

Motivating Kids on the Court

by Larry Karageanes

Larry operates Club and Resort Tennis Services, a company that provides professional resources for tennis teachers and coaches including drills, video clips, lesson plans, programs, marketing, practice formats, match coaching ideas and much more. With 20-plus year in the tennis industry, Larry has been a frequent speaker at PTR International Tennis Symposia and has presented at the USTA Tennis Teachers Conference. PTR Members receive a 33% discount to www.jobeasier.com Just enter 0412PTR in the discount box on the registration page.



photo Anni Miller

What excites kids?

Remember when you were a kid; how excited you were about new toys, pleasurable things like certain foods or trips, surprises, recognition, attention and appreciation? (These things probably still excite and motivate you.) This excitement always seemed to provide the energy to overcome any obstacles. Kids like fun and pleasure, new things and excitement. They also like to achieve things to have some sort of success.

So how do we motivate kids on the tennis court? Obviously, it would become expensive and time consuming to provide new toys for every kid every time they stepped on the court. But you can provide the opportunity for them to "use new toys" like a ball machine, different types of balls (foam, beach, balloons, etc.), and other unique and fun teaching aids. Here are some other tennis specific examples:

- Trips - trips to college or pro matches or just practicing at a different facility or on different surfaces
- Fun - games, use targets, competitions, variety
- Surprises - guest appearance, special refreshments, costumes, new games or drills
- Rewards - take something home, examples: "golden ball" (paint a tennis ball) or a "silver ball" (wrap a ball in aluminum foil), stickers, player of the week certificate, etc.
- Success - base it on effort, different types of games (on and off-court)

The following are some other ideas about motivating kids keeping in mind different ages.

• Ages 6-8

A lot of these kids are still trying to master fundamental physical skills - jumping, throwing, kicking and catching, so use a variety of activities and games with the biggest focus on fun. All the games or activities don't always have to be tennis. These kids may not be ready for the pressure of competition or complex strategy. Stress basics and lots of encouragement and use a TEAM atmosphere often.

• Ages 9-12

These ages will understand the rules. It's important for them to learn how to handle setbacks and losses, but tennis should still be fun. They will feel frustrated by failure, but will begin to learn from their mistakes. Consider the child's temperament when teaching and developing their game. Often kids will look for role models during these ages.

Stumbling Blocks

Kids need to learn how to fail. Everyone will fail often on the tennis court. It will become a big problem if they take a "loser attitude" off the court, or if it holds them back from competing or trying. You can relate to kids the example of professional sports teams. Ask them about their favorite sports teams and how losing doesn't permanently defeat the pro players, because the team will learn from and accept the loss, but not stop trying. How often will kids fail on a tennis court because they quit trying?

It's usually more about the "fear" of failure than the failure itself. Many kids blow failure out of proportion. You usually don't take it literally when a player says, "If I lose to her (a much lower ranked player), I'd just die." But that fear is real, and it will often have a negative effect. Kids must learn to use "I want to do the best I can" as motivation rather than "I must win". Kids of all ages must learn to accept failure as part of tennis (and life) and learn to bend rather than break from the pressure.

A combination of fun and learning from failures on the court will help motivate kids. A motivated player will often practice and play more, which leads to improvement and success, often increasing their motivation. Start this "motivation ball" rolling and your job gets easier!