

## When you are a Tennis Parent – Part I

At evolve9 we want to give every child the opportunity of developing to their full potential, not just as a player but also as a person. You of course have more influence over this process than any on else, but also we understand that you will have many questions along the way. Unlike Coaches who have to attend training and pass a course to do their job; parents have to find their own way. We hope that this and future articles will provide some answers to your many questions.

### Being a Parent

Something happens to you when your child is born. You move from being an “adult” to being a “parent” and it’s a very different stage in your life. You are now responsible for this whole other person, your child, who looks to you to provide everything it needs. Non Parents often don’t understand that you now face a constant battle between your head and your heart as you try to raise your child.

Your head will always tell you what is logical. Things like, “Children should learn from their own experiences!”, “Children need to develop independence!” “Children need to be responsible for their own actions!”

Your Heart on the other hand will give you emotional messages like, “They are only small!” “I can’t bear to see them unhappy!” “How could that mean child do something like that to my child!”

Inevitably in moments of great stress, or distress for our child, the heart overtakes the head and we sometimes take the “protect at all costs” mentality, doing sometimes strange things to make the world right for our child. So you need to understand that this is not our fault, we all do odd things sometimes and often are not sure if we did the right thing, and we have the same questions!

Being a parent is a challenge, and as every child is so different there is no real guide to lead you through. Add to this that you are a parent of a “Tennis kid” and now you are a “Tennis Parent”.

Your challenges will come in two areas:

- 1) Being a parent when your child is taking lessons or attending practices
- 2) Being a parent when your child is competing

In this first article we are going to look at what you should know and do as a Tenniskids parent when your child is taking lessons.

### Preparing them for lessons

When a child starts learning the game they may be going to a new place, meeting new friends and a new coach. You may want to tell them that tennis is a game that sometimes takes a while to learn so you don’t expect them to be a tennis star and you are just happy if they try their best and have fun. You may also want to agree a timeline, letting them know how many weeks the programme will go on for. Children at this age encounter many new things every week but they still like routine and consistency so be really supportive at the start until your child grow more familiar with the club, coach and format of the sessions.

### Understanding Red, Orange and Green

The ideas used in 10 & under Tennis have now been adapted by many tennis nations across the world. There are three stages based upon the colours of a traffic light. Red is the first stage, it is played across the width of the court and is for the youngest players. Players will usually develop the skills of serve, rally and score in this stage and will also spend longer in this stage than any other. There are 3 award levels for this stage to allow players to progress gradually and ensure that they can see their achievements as they go. The more skills players develop in red the easier it will be to make the transition to orange. In the orange stage players will play on a court that is approximately  $\frac{3}{4}$  the length of the regular court. As players will spend less time at this stage there are only 2 award levels. Players will then progress to the full court but using a ball that has  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the pressure of a regular ball. This is the green stage.

## Moving to the Next Colour

As a parent remember that it is not a race to get your child through the stages. Just like building a house you have to develop skill sets in the right order, if you move to the next level without developing all the skills in the awards then it's like trying to build the walls of the house when you have not yet finished the foundations. If you rush through one part of the process then it will be more difficult to develop the next skill set. This is when the child can get frustrated and lose confidence and could even mean they decide that they don't want to play anymore! Children will develop at different rates and there is no evidence to suggest that just because a player seems to be ahead of their peers in skill development that they will not be caught up by other players at a later stage...so don't take any short cuts.

## Getting the right racket

Choosing a racket is a very important step. Get a racket that is too big and your child will struggle to control it properly and you may limit their progress. In 10 & under Tennis we use the different size courts and there are recommended racket sizes based upon these. They are

Child Height	Approximate Age	Racket Length	10 & under Tennis Stage
91cm	5 - 6	48cm - 54cm	RED
91cm – 122cm	6 – 8	54cm - 58cm	RED
122cm +	8 - 9	58cm – 64cm	ORANGE
130cm - 152cm	9 - 10	64cm – 66cm	GREEN

However children may be tall or small for their age so to measure a child correctly get them to stand up straight, hold the racket in their hand, but pointing down towards the ground. Check that the racket does not touch the ground. If it does it is too long for them. As a rule if you are not sure if which size your child should use you should always choose the smaller racket, but of course talking to your child's coach will also help if you are unsure. There is no evidence to suggest that a racket that is too short will harm the technical development of a player; however there is significant evidence to suggest that children who use a racket that is too big may struggle to develop effective and efficient technical skills.

## How Much Tennis?

As parents most of us are keen for our children to experience many different activities, to be provided with opportunities to do many things that perhaps we were not able to when we were younger. Doing different sports and activities can help a child to develop an all round athletic ability that they can apply to all sports as they grow up. However there is a balance to be found. Children will generally enjoy most the activities that they are good at, so you also need to give your child the chance to be good at tennis. Playing tennis every day of the week will be too much for young children but you should certainly look for your child to be playing two or three times a week. The problem of taking just one lesson a week and not playing at any other time is that children do not get enough chance to retain what they have learned. In the seven days between one lesson and the next much of the learning is forgotten. At a young age playing three times a week will give your child the opportunity to progress quickly and feel really competent and therefore confident about their tennis.

## What to expect

The coach's first job is to create the environment to motivate and inspire your child to want to play the game and then keep playing it. Teaching of course is a vital part of this process but teaching what is appropriate to each child is really the key. The first priority of the coach should be to get your child to learn to play the game. The ITFs Play and Stay Campaign which takes many of its principles from 10 & under Tennis uses the phrase "Serve, Rally and Score". These should be the priorities and coaches should teach technique appropriately to enable this to happen. Having a forehand like Roger Federer is nice but will take a long time to develop (after all it took him years to develop it!) and so simple skills should be learned at the start including simple contact points, tracking and receiving the ball, moving and balancing. Developing all the technical and tactical skills in tennis requires years and years of practice and play, and there is a simple and logical order, so don't focus only on stroke shapes and refined techniques, instead focus on skills that will enable your child to really play.

## Understanding tennis – It's not all about the racket

Tennis is a game of reception and projection. It's not about just hitting one ball, but hitting the ball back and forth over the net, trying to out manoeuvre the opponent. As reception skills are so important, unlike golf, it's a game where you can have the best looking strokes in the world but if you can't move into position and judge the ball effectively they count for nothing...coaches have been trained to understand this. They know that it is not all about the shape of the strokes and in order to teach a child to rally effectively they need to develop reception skills. This is done in many different ways and some of these may not involve a racket. Controlling the racket is important of course but equally important is controlling the body and judging the ball.

## Qualities of a Great coach

A great coach is one that will

- Inspire and motivate your child
- Understand your child and talk to them as a child
- Understand the differences between an adult learner /player and a 10 & under tennis kid
- Provide other opportunities to play other than just lessons
- Help your child make progress
- Communicate with you, the parent

Of course you want your child to have fun and enjoy their tennis, but the great coaches manage to do this and help children develop a love of the game. It's not just about running round hitting balls and playing games. Children will quickly become bored with silly games that do not really resemble tennis, so make sure that your coach is really teaching your child how to play.

## Understanding the Learning process

The learning process can be a frustrating one. Often children may seem to be struggling with a skill for weeks and then suddenly they grasp it. The opposite is also true; sometimes they grasp a skill almost immediately and move quickly on to developing it into a much more advanced skill. There are many factors influencing the rate of learning, some which can't be easily controlled or influenced. As adults we often forget how hard it is to learn a new skill because our daily life is usually based around our job and this is usually something that we are good at already. Be patient, as long as some progress is being made and they are having fun then the best thing that you can do is to be positive and encourage your child.

## Where is the baseline?

The baseline is the end of the court. And there will be a baseline for you as a parent too when your child starts taking lessons. This is the imaginary line that you should not cross. Part of taking lessons is about the child learning, but it's also about building a very important relationship with the coach. Watch from the side of the court and only go on court if the coach specifically asks you to.

When it comes to tennis matters you should understand that you are paying the coach to teach your child, they are the expert and you should trust them. Of course you can ask questions to get clarification but you should not interfere. Coaches often report that children behave very differently when the parents are around, so while it may be a good idea to watch lessons to show that you are there for your child, it is an equally good idea to not attend every lesson that your child takes. Once they are happy with the coach and club try to attend a maximum of 75% of lessons.

## Doing Your Bit

10 & under tennis provides an easy way for you to play tennis too. You have a unique opportunity of going on court and playing with your child. Key to this is remembering that you are the parent and not the coach; so go and have fun together, practice the things that your child has been learning in lessons, just avoid trying to teach. Your child wants you to be the parent not the coach!