The Player in the Game

Seven ideas about how young players see, learn and grow in football, and the questions they raise.



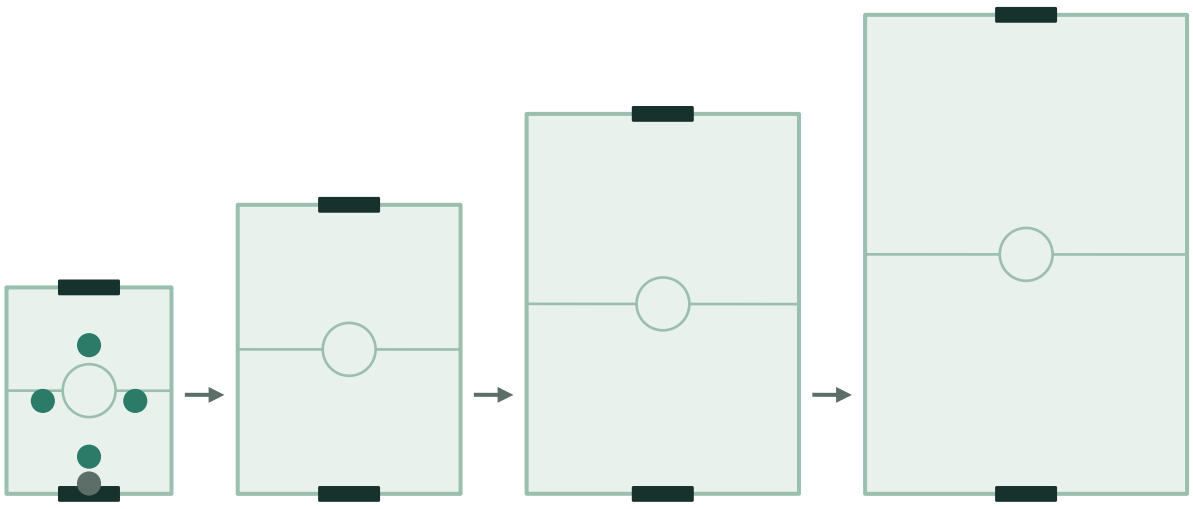
Jonathon O'Neill

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What Does the Game Look Like?

The same game, four formats. 5v5, 7v7, 9v9 and 11v11 each set different problems for players at different stages.

one game, growing: more players, more space, more choices, more to see



WONDER

What does "the real game" look like to a 6 year old, and is it the game we see?

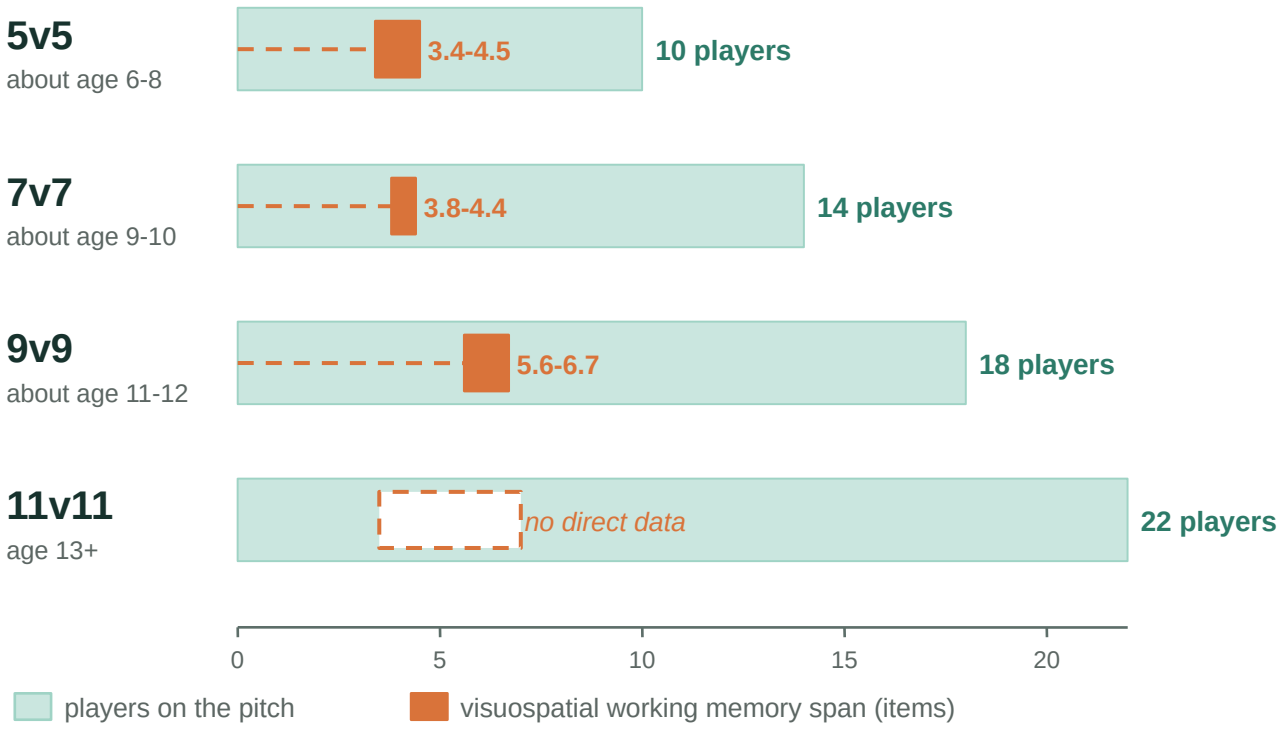
From 5v5 to 11v11, what changes: the problems players face, or just the numbers?

If a format were designed around the child rather than the adult game, what would it look like?

What does the research say about small-sided formats and development?

What's on the Pitch, What They Can Hold

Every format puts more players on the pitch. Working memory grows too, but not at the same rate.



OUR INFERENCE The ages per format are approximate, and a pitch is not a span task: players chunk, and not every player matters to every action.

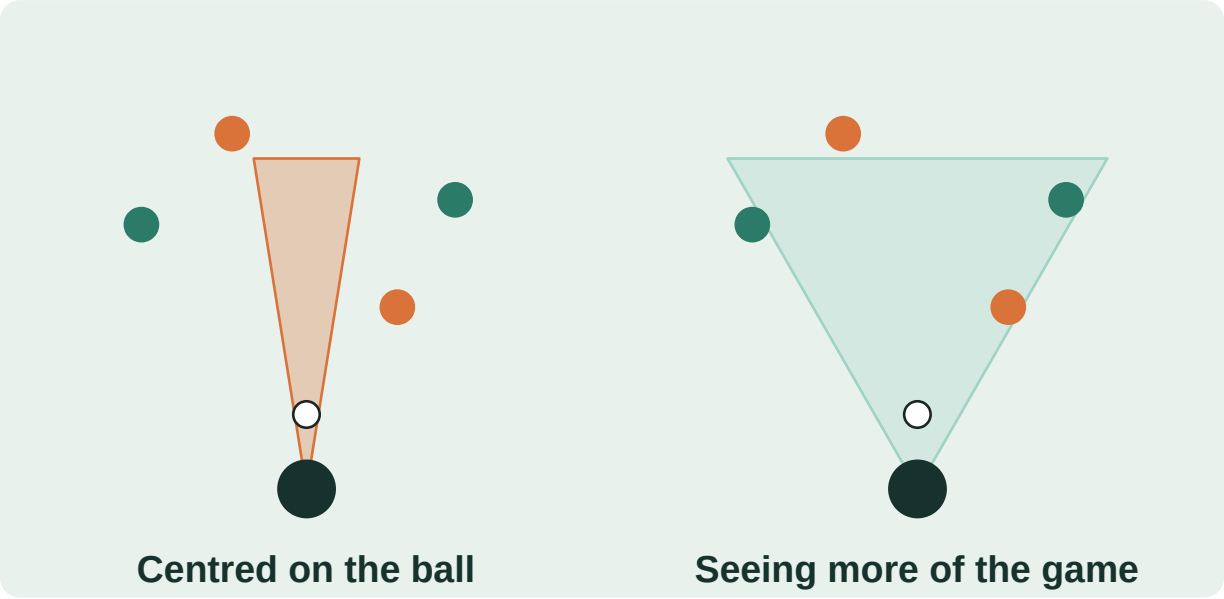
WHAT THE LITERATURE SAYS

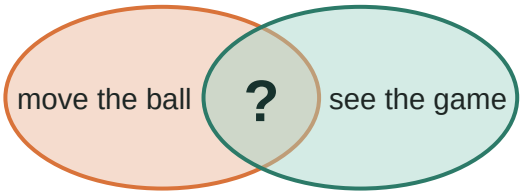
- Visuospatial working memory span (items held while using them): 3.4 to 4.5 at age 6-8, 3.8 to 4.4 at 9-10, 5.6 to 6.7 at 11-12 (Gathercole et al., 2004; Simmering and Perone, 2013; Arsalidou, 2013).
- Beyond 12 there are no direct figures. Pascual-Leone (1970) modelled growth to about seven units by 15.
- Adult capacity: seven plus or minus two with chunking (Miller, 1956), around four without (Cowan, 2001).

Where it runs out: No working memory figures at this resolution after age 12, and span tasks are lab tasks, not pitches.

The Child in the Game

Piaget: at the preoperational stage (about 2 to 7) children tend to centre on one feature at a time. Football asks them to dribble and see at once.





two tasks, one player

WONDER

If a 6 year old centres on one thing, what are we asking when we say "dribble and look up"?

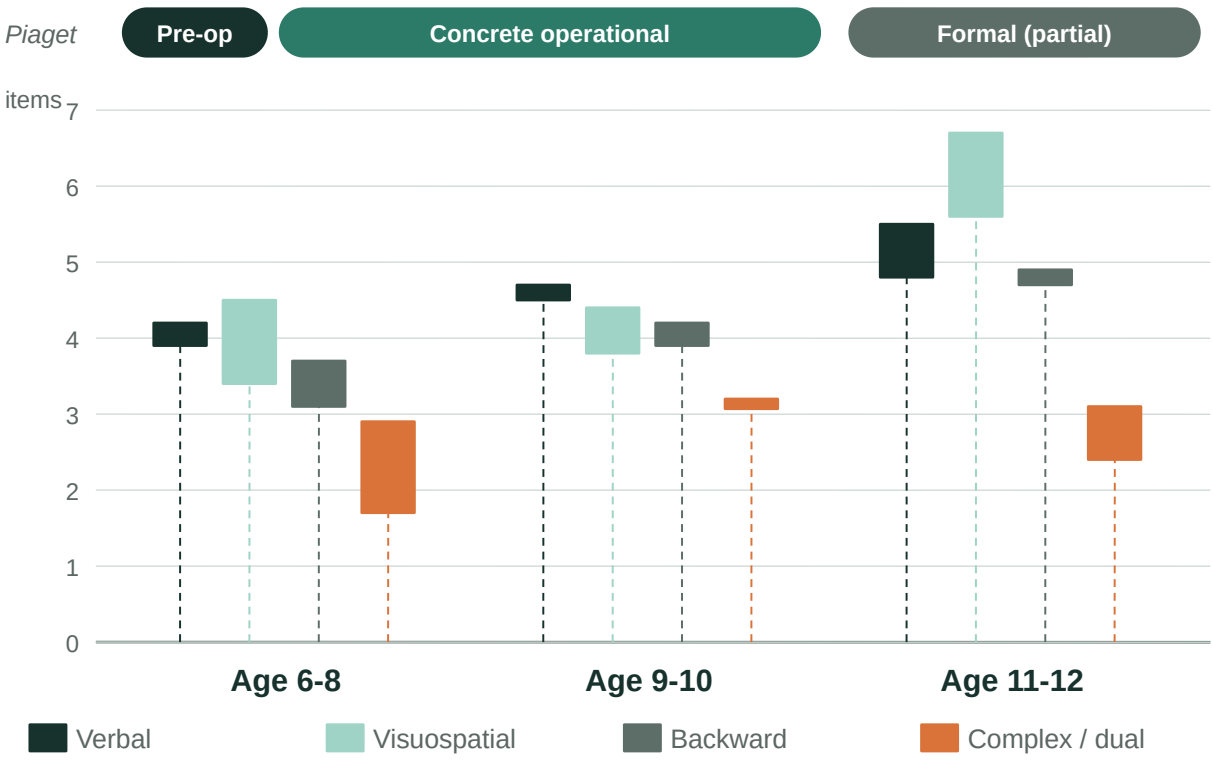
Is the 5v5 player who never passes making a bad decision, or the only one available to them?

Can training speed up seeing more of the game, or does it wait for development?

What does the research say about attention and dual tasks in young children?

Working Memory, Age 6 to 12

Average spans across studies, by task type. The bars show the range reported, in items.



Communicating with the football environment is the first part of a dribble, not a second task. So what does a dual-task span tell us about a 5v5 player?

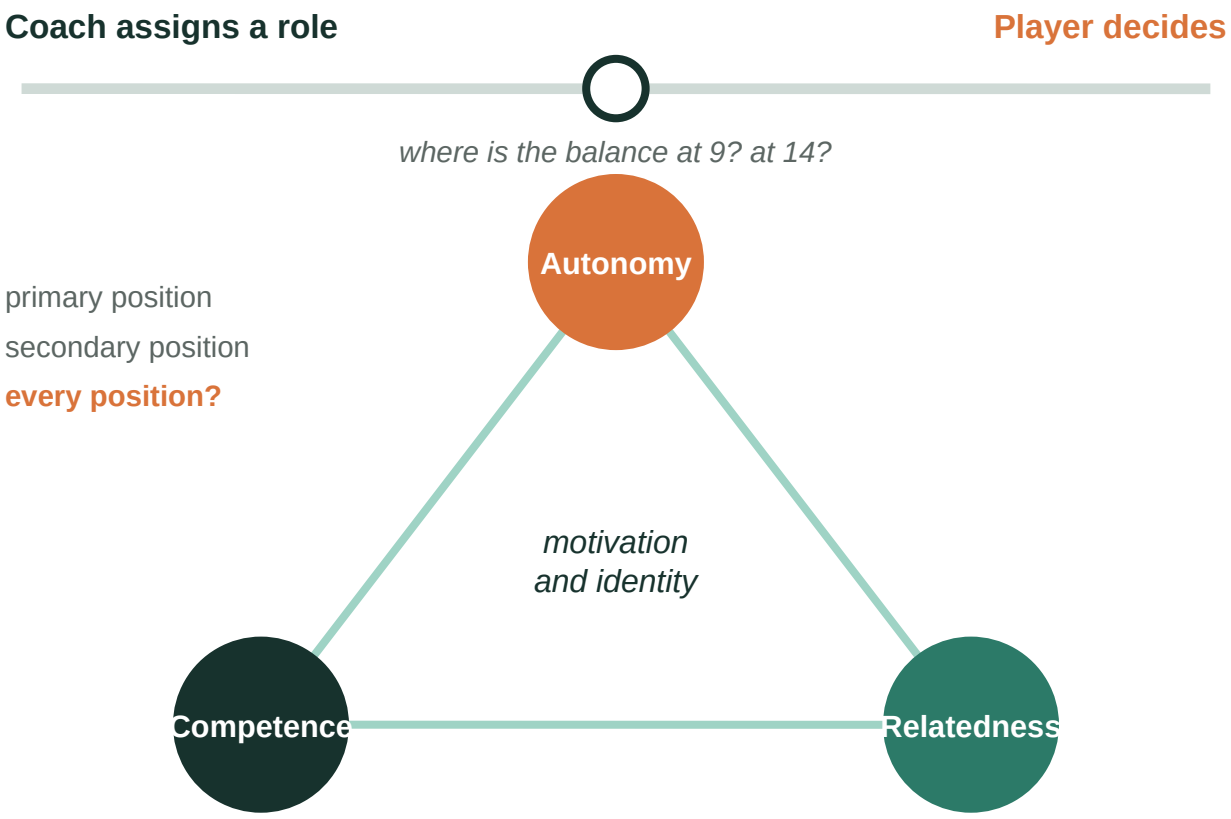
WHAT THE LITERATURE SAYS

- Verbal span rises steadily: 3.9-4.2 (6-8), 4.5-4.7 (9-10), 4.8-5.5 (11-12).
- Complex or dual-task span, doing two things at once, is the lowest of all: 1.7-2.9 items at 6-8.
- Piaget's stages overlap rather than switch (Siegler's overlapping waves). Under fatigue or pressure, older strategies return.
- Chunking starts to help from about age nine.

Where it runs out: The dataset stops at 12. The visuospatial row is noisy, and the dual-task dip at 11-12 reflects different studies, not a real decline.

Who Am I in This Team?

Erikson: industry vs inferiority (about 6 to 12), then identity vs role confusion (from about 12). Self-determination theory: autonomy, competence, relatedness.



WONDER

How does a coach help a player find a role without boxing them in?

What if players chose their own position for a session? What would you learn?

Does belonging in your team come from the coach, the role, or the group?

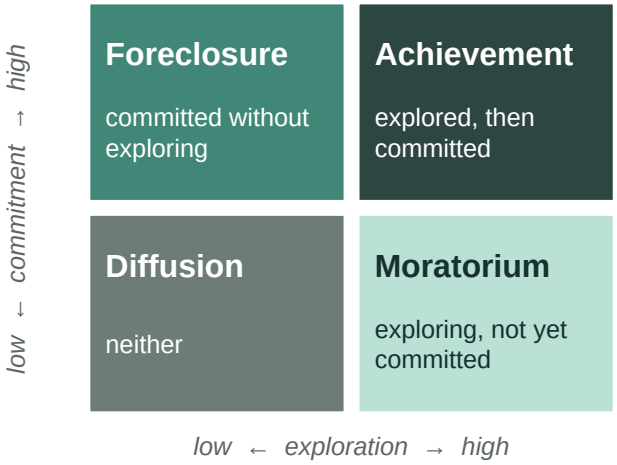
Who in your team feels least competent right now, and how would you know?

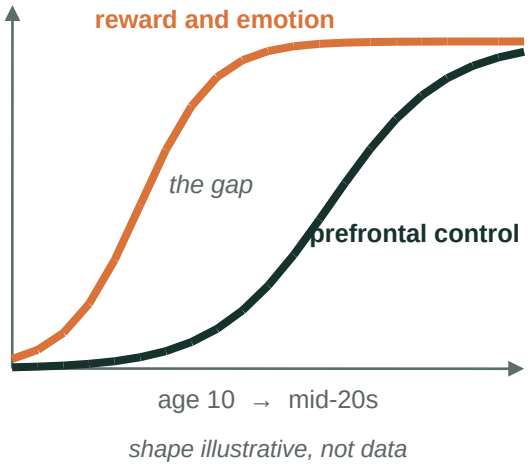
What does the research say about autonomy-supportive coaching?

Identity Across the Bands

Erikson frames what is socially at stake at each age. Marcia gives the identity statuses. The adolescent brain explains the timing.

U7-U11	U12-U16	U17-U21
Industry vs inferiority	Identity vs role confusion	Identity, toward intimacy





shape illustrative, not data

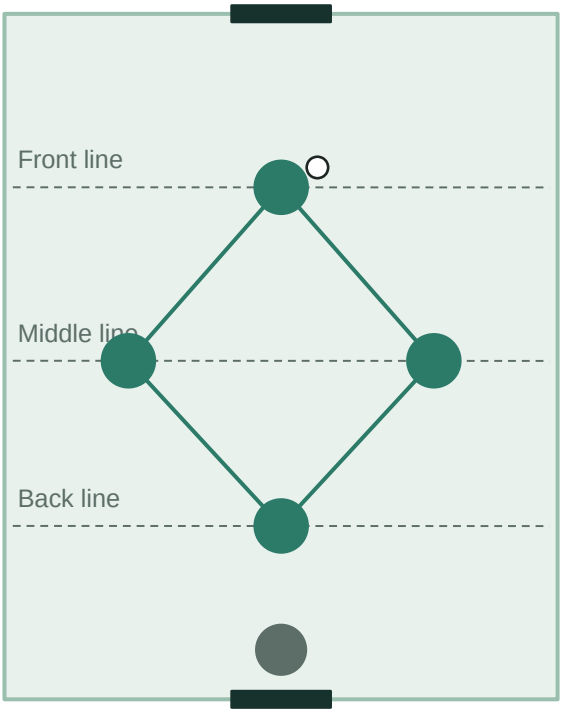
WHAT THE LITERATURE SAYS

- Erikson (1968): industry vs inferiority runs to about 11, with competence as the currency. Identity vs role confusion opens around 12.
- Marcia: identity forms on two axes, exploration and commitment, giving four statuses.
- Reward and emotion systems mature earlier than the prefrontal control that regulates them, which keeps maturing into the mid-twenties (Casey, Jones and Hare, 2008; Steinberg, 2010).

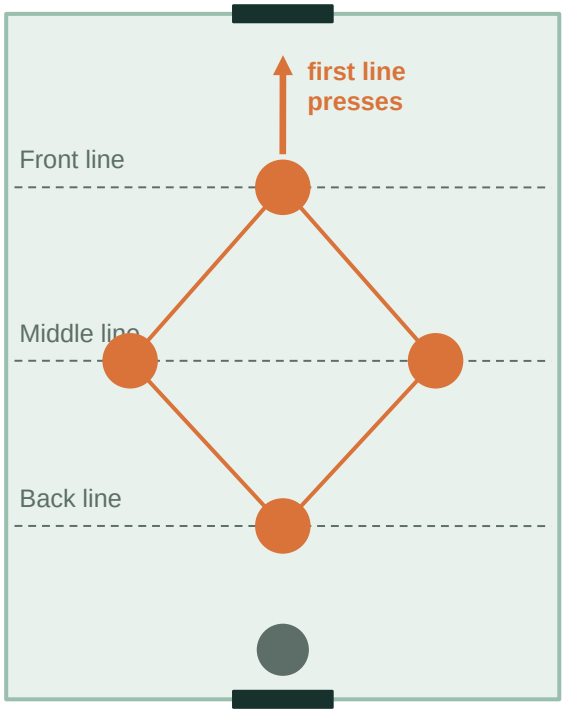
Where it runs out: Erikson is a lens, not measured stage data. The brain mismatch is referenced to adolescence broadly, not to two-year bands.

Lines, Not Labels

"I'm an attacker." "I'm a defender." Or: every player attacks when the team has the ball, and every player defends when it doesn't.



With the ball: all attack



Without the ball: all defend

WONDER

If everyone attacks and everyone defends, what does "defender" mean?

What does a 5v5 front-line player do the moment the ball is lost?

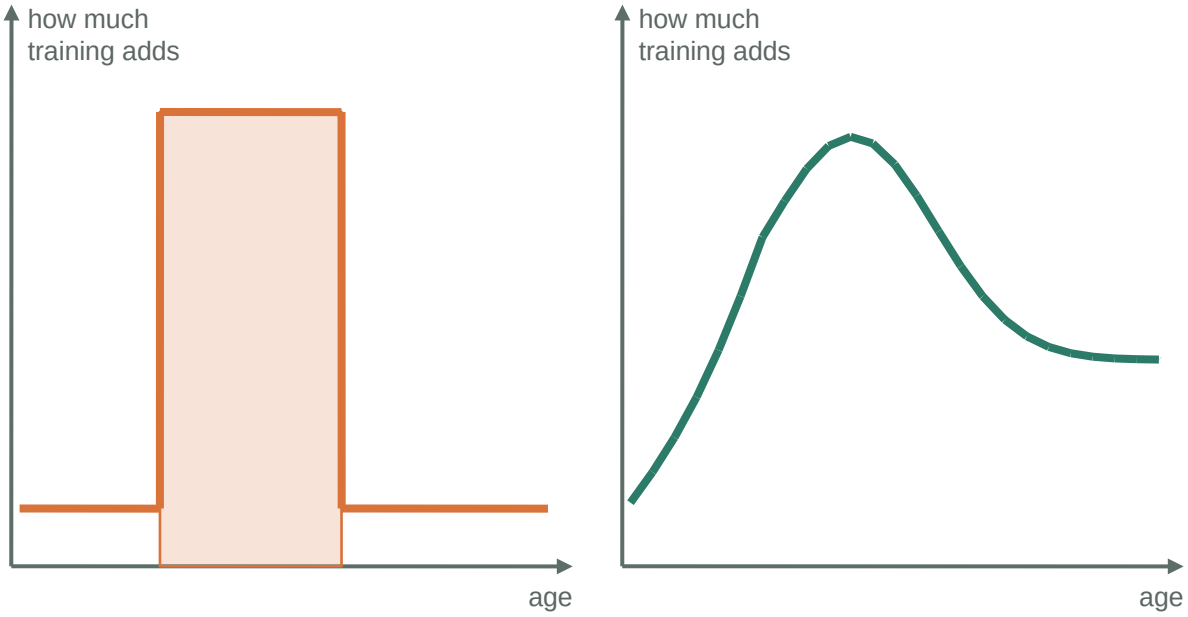
How early should players play every line, and what might they lose by settling into one?

What do your players call themselves, and where did that come from?

What does the research say about early specialisation and sampling?

Windows: Doors or Rooms?

Some players arrive having missed coordination and balance opportunities. Are development windows real, fixed, or plastic?



A door that shuts **A room that stays open**

or something else?

WONDER

Are development windows doors that close, or rooms you can still enter later?

If a player missed a window, do we build it away from the game or inside it?

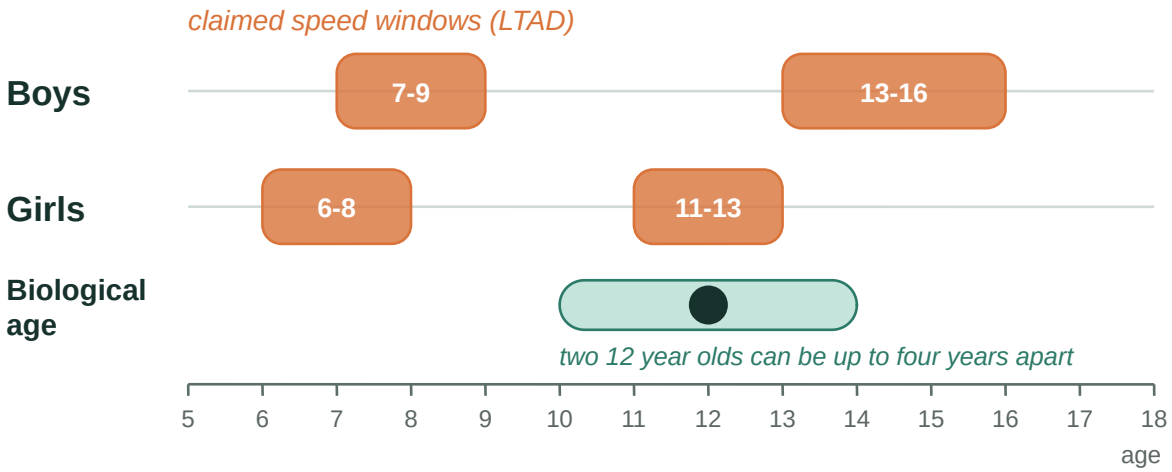
Does a player need balance and coordination "in general" to perform football actions well?

How do we keep training age-appropriate while filling gaps from earlier?

What does the research say about sensitive periods and plasticity?

Windows: What's Claimed, What's Supported

LTAD's speed windows are the clearest case of a gap between a model and its evidence.



The model says

Miss a window and you may not reach full potential.

The evidence says

No longitudinal support. Trainable throughout. Maturation matters more than the calendar.

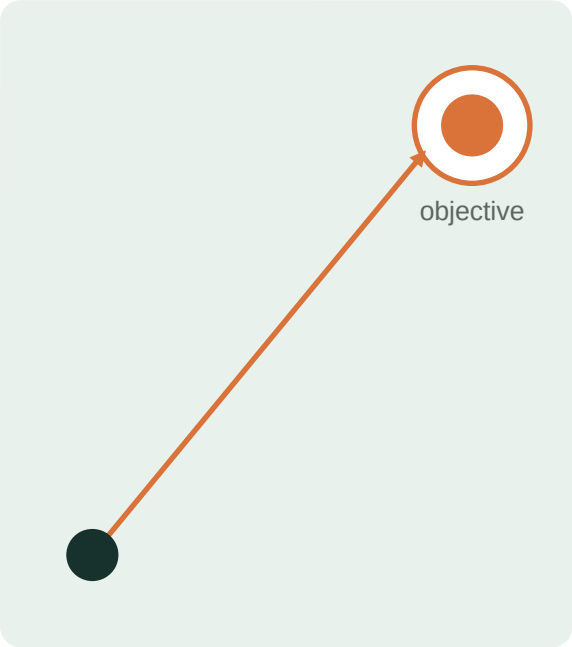
WHAT THE LITERATURE SAYS

- LTAD (Balyi) proposes speed windows for boys at about 7-9 and 13-16, and for girls at 6-8 and 11-13.
- Ford et al. (2011): the windows of trainability lack longitudinal empirical support.
- Lloyd and Oliver (2012): all components are trainable throughout, though some modes suit certain phases.
- Biological age can sit up to four years from chronological age, so maturation (PHV) matters more than the calendar.

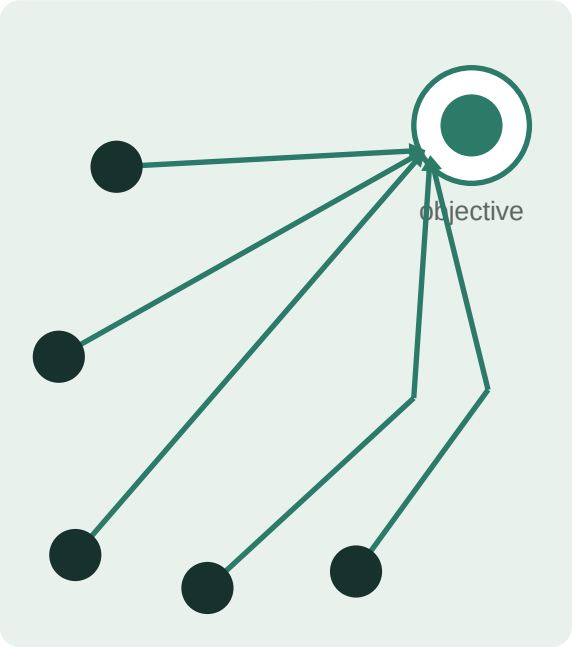
Where it runs out: Sensitive periods are real neuroscience, but they do not justify tight age-gating of sport skills. Use the LTAD stages as a planning scaffold, not the windows as gates.

Whose Technique Is It?

Absolute technique: the action must look a certain way. Functional technique: the player reaches the objective with their own body. Football babbling: exploring until it works.



Absolute: one right way



Functional: many ways in

WONDER

Who decides what good technique looks like: the coach's eye or the outcome?

If a player solves a problem in a way you would never teach, is that a mistake?

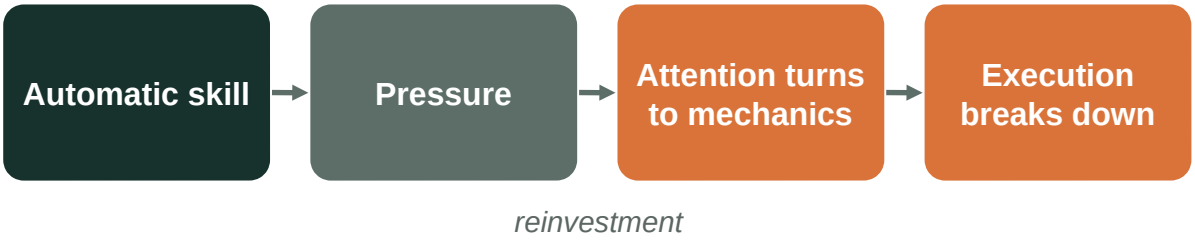
How do body type, maturation and sex change what functional technique looks like?

Where is the line between babbling and a habit that will hold them back?

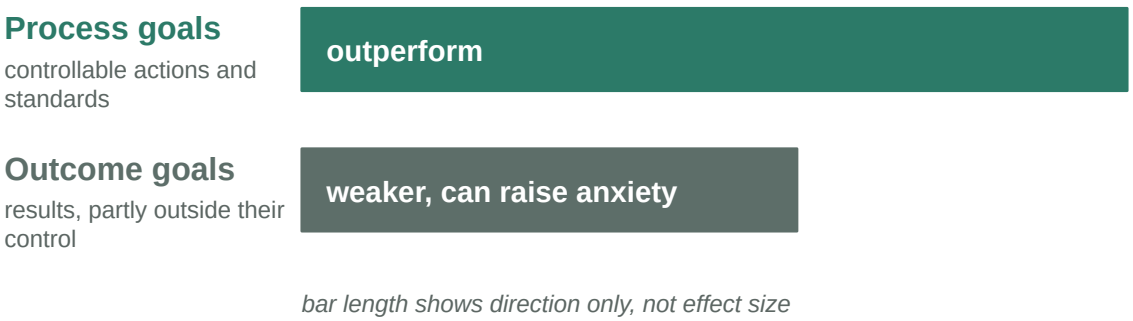
What does the research say about movement variability and learning?

Skill Under Pressure

Why a well-learned action can fall apart in a big moment, and what kind of goal helps a developing player.



Which goal helps?



OUR INFERENCE For an automated skill, cueing internal mechanics under pressure is likely to be counterproductive.

WHAT THE LITERATURE SAYS

- Consciously monitoring a skill that has become automatic degrades its execution, especially under pressure (Masters, 1992; Beilock and Carr, 2001).
- Pressure invites exactly this inward attention to step-by-step mechanics.
- A 2022 meta-analysis finds process goals produce better performance than outcome goals.

Where it runs out: These findings come from skill and pressure research generally, not from youth football age bands.

Parts, Wholes and the Game

Do players need basic movements before they can play? Whole-part-whole, motor tasks vs complex tasks, blocked vs variable practice.





WONDER

Does a player need the movement before the game, or does the game build the movement?

When you take a part out, what comes with it, and what gets left behind: opponent, decision, direction?

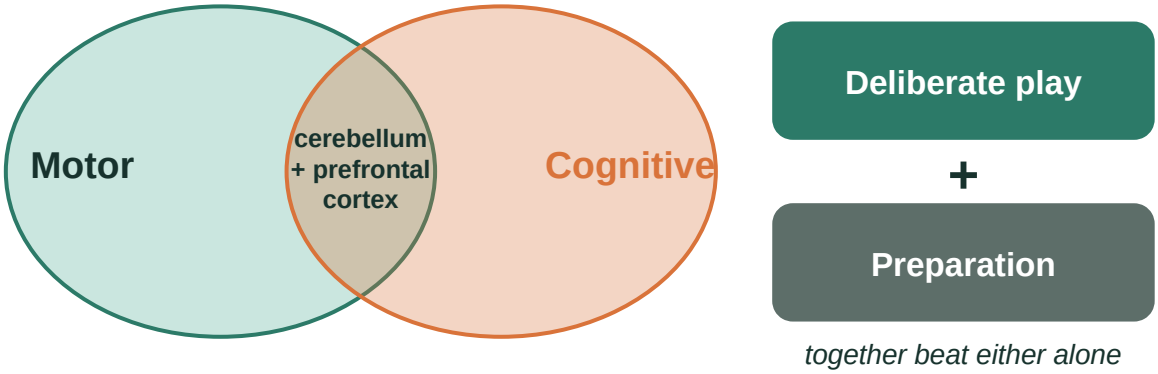
How quickly should the part go back into the whole?

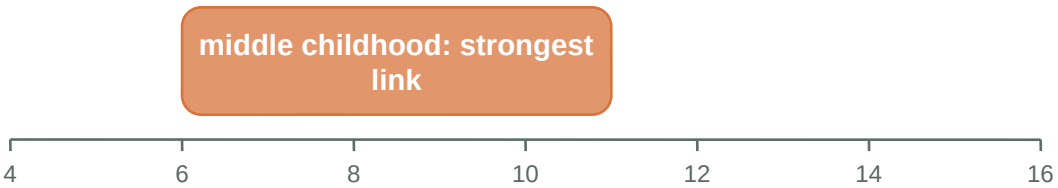
Where does a "basic" skill really sit on the line below?

What does the research say about blocked vs variable practice?

Body and Brain, Developing Together

Motor and cognitive development are closely linked, and the link is something practice design can use.





review covered ages 4 to 16 (van der Fels et al., 2015)

Most 5v5 and 7v7 players sit inside this band.

WHAT THE LITERATURE SAYS

- Motor and cognitive development share the cerebellum and prefrontal cortex (Diamond, 2000).
- A systematic review across ages 4 to 16 finds the motor-cognitive relationship strongest in middle childhood (van der Fels et al., 2015).
- Deliberate play combined with preparation benefits motor and cognitive development together, more than either alone (Pesce et al., 2016).

Where it runs out: The link tells us motor and cognitive work belong together. It does not tell us which activities to run.

How Does It All Connect?

Every idea here pulls on the others, and the game sits in the middle of all of them.



WONDER

Where do these ideas pull against each other in your sessions?

Which one, if you took it seriously, would change your next session most?

If the game is the teacher, what is the coach's job?

What would a 6 year old say your training is for? A 15 year old?

What does the research say about how these connect, and where does it disagree with itself?