is ultimately an individual sport, where players are 'alone' on the court. When they are young, they need the right kind of support before, during and after play to get the best from themselves.

Tennis is a game of winners and losers. Children need to learn how to do both and parents need to realise that in tennis, the players really do 'win some, lose some' ALL the time.

Progression will involve ups and downs and it will take between 8 and 12 years for a player to develop their full potential (and at the age of 6 or 7 nobody knows what the potential is!) In addition, just like every subject at school, different things need to be learned first and at the right time. So progress needs to be planned to give each child the chance to reach whatever potential they have. Tennis coaches have been trained to provide good development programmes for children which relate to their age and ability. Training time and enough of it – is important. Competition is important too, but must be the end product of training with children.

Children grow and mature at different rates and at different ages and some have been playing for longer than others – so it is almost impossible to compare children as they learn the game.

To learn well and enjoy the sport children need to be in a safe environment. All parents have the right to, and should, ask about the club and coaches where their child is learning tennis.

Important Issues for Parents

Parents should ask and be happy about

- The coach's qualifications and experience
- Whether the coach holds a CURRENT LTA Coach Licence which ensures they have Child Protection references and a Criminal Records Bureau Disclosure Certificate.
- Whether the coach is insured and licensed
- The arrangements made to ensure the safety and well being of children at the club, tennis centre or park
- The name of the adult responsible for children, so that they can discuss anything to do with playing, coaching or the social environment
- The coach's behaviour with their children both on and of the court. The LTA has strong guidelines for coaches, clubs and all its staff regarding issues of Child Protection in tennis.
- The way the coach conducts his/her session – watch the coach in action conducting a lesson with children on court

The coach should be able to produce their LTA Coach Licence and coaching certificate.

Children should be encouraged to discuss their coaching and tennis so that parents can be aware of anything unusual.

The LTA has also produced guidelines 'Working with Children in Tennis' which are available from the LTA website or your County Office.
The LTA has experienced staff who can give advice in relation to Child Protection issues within tennis.

Becoming a Better Player

As children improve and grow older they will train and compete more and more. The role of the parent must adapt to cope with additional training time and competitions further from home. Parents also have an important role to ensure that young players get enough rest and have balance in their lives.

The needs of other children in the family and parents themselves have to be considered and planned for.

A mother or father can become over-involved and inadvertently put pressure on the child to train harder than they want to, or to win at the expense of enjoying taking part in competition itself. Parents may therefore take their children's tennis more seriously than the children do. Most parents, of course, are

only trying to help but it is important that young players learn to see training and competition not as a threat, but as a healthy enjoyable challenge, over a long period of time.

Watching your child compete can be an emotionally draining experience! Be very aware of how you display your emotion!

It is very important that the child knows that EFFORT as well as success will be rewarded. An over emphasis on winning by one or both parents can result in a fear of failure – with your love and respect being seen by your child as contingent upon winning.

Consider how much your child's sport means to you. Try to gauge your involvement in your child's sport by reading through the issues raised here.

- Do you want your child to win tournaments more than they do?
- Do you show your disappointment if they have a poor result?
- Do you get angry or frustrated when they lose?
- Do you feel that you have to 'psyche' your child up before a match?
- Do you feel that your child can only enjoy sport if they win?
- Do you conduct 'post-mortems' immediately after matches or training? The car journey home can be a very difficult time for young players with over anxious parents!
- Do you feel that you have to force your child to go to training?
- Are you tempted in matches to call the score or call balls in or out, rather than letting the players do it?
- Do you find yourself disliking your child's opponent?

If you have answered yes to any of these issues you may be putting unnecessary pressure on your child, which in turn could very well lead to their eventual rejection of the sport or even lasting damage to your relationship. At best you could already be too involved!

A child should know that effort and not just success will be rewarded.

Some Things Which Might Help

The ideas which follow should help you maximise your contribution to your child's sport whilst minimising any adverse effects.

Do get to know your child's tennis coach – after all the coach will have an important role in their tennis and personal development over time. Both of you and the player should have and know the Long Term Development Programme for the player. This programme will ensure that the right skills are taught at the right time and that competitions are scheduled appropriately. The Long Term Player Development Programme enables both children and parents to remember that the next training session or the next match is only part of the long journey. The LTA has produced a leaflet for parents on Player Development between 6 and 16 years.

Do respect the coach's opinion because, in tennis terms, they are more knowledgeable than you.

Do assess your child's progress against their Long Term Development Programme on a regular basis. Discuss with the coach any adjustments which need to be taken. If you both develop a good relationship and discuss respective responsibilities, decisions, should not come as a surprise! Regular communication and a respect between parents and coaches will help your child.

Do get to know other parents so that perhaps you can share transport for example.

Do encourage effort as well as results – when they are young children do not know the difference between effort and ability. Tennis players do NOT win all the time, especially when other things affect their tennis, such as schoolwork, relationships or just plain growing up and maturing! But they can ALWAYS try hard to put in their best performance and effort.

Do be generous in your applause for both players in a match and help your child to recognise good performances in others.

Do ensure that young children know when to stop and rest.

Do ensure that young children are given realistic challenges so that they can develop their confidence.

Do learn what is important for children to learn at different ages and stages of their tennis development.

Regular communication will help develop relationships and benefit everyone.

Some Things to Avoid

Don't ignore aches and pains – children are often reticent to describe sports-related injuries, especially if it means missing training or competition, so keep an eye on persistent grumbles about health: It is important to take injuries seriously, bearing in mind that apparently minor injuries can become serious unless properly treated.

Don't allow your child to play when they are injured however 'important' a particular tournament or training session seems to be. In junior tennis, tournaments and ratings points can appear very important at the time but are simply part of the long term development of a tennis player. If your child is taking part in a sustained, planned tennis training programme, it is also advisable to get your GP to give the child a check up every year. Many injuries can be prevented and in this respect it is important to pay attention to footwear. The coach will advise as to the best type. If your child does get injured, get professional medical advice as soon as possible. You will find that many hospitals now run sports injury clinics so it is advisable to find out where your nearest clinic is located.

Don't forget that because the child is still growing, prolonged repetitive training is not appropriate. Many other sports use training programmes which are more suitable for an adult. An inappropriate training and competitive schedule can have long term effects on the growth and development of a child.

Don't respond to a result or a mistake with punishment or criticism. First give the child space, then compliment the child on what went well and then give advice, emphasising positive performances. It is vital for a parent to avoid giving the impression that they do not value a child after a loss.

Don't turn a blind eye to bad behaviour, cheating or bad manners. To do so will infer that you condone such behaviour and that you do not consider personal standards and respect for others important in sport. Good behaviour both on and off the court, respect for the game and other players and officials should be taught at a young age and re-enforced at all ages.

Don't coach from the sidelines-players need to be independent and to think for themselves. Don't try to umpire!

Don't ignore other children in the family – sometimes brothers and sisters may feel left out or bored if the whole household revolves around the needs of the young player. It is important to try to keep a balance between tennis and the interests of other members of your family. A tennis player is also a person!

Don't allow the situation to develop where your child is frightened of losing because of the way you respond – a fear of failure can often result in children feigning injury, avoiding certain matches or playing with unnecessary caution.

Don't force a young child to specialise entirely on tennis – children should be allowed to develop their own preferences. In any case up to the age of 15/16 a concentrated diet of playing just one game to the exclusion of all other physical activities does not help develop the skills for tennis. It could well produce not only physical injury, but in the long term, a declining enthusiasm for that game.

Don't always greet your child with 'Did you win?' Try to start with 'Did you enjoy it?' With young players quality of performance matters.

Don't attend every lesson and every match – it is important to your child's future development in sport that they are trusted to make the correct decisions during either training or competition. This is the first stage in the development of self-motivation, self-reliance and independence. A tennis player has to be independent on court. Constant supervision by the parent can easily result in the young tennis player becoming emotionally and otherwise over-dependent on parental presence and advice.

Don't say "we" won or "we" lost – it is important that you don't become so involved in your child's tennis that you find yourself saying "we" at any time. Remember, it is your child who is participating-you are there to support and encourage, not to compete.

It is important to take injuries seriously.

Parental Example is so Important

Providing children are faced with realistic challenges, tennis should be fun at whatever level it is played. With the right parental support not only will your child be able to develop their tennis potential in an enjoyable, rather than stressful, sports environment – you will also be providing them with the opportunity to obtain a sense of achievement, competence and self-worth – as well as reaching the potential they have. Parental example is unbelievably important. After all if YOU cannot cope with the ups and downs of your children's tennis life – how can you expect THEM to?

If you have any queries regarding the safety of your child in tennis or Long Term Development Programmes for young players contact

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