



**THE  
CAMOGIE  
ASSOCIATION**  
An Cumann Camógaíochta

# Camogie Coaching Corner

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## The balancing act of coaching

**“A coach is a person who builds competencies by assisting and challenging players and self to achieve full potential”**

I first saw a similar version of the above quote at a GAA coaching conference back in 2004 presented by Pat Daly. 15 years later and it plays such a huge part in my coaching life. Part of our coaching roles includes teaching hurling and camogie in primary schools. Every single child has unknown potential. As a coach we can suppress or release that potential by our thoughts, words, actions and behaviours. Our main job is to build competencies. Once we develop competencies, then we can gain a degree of confidence and with every competency comes higher levels of confidence.

Think about the small child like a smart phone. When the phone is new, in the box and the battery isn't charged there is very little it can do but it has lots of potential. Once it is charged then it is capable of so much. In primary schools and also in our club sessions we can charge the children by getting their hearts beating faster and their lungs moving during aerobic exercise. Competencies are like Apps on a smartphone. A phone can't do much without apps. If I get a new phone, the first apps I get are the social media ones. Then I feel my phone can function. Every time I install a new app I have more confidence in my phone. Instead of facebook, twitter and snapchat we can install apps to small children like the grip, running and agility skills. Mainly this is done through assisting. Assisting happens when we provide a really clear demonstration of a pretty easy skill and give children ample opportunity to practice and learn it. Apps are grown in children when connections are made in the brain. The connections that are needed for reading, writing and maths are the same that are needed



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for rising, catching and soloing. Like the teacher in the classroom they are taught by assisting or challenging.

Children need lots of assistance in the first few years of sport. It is estimated that 20% of young children survive in a competitive environment. If we play a 10 a side match at under 6 or under 8 training, only 4 children will benefit from it. 80% is a huge failure rate and one that most clubs can ill afford to allow happen. However once children develop a range of athletic and skill competencies they can be gradually introduced to small sided games.

As children get older, getting the balance right between assistance and challenge is a key coaching skill. If we go for too much challenge we can cause incompetence, anxiety and resistance in players whereas if we assist too much we can still cause incompetence and boredom and very often players resent this form of approach. There is a term used when the level of challenge set by a coach matches the level of skill of the players. This often causes players to achieve "flow". It is called the zone of proximal learning.

The zone of proximal learning or the zone of proximal development occurs when a challenge is pitched just on the outer reach of a person's current ability. It is a little outside what a child can currently do and often it requires the help of a coach. Most of us probably used this model unknowingly as children. If we tried to get a certain number of roll rises in 30 seconds and then tried to beat our score next time we were in this zone. If we tried to strike a ball through a small target or take a ball hit at pace on first touch or tried to get a certain amount of ball strikes off a wall in a time we were on the zone of proximal learning.

Using this coaching model can really help increase the level of effort and concentration from players. It also causes a level of excitement and is guaranteed to increase the speed at which players play. It helps players to think about mastery rather than winning, which they have no control over. Most video games use the zone of proximal learning to engage their audience. They start off playing and they aren't able to get very far, then they get competent at a certain level until the challenge increases and the process continues. American game designer, Raph Koster says *"Fun from games arises out of mastery. It arises out of comprehension. It is the act of solving puzzles that makes games fun. In other words, with games, learning is the drug"*.

## **EVERY SINGLE CHILD HAS UNKNOWN POTENTIAL. AS A COACH WE CAN SUPPRESS OR RELEASE THAT POTENTIAL BY OUR THOUGHTS, WORDS, ACTIONS AND BEHAVIOURS.**

The assistance and challenge coaching model can be used from nursery children all the way up to county seniors. While county seniors will require the highest level of challenge, there are many occasions when they also need assistance. Like a professional golfer trying to tweak or restructure their swing or putting stroke, very often a top class camogie player or hurler often needs to develop a higher level of competency in a skill. This is not a time for challenge. This is a time for clear demonstration, explanation, observation and feedback. Very often the coach has to admit they don't have the answers but together with the player they will work it out and reflect on progress or lack of. Once the new skill is learned then the coach and player can increase the challenge.

Like other areas of coaching, getting the balance between assisting a challenging is vital to the environment. When right balances are struck between skill development and games, instruction and action, winning and mastery, praise and encouragement, patience and honesty and participation and excellence a very special bond can be formed in a team or coaching environment. When coaches reflect in the aftermath of training sessions and games, little tweaks can be made to maintain that balance.

