

Essentials for Maximizing Incidental Learning with Kids Tennis



photos courtesy HEAD Penn Racquet Sports

by Mike Barrell

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Why is it that we believe we are the ones who make things happen? Surely, we teach and therefore children learn. It's scary to think that we are not in full control, and the truth is we're not.

When it comes to getting children to learn the myriad of skills, tactics and nuances of the game, we are only a small part of the process. As coaches, we are like the steering wheel for the player, or maybe the co-pilot. We cheer on our player, add some quality information, trying to improve and shape skill, at the same time adding motivation and excitement to sessions, but the truth is much of the learning process happens without us!

Incidental learning describes the learning that happens despite it not being the focus of the session. Kids learn far more than we set out to teach them, good and bad. Although it may not be our conscious intention to make this happen, much is due to the environment that we create.

To prove my point, here is the example I use in workshops - a real experience that happened when my daughter was only six years old. Having landed in the US at the end of a long flight, I phoned home to speak to my family. My daughter answered the phone. "Where are you, Daddy?" she asked. "I am in America." "I know you are in America, Daddy, but where?" came her response. "I am in Washington," I replied. "Oh, like George Washington, the President," she said. My instant response was, "How does a six year old British girl know about George Washington?" Her very calm and simple response, "Lisa Simpson told me!" Lisa Simpson is a cartoon character!

This confirmed the sponge phenomena. Kids soak up information. It is so vast that much of it is beyond our control, and although we seek to guide and stimulate this process, the reality is that kids are learning all the time, from the minute they wake in the morning until their little heads touch down on the pillow at night.

If all this information is being processed and learned every minute of every day, what can we do to make the process of learning the game of tennis more efficient, more effective? The truth is, we must pay attention to the environment that we create. Use these simple rules to make learning more effective.

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4 Golden Rules

- Be a Role Model
- Where is the Court?
- Having an Opponent
- Moving

Be a Role Model

One of the major ways in which children learn is through imitation. Being a role model for players means being alert, enthusiastic, loving the game and showing it. Having fun with your players and showing them how you respond to winning and losing can provide the framework for them to develop their own set of behaviors and beliefs. Don't underestimate it, **you** are the mirror for your players and influence all that they do. Don't forget that this includes how you move and not just how you hit the ball, as well as your intensity when playing and rallying. This is still the most powerful learning strategy used by young players, so ignore this at your peril.

Where is the Court?

It is my experience that many coaches are limited by the boundaries that are permanently marked on the court. By using throw down lines, think about how you can change the court to match the skill. Too often children are asked to play in an undefined space - one without boundaries or borders. This creates a lack of focus. After all, tennis is about making the ball do something in a given space. By always defining the court, players will:

- Quickly understand the concept of in and out
- Focus on keeping the ball in the court area
- Have a context in which to learn the key skills required to play in that space

Having an Opponent

It is often said that tennis is a game of sending and receiving. The truth is that tennis is mostly a game of receiving and sending, since only one shot in each point starts with the sending process, the serve. For all other shots, the process starts with receiving - seeing the ball, making a decision and executing on that decision. Therefore, it's essential that we create a lesson environment where players are exposed to the receiving process over and over again. It takes a very short time to learn the shape of the stroke, yet the focus of most sessions is on the refinement of this technical shape. The major limiting factor stopping young players from playing is reception and not sending. So try this very simple rule - whenever a ball is sent over the net, there should be someone to receive it.

Get players to work in pairs and feed to each other, and while you might be tempted to return to basket feeding when children have limited success throwing the ball to each other, stay strong, stick with it, and you will find that by working together, children quickly learn to feed the ball to each other and are developing the skills to receive the ball. The benefits of creating this environment are:

- Players practice receiving the ball
- Players understand that there is someone at the other end of the court, and learn to cooperate and be an opponent, and equally to understand that they will have an opponent
- Players will hit a lot more balls as lines become non-existent

Moving

If the focus of too many of your drills is around having players hit from a static position, then you are not teaching tennis, you are teaching golf! Tennis is a game where you start from a ready position, move to the ball, balance, strike the ball, and recover to a relevant position. How is this reflected in the lessons you conduct? Add a simple movement cycle and you will help your players understand what tennis is all about. There are a few keys to remember to help reinforce this throughout lessons.

Avoid having your players stand on dots or spots. It sends the signal that they don't have to move and that the ball will come right to them. Instead, have students stand behind a line. This is surely a more relevant principle for tennis.

Add recovery to every practice. Players should learn at a young age that tennis is about playing a series of shots, and is not just about hitting one and admiring their achievement. Each shot, even the serve, should be followed by recovery in every practice.

Allow players to feed to each other. This "inaccurate" or "unpredictable" feed is actually closely replicating the skills required to play the game. If you choose to feed once the players have established a basic contact point or action, avoid feeding too many balls directly to them. Instead, feed a few steps away so that players have to move. Over time, gradually increase this to create progressively more challenging feeds that require more movement skills.

Adding this simple extra means that players:

- Understand that tennis is about moving, not standing still and hitting
- Develop more athletic skills
- Will be better prepared for competition when opponents do not hit the ball back to them

In Action

Let's take a simple practice familiar to all coaches:

- Players line up to practice the serve
- They stand at the baseline and hit two serves
- After two serves they go back to the basket, collect two balls and join the line again

Now let's revise that:

- A player is at the baseline ready to serve
- Another player stands at the other end of the court holding a cone ready to receive the ball
- The player hits his first serve, then recovers to the center of the baseline (eventually this will develop into the recovery position relevant to the placement of the serve)
- The receiving player catches the ball in the cone and recovers to the center of the baseline, dropping the ball back in a hopper
- Both players then return to their original starting positions

Doesn't that seem a bit more like tennis? Of course! Our teaching points are likely to still be the same, but players are being placed in a much better environment, learning incidentals.

- They have a court - aiming for the service boxes
- They have an opponent - the returner is catching in the cone, practicing reception
- They complete the movement cycle - ready, respond, recover

I have kept the description of this drill very simple intentionally, as it is a serve and return drill for players on the 36' court. I have not included teaching points since, of course, these are dependent upon the children in front of you and where they are in their development. But, consider these principles as essentials with every practice and your progress with tennis kids will be much more rapid.

Remember that children especially are molded by the environment around them. We can all be more efficient by thinking about the environment that we create with every practice. If you change nothing else about your coaching, consider these four as essentials:

- Be a dynamic role model in everything that you do
- Define the court clearly so that players understand the boundaries and the context of the task
- Get players working in pairs to ensure development of receiving skills as well as sending, and to develop the idea of being an opponent
- Add the movement cycle - remember, tennis is not golf!

