

MATCH OF LIFE

The Tennis Parent's Guide

Part One — It's All About Becoming

Long Arnold

DIPL. TENNISLEHRER
WETTKAMPFTRAINER B

TEL. 079 325 41 21
LONG.ARNOLD@BLUEWIN.CH

WWW.LONGARNOLD.CH

PART ONE
Beginning the Tennis Journey

Chapter 1. When Should My Child Start Playing Tennis?

One of the first questions parents ask is when their child should begin. My answer is that the right age depends less on the calendar and more on the child's individual development. Children develop physically, cognitively, emotionally and socially at different speeds.

Some are comfortable participating in structured activities at four or five. Others need more time. At the beginning, I am not primarily interested in whether a child can execute a technically correct forehand. I am interested in whether the child enjoys moving, exploring, experimenting and interacting with the ball.

Tennis should initially be a positive experience. Children need to develop coordination, balance, spatial awareness, movement skills and confidence. They need opportunities to discover what their bodies can do. They also need to feel comfortable with the coach and the learning environment.

What parents should understand

Early specialization is not automatically an advantage. Starting younger does not guarantee becoming better. A child who begins at seven or eight may eventually develop further than a child who started at four.

What matters is the quality of the learning experience, the child's development and their willingness to continue.

My message to parents:

Don't worry about how early your child starts. Pay attention to whether they are developing a positive relationship with movement, learning and tennis.

It's All About Becoming.

The First Tennis Lesson: It's All About Becoming

When a child walks onto my tennis court for the first time, I approach them with one thought: **Potential.**

Not whether they are talented.
Not whether they might become a competitive tennis player.
Not whether they can already hit a tennis ball.

I am interested in discovering what this child brings with them and where their development might begin. After more than 35 years of coaching, I have learned that the first lesson reveals much more than a child's initial tennis abilities. It gives me an opportunity to observe how a child experiences something completely unfamiliar.

What I Look For

During the first lesson, I observe several things.

- **Ball feeling.** How does the child interact with the ball? Can they judge its movement, speed and bounce?
- **Coordination**. How does the child move? Can they coordinate their hands, eyes, feet and body?
- **Athletic abilities.** How do they run, stop, change direction, balance and respond to movement challenges?
- **Approach to learning.** How do they approach a new task? Can they experiment, adapt and gradually discover solutions?
- **Listening and communication.** How does the child respond to explanations and demonstrations? Do they understand what I am asking? Do I need to communicate differently?
- **Frustration tolerance.** What happens when something doesn't work? Do they try again? Become upset? Withdraw? Ask for help?
- **Behaviour under pressure.** How does the child respond when a task becomes more difficult or when they feel observed?
- **Personality.** Are they curious, cautious, energetic, reserved, playful or hesitant? How do they approach a new adult and an unfamiliar environment?

These first observations are not conclusions about who the child is. They are the beginning of a relationship in which I continue learning how to support them.

You May See Vulnerability Before You See Competence

What parents should understand

When your child attends their first tennis lesson, remember something important: Your child has no experience of being a tennis player.

They don't know how to hold a racket.
They don't know how a tennis ball behaves when it bounces.
They don't know how to position themselves.
They don't know where to make contact with the ball.
They don't understand the rules.
They don't know how to control the racket.

And they don't know me. Everything is unfamiliar.

Expect Your Child to Miss

Your child will miss tennis balls. Many tennis balls. They will hit the ball in the wrong direction. Sometimes they will miss the ball entirely.

They may become frustrated. They may cry. They may stop trying. They may need reassurance.

None of these reactions automatically tells us what kind of tennis player they will become. They tell us something about what the child is experiencing at that moment. A child's first mistakes are not evidence of their limitations. They are part of encountering something they have not yet learned.

The Most Important Thing I Want to Create: A Spark

I want the child to discover that learning tennis can be enjoyable. The spark I am looking for is not constant laughter. It is the beginning of a positive relationship with learning and tennis.

The most important question may not be how many balls the child hit successfully, but whether they leave wanting to return.

My Message to Parents

After more than 35 years of coaching, I don't expect a beginner to demonstrate competence.

I expect them to arrive with possibilities.

Some children will learn quickly. Others will need more time. Some will eventually become competitive players. Others will enjoy tennis recreationally. And some will discover that another activity suits them better. None of those outcomes determines the child's worth.

What matters at the beginning is creating an environment in which the child can discover what they are capable of becoming.

That requires observation. Patience. Warmth. Structure. Appropriate challenges. And a willingness to see the individual rather than compare them with an imagined standard.

The first tennis lesson is not about discovering how good a child already is. It is about beginning to discover how that child learns, what they enjoy, and what they might become.

Because ultimately, it's all about becoming.

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Match of Life — Letters to Tennis Parents



To Parents
What was your child's biggest takeaway from their first lesson? Hit reply and let me know—I read every email.

Coming in Part Two
How do you recognize a good tennis coach? I look at the 5 essential competencies every parent should evaluate before



“One of our deepest human needs is to feel seen, heard and understood.

On court, I don’t just see a student—I see a player in becoming. I see the insecurities, the curiosity, the frustration, and the quiet spark of a new passion. Emotional safety isn’t an extra; it is the prerequisite for learning. The more secure a child feels, the less armor they need to wear, and the freer they become to explore what they are truly capable of achieving.”

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