

Top ten tips to help fully engage with players when working outdoors in the cold weather

- **Young children are not mini-versions of adults**

As much as they will be adults one day, the young players in your care are certainly not there yet. We must understand and recognise that we can't treat them in the same way as we would our peers. We must always have the well-being of each of the children in our care as the priority. The session must fully engage the young players no matter what the weather.

- **Get the players moving as soon as they arrive**

In cold weather keeping the players busy is vital. Young children will get cold quickly – almost without noticing – and once they are cold they will really struggle to warm up again. Telling them to run around a bit more won't help either unfortunately – it's too late by then.

An arrival activity is vital. The children should arrive warm and getting them active early is crucial. Little games of tag, mini 1v1s or 2v2s, and small fundamental movement games will all help to do this. Make sure you have this section in your session plan ready to go whatever the weather.

- **No queues and keep all the players involved**

Having queues of children waiting for their turn is a big no-no in any session let alone on a cold, wet day. Can you find ways to make sure all the players are all involved all of the time? If you are struggling for equipment, could you set up two or three smaller areas rather than one to cut down any form of waiting?

- **Use games during training**

Consider what the players expect football to look like. What's the first question they ask: 'When are we playing a match?' Wet and cold sessions are perfect for match time as it keeps them all involved and active. Play mini 3v3s on a couple of pitches to keep all involved and then carefully manage how you intervene to coach.

- **Work with individuals rather than stopping the whole group**

Children don't like coaches talking for ages at the best of times but on a wet or cold day it's even more important to keep communication concise. Can you coach individuals whilst the game plays on around them? Could you give quick challenges to players 'on the fly' as they pass you? Could you set yourself a challenge to intervene for no longer than 30 seconds? The kids would really appreciate this.

- **Consider practice design and progression**

Spend time on planning the session. Will you use a technique-skill-game format or whole-part-whole or a myriad of other templates? Which will increase playing time the most and which may lead to times of relative inactivity? How can you create excitement and therefore engagement? Can you always have a scoring system in place? Can you ensure that if any defender wins the ball, they have a way to attack and score too to keep games flowing?

How you progress the session needs to be thought about too. Can you progress some players without stopping all of them at the same time? Think about working the session with players in groups; perhaps advance the better players first before gradually progressing the weaker players later on, meaning that they'll get the extra practice time they need. This also means that as you talk to each group two-thirds of your team are still active and warm.

- **If in doubt: play matches**

If you're ever in doubt or get caught by the rain or cold weather half-way through a session, revert back to several small matches. Smaller sized matches promote ball contacts, in and out of possession play, transition and game craft. They also ensure that players are never more than one pass away from the ball, so engagement and activity levels stay high.

- **Have some rules about correct kit**

It's important to have some rules or conditions regarding kit. Children should not be arriving in t-shirt and shorts to sessions in December. Parents sometimes feel that it's okay because they'll be running around at football – yes, but they will only be warm if they start warm in the first place.

We can take note from cricketers playing in early April or late September. They wear lots of thin layers rather than a couple of large ones to keep heat in. Encourage your players to do the same. They can always take some off, if they get too hot.

- **Safety and welfare are top priority, but each individual is different**

We have a responsibility to the children and their parents to look after them and always to make decisions in their best interests. Safety and welfare are the top priorities, but we also mustn't shy away from playing just because the weather isn't great.

What we must always understand is that every child is different, some will love and thrive in the terrible weather, whereas others will hate it. Either way, they are both likely to remember it for a lifetime.

We must make certain that our coaching fosters a love of the game and a love of playing it. Make sure that when you are next faced with bad weather you make decisions and plans based on the best interests of the children that turn up each week to play.

- **Find a way to use the weather to create memories**

Some of our fondest experiences as a kid were playing outside in terrible weather. Some of us still remember our first game in snow and the excitement playing with an orange ball for the first time, the sliding tackles that seemed to last a full 30 yards through the midfield mud-pit and the diving headers that gave such a splash landing that if you timed it well could soak the watching parents!

We must appreciate that we could be building memories for our players; let's make sure they are positive ones where the kids can't wait to play the next time it rains.

Starting to implement all of the above is a good foundation to start from.