

PLAYER  
DEVELOPMENT  
GUIDELINES

# Best Practices for Coaching Soccer in the United States





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UNITED STATES SOCCER FEDERATION



# Best Practices for Coaching Soccer in the United States

## INTRODUCTION

The scope of coaching education in the United States is as large as the country itself. As our society is woven with the threads of many cultures, so is our soccer the product of the styles and experiences of the many diverse communities across the country. While this presents us with a set of challenges that are unique to the United States, this diversity also helps to continually breathe life into our soccer community. It is against this backdrop that U.S. Soccer approaches its responsibility for helping to prepare coaches to bring the game of soccer to our young players.

There is not just “one way” to teach soccer to players, nor is there just one style of coaching. There is a broad spectrum of styles and methods for how each of us experiences the game. Some of this comes from our backgrounds, while some of this also is the product of our own personalities. At the youth and junior levels, however, there is a set of fundamental principles that must be considered by anyone involved with soccer. In general, *young soccer players require a certain amount of uninterrupted play. This allows them to experience soccer first hand. They should be allowed the opportunity to experiment, and with that, succeed and fail.*

The coach’s long term goal is to prepare the player to successfully recognize and solve the challenges of the game on his or her own. It is vital that the coach approaches soccer with this in mind.

This document is designed to give youth and junior level coaches a basic set of ideas that can help open up the game of soccer to children in ways that celebrate the spontaneous qualities of soccer. It is not designed to give the coach the “secrets” of the game. There are no secrets. This is part of soccer’s beauty.

This document represents a series of recommendations that have been compiled and reviewed by U.S. Soccer’s Coaching Education staff and the Men’s and Women’s National Team staffs. It presents a compilation of what U.S. Soccer considers to be an appropriate, comprehensive and responsible approach to developing sound soccer players.



## **BASIC IDEAS TO CONSIDER WHEN COACHING YOUTH SOCCER**

The most fundamental skill in soccer is individual mastery of the ball and the creativity that comes with it. This should be a priority in training and games, especially in the early years. As this skill is mastered, the rest of the game becomes easier - both to teach and to learn. Practices should be built around facilitating the development of the skills necessary to move and control the ball well. As these individual skills and the creativity to make them come alive in the game are developed to a level of competence, the finer points, first of passing skill and later of team organization can be taught.

The town and club coaches who work with our youth and junior players on a daily basis play a fundamental role in the development of soccer players in this country. Towns and clubs should strive to place experienced coaches who have a clear understanding of the value of teaching technique at the youth and early junior levels. Equally important is the coach's personality and character. Working with 6- to 14-year-old children requires patience, kindness and respect.

Coaching soccer can be confusing at times because the game changes dramatically as the players improve in both skill and physical ability. When coaching young, developing players, as well as the adolescent players, U.S. Soccer feels it is helpful to keep the following ideas at the forefront of your mind:

- 1) Set up situations where the players can learn by playing the game. The game is the best teacher for young players.
- 2) Coaches can often be more helpful to a young player's development by organizing less, saying less and allowing the players to do more. Set up a game and let the kids play. Keep most of your comments for before and after practice and during water breaks. Comments should be kept short and simple. Be comfortable organizing a session that looks like pickup soccer.
- 3) Teaching and learning the game of soccer is a process: make your goals seasonal, as well as daily and weekly. Often, at the younger ages, the developmental efforts of one season are not noticeable in children until sometime in the next season.
- 4) Set age-appropriate goals i.e., know what the child is able to do at that age.
- 5) From a developmental standpoint, the young ages are the best ones for learning skills. Spend the time now encouraging this growth. By the age of 17 the capacity to pick up new motor skills begins to wane, while the ability to conceptualize team organization, tactics and strategy increases. As a coach, work with these strengths, not against them.



- 6) Do not expect games and practices to look like professional soccer. If you want to use high level soccer as a teaching tool, focus on the individual skill level of professional players, not their organization. Give your players opportunities to see what older, more skilled players, i.e., a high school, college player or an older brother or sister, can do with the ball. On occasion, invite some of these players to participate in your practice. Use them to model good soccer qualities. Let your players learn by experiencing the game alongside or against these better players. Older players can also be used as “neutral players.” In this case, the neutral player helps whichever team has the ball i.e., he or she never defends. Maybe that neutral player has limited touches and/or can’t score, but he or she gives the team with the ball a better chance of keeping the ball. By helping to maintain possession, the neutral player(s) helps the game maintain some rhythm, and gives the kids a clearer picture of the game’s possibilities.
- 7) Recognize and understand how the skills learned at each age are connected to preparing the player to move into the next phase of his or her development. Know what the next level of play is, and the general tools that your players should carry with them as they move on. Help them to be prepared.
- 8) Allow your players to develop these requisite skills in an environment where the main goal is to have fun with the ball.
- 9) The value of matches is that they provide youngsters with an opportunity to showcase their newly acquired skill and creativity. It is always nice to win, however that should not be your focus at the younger age groups (through 14 years).
- 10) Have a clear idea of what it is you want to accomplish at practice. Create exercises/games that replicate and repeat the movements and situations that are found in soccer and that allow the player to grow comfortable and confident with the ball at his or her feet. Encourage players to move with the ball at his or her feet and deal with boundaries, opponents, teammates and goals. Keep in mind that soccer is a pretty simple game. If you are involved in soccer for long enough, you begin to realize that all the many little games that work are really just variations on the same basic concepts. As long as the parameters that you have established in your exercises/small-sided games are true to soccer (goals for scoring and defending), creates the problems that you want the kids to solve (protecting the ball while dribbling, etc.), and allows your players to be challenged and find some success, you’re on the right track.
- 11) Don’t be afraid to experiment to find what works best.
- 12) Remember that the game is the best teacher for the players. Coaches and parents should think of themselves more as facilitators, monitors, guides or even participants, to provide a rich environment for the kids to learn from and enjoy.



## AGE APPROPRIATE RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE U-6 TO U-18 AGE GROUPS

The following pages represent U.S. Soccer's recommendations on best practices in soccer according to the player's chronological age, from Under-6 through Under-18. It is just as important, however, to consider the players' "soccer age" (i.e., his or her level of soccer competence), when determining themes to address in practice and matches. Remember that these recommendations are based on the assumption that the players have the ball skill necessary to move onto the next level of challenges. It is the responsibility of the coaches to continually evaluate and assess the needs of their players so that they can play soccer at the appropriate level. Parents and coaches alike should also take care to give their players a variety of playing experiences so that they are able to find some games where they are more challenged and some games where it is a little bit easier. In this case, it is the responsibility of the adults to evaluate this on a team and individual basis.

### ENCOURAGE CREATIVITY AND BALL SKILLS BEFORE TACTICS!

The youth coach has an important role in encouraging the development of these fundamental tools. One of the goals of this coaching guide is to introduce parents/youth coaches to an approach to coaching youth players that 1) embraces the lessons that are found in the game itself, and 2) is player-centered rather than coach-centered.

What does this mean? Consider the following comments by Hans Bongers on the growth of soccer around the world in the last 30 years, and how adults/coaches have approached player-development:

*Organized soccer "boomed" in the seventies. Not only did the number of people around the world who play in leagues drastically increase, also the age at which the youngest kids could start to play official games went down to 5 years and even younger. Parallel to this, many well organized coaching clinics and soccer schools, based on different educational theories were created, all hoping that a new Pele or (Johan) Cruyff would emerge from them and the brilliant collective play of the Brazilian team in the sixties and the Dutch ("total soccer") team of the early seventies could be reproduced. In the last decade many soccer associations from different countries have asked themselves how (even if!) soccer can be taught. (Hans Bongers: Somagic Street Soccer/ [www.streetsoccer.hypermart.net](http://www.streetsoccer.hypermart.net)).*

By default, the well-intentioned and seemingly reasonable approach of many youth coaches is to look to adult soccer as their guide to teaching the game. What most youth coaches find helpful in



the adult game is the organization and positional responsibilities (tactics) that the adult players exhibit so well. They are concepts that adults can understand well and so, as coaches, many tend to bring an organizational or tactical approach to coaching youth. Coaches often focus on keeping the players under control and teaching what appears to be the basics of the game: organization, positions, tactics, how to prepare to win games. We choose order over apparent chaos. It is tempting to strive to have the youth games look like adult games, with kids holding their own in set positions, organized and disciplined. The magic of the Dutch players of the early seventies, or Brazil's great players of the sixties, however, was not created from an organized practice routine. It began when they were children, in pickup games where the player and the game were the dominant factors. There were neither adults nor a set schedule of mandatory practices and games. That said, we live in a different world today. Adult supervision is often necessary to ensure proper safety. The presence of adults, however, does not have to inhibit the opportunity for children to be creative and experimental in their approach to learning soccer.

Manfred Schellscheidt, Boys U-14 National Team Head Coach, describes the scene that many of our beginner level players face in the following quote:

*Let us take a look at what typically happens to our youngsters as they are introduced to the sport of soccer. Day one for most of our players is probably the day mom and dad registers them with the local or the town recreation league. Based on the number of applicants, teams are formed, coaches assigned, and playing fields coordinated. The available fields serve all ages and are quite often adult dimensions. And so the games begin. Children that may have never previously kicked a ball are faced with the ultimate challenge - playing eleven v eleven on a field too big for them. Are we really surprised that they cannot do this? But do not worry; this is where the coach comes in. He or she is the one who is called on to fix and remedy the situation. With the help of positioning, the players are spread all over the field and told, 'This is how the big guys do it. The ones who just won the World Cup.' Since this proved to be the winning formula, we must all learn from them and imitate them. (Manfred Schellscheidt: *Experimenting With The Game*).*

In reality, what is needed from the youth coach is quite different. Again, we need to keep in mind that most of the great soccer players today played their early soccer in unsupervised games.

*"International conferences about this topic often conclude that well-intended coaches and parents should try to withdraw from influencing young players too much, if not completely. It is suggested that if you do want to train young players the emphasis should be on 'play and fun' and various smaller versions of the 11-against-11 game have seen the light. One concept that pops up more and more in all these discussions is 'Street Soccer.' 'The streets' (alleys, parks, beaches ... ) being the mysterious setting where brilliant players like Pele and Cruyff – and their fellow magicians in other sports – developed in a natural way." (Hans Bongers: *Somagic Street Soccer*).*



A primary focus for the coach at the youth level, through the U-12 age group, is to provide an environment that comes close to simulating the “pickup” games of our youth. In this setting much of the creativity and personality of kids developed naturally, without the involvement of adults. Kids need to be allowed to play freely, develop their skills and use them in a creative manner. Coaches should organize only so far as it helps to create this environment. Again, Manfred Schellscheidt comments on this idea of “street soccer” and how the coach can help to create this environment.

*Beside the games, what do our training sessions look like? Are they mobile or static? Are the players free to experiment and learn from the game or are they constantly instructed? Is there room for trial and error, or are they simply told what to do and where to go? (Breathing life into soccer) ... is more about converting our training sessions into some form of street soccer in which players, with the help of the coach, experiment with the basic elements of the game in a competitive way... Learning (in this case, soccer) is about experimenting with new things and relating to them. Mastery means coming to grips with things we have experimented with, often with repetition. It is all about developing an understanding and feel for the game. The lessons for all of us will come from the game and so will the answers. In the beginning the person and the game are separate, maybe even far apart. When things get good, the game and the person become one. (Manfred Schellscheidt: Experimenting With The Game)*

With this in mind, try to encourage comfort with the ball and the confidence to use this skill creatively. Encourage the dribbler at the younger ages; your team of 8 to 10 year olds should be full of them. Dribbling, at the younger ages, is the child’s attempt to gain control over the ball. Controlling the ball is the primary skill that every other skill in soccer depends upon. Although controlling the ball may seem to be a simple task, it actually takes an enormous amount of the child’s energy. Do not expect him or her to look to pass or to pass with any level of competence or awareness, until he or she has first mastered this skill. Consider these two points. Children from about age 6 to 12 have an almost limitless capacity to learn body movement and coordination (i.e., motor skills). At the same time, their intellectual capacity to understand spatial concepts like positions and group play is limited. Work to their strengths.

**CONSIDER THIS:** At the younger ages (6 to about 10), soccer is not a team sport. On the contrary, it is a time for children to develop their individual relationship with the ball. The fact that younger children are placed into team environments is not their fault. Do not demand that the more confident players share the ball. Encourage them to be creative and go to goal. Do the same with the rest of your players. Work to bring all your players up to that level of confidence and comfort with the ball. Coaches should avoid the impulse to “coach” their players from “play to play” in order to help them win the match. Coaches should not be telling their young players to “pass rather than dribble,” to “hold their positions” or to “never” do something (like pass or dribble in front of the goal).

Many kids who have been involved in organized soccer will often look to pass the ball or kick the



ball down field as their first option. They have been taught to “share” the ball or they have learned that the best way to keep from making a “mistake” with the ball at their feet is to kick it away as fast as possible. For this reason, it helps if the coach continually encourages the players to make dribbling their first option. It may also help to make the players take at least two touches on the ball before they can look to pass. Remember that making mistakes at these early ages is a very important part of the player’s learning and development. Encourage risk-taking and applaud effort.



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# Ball Control and Creativity: 6 - 12 years old

## PRE ACADEMY LEVEL: U-6 THROUGH U-12 AGE GROUPS

### U-6: K and 1st graders

Soccer at these ages should be discouraged in any form other than as a fun activity for kids, that happens to include a soccer ball. There should be groups of players rather than teams. Fees should be nominal. Attendance should be optional. Creating a joyful environment is mandatory.

#### GAME APPLICATION

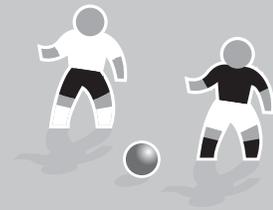
**Game Form:** 3 v 3 is best option for these ages

**GK Status:** Goalkeepers should not be used

**Field Size:** 4 v 4 (40 yards x 25 yards)—3 v 3 (30 yards x 20 yards)

**Ball Size:** 3

When ball goes out of bounds, the game is restarted with a kick-in or dribble-in. No throw-ins.



#### ■ SOME GENERAL THOUGHTS ABOUT THIS AGE:

Five- and six-year olds are too young to be involved in any structured, organized soccer program. At most, they should be involved in fun activities that encourage the children to explore their physical abilities, while also including a ball with which to play. Make sure these are activity-based games that emphasize exploration and experimentation with the rolling, spinning, and bouncing qualities of the ball. The soccer ball should be considered a toy. There should be no activities where players wait in lines to perform a pre-determined movement or required action.

Five- and six-year olds, although still young, are beginning to gain more control over their bodies. At the same time, it is still new to them and they will require a lot of time and energy figuring out what their bodies can do, and how to use this developing coordination. Children at this age also love to use their imagination when they play. Keep this in mind when designing games. They



enjoy playing on their terms, and as a by-product of their play, they will gain some limited comfort with the ball. Although they love to play, their ability to stay focused on any one thing is very limited. Keep your activities short and simple. Finally, even as they are steadily developing physical and mental abilities, they are still very young. Always treat children with care, patience and give plenty of encouragement. It can be helpful to include parents in the practice/play time so they can take ideas home with them to their backyards or parks. If children must be involved in these organized practice times, they should be having so much fun that when they go home, the soccer ball becomes one of their favorite toys.

## ■ DURATION OF PRACTICE; RATIO OF BALL TO CHILD AT PRACTICE

30 to 45 minutes is the best option for these ages. Most of the practice should be spent in ratios of one ball per child or one ball per two children.

## ■ GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF WHAT SHOULD BE HAPPENING DURING PRACTICE

The children should be having fun with the ball. There should be periods of active playing where everyone is involved, and there should be ample opportunities for short breaks for water and for catching their breath. If there is more than one adult/coach, the children should be divided into smaller groups, with at least one adult per group. At these young ages, children work hard and tire quickly. Allow them to have “active rests,” where they are not running but are trying to do something specific with the ball, often sitting or standing. Everyone should be occupied with something, even when resting. Keep the numbers from 1 v 1 to 3 v 3 and keep as many children actively involved with a ball as possible. Let them go to small goals with no goalkeepers. When possible, a size 3 soccer ball should be used.

## ■ GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF WHAT SHOULD BE HAPPENING IN MATCHES

U.S. Soccer recommends that there be no organized matches at this age. Consistently set up mini games at practice for your kids to compete with and against each other, according to their age.

**CONSIDER THIS:** At these young ages, the primary goal is to make the player’s experience with soccer so enjoyable that when he or she has a choice of activities, he or she choose to play soccer on his or her own.

## ■ GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF INFORMATION THAT IS COMMUNICATED TO THE PLAYERS BY THE COACH

At these ages, the coach/parent should be positive and encouraging of each child. Specific soccer-related information should be limited to basic ideas of how to best keep the ball from running out of bounds too often. There should not be any discussions about positions or any other team concepts.



## ■ BEST QUALITIES OF A COACH FOR THIS AGE PLAYER

Patience, good humor, and a willingness to see the world through a child's eyes. Also, the ability to speak their language and accept that the children's play will not look at all like soccer.

## ■ NUMBER OF MATCHES PER CALENDAR YEAR

Children at these ages should not be playing any organized games. Playing with and against their teammates during practice times is sufficient and is to be encouraged.

## ■ BREAKS FROM ORGANIZED/MANDATORY SOCCER

Children at this age should be able to play when they want to play, and walk away when they are through.

## ■ TRAVEL

None.

## ■ STATE, REGIONAL AND NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIPS

None.

## ■ TOURNAMENTS, FESTIVALS, ETC.

None.



## U-8: 1st and 2nd Graders

Soccer is still all about having fun with the ball and encouraging the children to want to have the ball at their feet. The numbers should still be one and two players to a ball.

### GAME APPLICATION

**Game Form:** 3 v 3 is best option for these ages

**GK Status:** Optional. Players should not be limited to playing one “position”

**Field Size:** 4 v 4 (40 yards x 25 yards)—3 v 3 (30 yards x 20 yards)

**Ball Size:** 3

When ball goes out of bounds, the game is restarted with a kick-in or dribble-in. No throw-ins.



### ■ SOME THOUGHTS ABOUT THIS AGE

These children are still young. By the end of this phase, (around eight- years-old) children are beginning to be able to apply past experience to the present situation. For example, at a simple level, they can remember what they were shown or what they tried with the ball from last practice. At the same time, this ability is not present on a consistent basis. They are still not able to imagine consequences (i.e., if you do this, what will happen?). Let them learn through experience.

Do not attempt to replicate organizational schemes that you have seen older teams doing. Seven and eight year olds are not capable of playing anything that resembles organized soccer. For example, team concepts such as combination play or positions should not be introduced at this age.

Do use older players as mentors and role models. Often the younger players will learn simply by watching how the older players move or by what they can do with the ball.

## GOALS FOR PRACTICE, GAMES AND SEASON

### ■ PRACTICE:

There should be a lot of playing with the ball in small numbers for relatively short periods of time. A key focus for this age is to encourage players not to fear the ball. Give each player plenty of opportunities to experience the ball at his or her own pace. For example, organizing games where there are multiple goals and balls for the players to work with. Also, games where they are changing direction and changing how fast they run, and dealing with balls on the ground and with bouncing balls.



***“I don’t believe skill was, or ever will be, the result of coaches. It is a result of a love affair between the child and the ball” – Manfred Schellscheidt***

■ DURATION, RATIO OF BALL: CHILD

Practices should last 45 to 60 minutes. For most of the practice, each player should be actively involved with a ball. Games of 1 v 1 or games up to 3 v 3 with multiple balls involved (2:1 ratio of player to ball) and games to goals are also enjoyable and effective for this age.

■ GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF WHAT SHOULD BE HAPPENING DURING PRACTICE

No Lines. No laps. No Lectures. Attendance is still optional. Provided there is adequate supervision, children at this age should be allowed to come in and out of practice as they please. At this point, if you have not already done so, you may want to introduce some boundaries. However, don’t allow the boundaries of the environment to hinder the training time by producing frequent stoppages of play because the ball goes ‘out of bounds.’ Try to keep the flow of the game going. Encourage informal play without pressure to “perform.” Encourage the basic skills and give the players a lot of time with the ball. This will ultimately build their confidence. Make sure to always include games to goals.

■ GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF INFORMATION THAT IS COMMUNICATED TO THE PLAYERS BY THE COACH

Similar to the U-6 age group, the coach/parent should be positive and encouraging of each child. Specific soccer-related information should be limited to basic ideas of how to best keep the ball from running out of bounds too often, as well as some simple ideas for maneuvering in tight spaces and past opponents. Coaches should exclude discussions about positions or other team concepts. When addressing technique, consider that kids learn much by watching and copying. A good picture of proper technique can be a very powerful learning tool. Coaches should say things such as, “See if you can make it look like this.” Limit time spent breaking down the mechanics. Instead, try to do most of your teaching of technique by offering a picture and then set up fun games where the objective of the game is for players to practice certain ways to control the ball. This approach allows the player a certain amount of freedom to develop their ball control and accept that there is more than one way of doing it. This is applicable at least through U-12.

■ GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF WHAT SHOULD BE HAPPENING IN MATCHES

U.S. Soccer recommends that there be no organized matches at this age. Consistently set up mini games at practice for your kids to compete with and against each other, according to their age. There will be no need to keep score or even be very involved, except to enjoy the players and their effort and joy. Every player should look forward to opportunities to have the ball at his or her feet



and to score. It is the coach's responsibility to encourage this fear-free culture. For the 7- and 8-year-old groups, these games should only be seen as another fun activity that happens to include a soccer ball. They are not ready for specific soccer type information and there should be no emphasis on team concepts or positions. They will have plenty of opportunities to play in "real soccer games," as they get older. Most of the information from coaches during these times will pertain to each player's individual relationship with the soccer ball — to want it, how to find it, deal with it, feel more comfortable with it, keep it close, etc.

## ■ BEST QUALITIES OF A COACH FOR THIS AGE PLAYER

This coach must clearly understand the capabilities and limitations of this age and appreciate the power of learning by watching. He or she must have the ability to demonstrate or to use older players to demonstrate.

## ■ NUMBER OF MATCHES PER CALENDAR YEAR

No organized matches where the score is recorded.

## ■ BREAKS FROM ORGANIZED/MANDATORY SOCCER

Children at this age should not be participating in a mandatory soccer program and should be free to participate at their own pace. There should not be a penalty or consequence for missing practice and no discussion about "commitment." An effort should be made to include any child that wishes to play soccer. It is healthy and appropriate to group players according to ability level, but movement between groups should be open and fluid in order to reflect changes in ability and individual development from year to year or every six months.

## ■ TRAVEL

None.

## ■ TOURNAMENTS, FESTIVALS, ETC

None.

## ■ STATE, REGIONAL AND NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIPS

None.



**CONSIDER THIS:** How can the coach help all his or her players to develop to their potential? First, help your weaker players to develop their confidence with the ball. At the same time, continue to challenge your stronger players to expand their creativity and confidence. Confidence is the key. The more time they spend during practice and games with the ball at their feet, the more comfortable they will become, the more confident they will become, the more they will look to get involved, and the more fun they will have with soccer.

Remember that the level of skill and competence that a 9-year-old exhibits is no indication of the skill and competence that he or she will exhibit at 16 or 18 years of age. You cannot predict which 9-year-old will develop into a real player. Therefore, work to encourage all your players to be competent and comfortable with the ball. This will give all your players the same opportunity to reach their potential.

Work during practice to move all your players forward at their own pace. Do not be concerned with match results. Be concerned that all your players want the ball at their feet and they want to score. If you can accomplish this, you have successfully allowed your group to grow as soccer players. Unlike practice, you cannot add more balls/goals during games to give kids more chances with the ball. But you can emphasize certain themes for the players to focus on, such as getting involved, attacking the goal, taking chances, and then spend the length of the game reinforcing these points. This approach will give your players the green light to experiment and be creative - qualities that, unfortunately at the younger ages, are often discouraged on game day, in the name of being safe and winning.



UNITED STATES SOCCER FEDERATION



# Ball Skill, Creativity and a Gradual Insight into the Game: 10 - 14 years old

## ACADEMY LEVEL:

### U-10 THROUGH U-12 AGE GROUPS

**CONSIDER THIS:** At the youth level, games are a forum for players to test their ball skills and game awareness, and should be considered an additional means of development, rather than the objective. Results are important as it gives the players a competitive focus in the match. Coaches are encouraged to promote soccer that:

- is free flowing,
- is coach-guided, not coach-directed,
- demands that all players on the field, regardless of their specified position, participate in defending and attacking.

## U-10: 3rd and 4th graders

Soccer for this age is a fun activity for the kids that encourages a lot of games to goals and encourages experimentation with the ball. The ratio of balls to players should be small enough that all your players are involved all the time. The focus is on developing a relationship with the ball in a joyful environment. There should be no standings and no awards.

### GAME APPLICATION

**Game Form:** A maximum of 6 v 6 including a goalkeeper

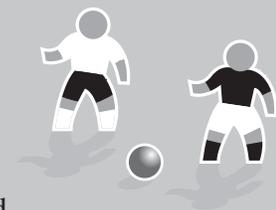
**Game Duration:** 2 X 25 minutes

**Substitution:** Free

**GK Status:** Players rotate as goalkeeper in game. All players should experience playing all the different spots on the field during the season.

**Field Size:** 60 yards x 40 yards

**Ball Size:** 4





## ■ SOME THOUGHTS ABOUT THIS AGE

At this age, there are some children that are becoming more physically mature. Among your group, there are now some bigger and faster players whose eye-hand and eye-foot coordination is a little ahead of the majority of your players. Some of your players may also demonstrate a greater capacity to stay focused for longer periods of time. At the same time, they are still people of action rather than thought. Explanations must still be brief, concise and purposeful. What seemed to make sense to them last practice may have to be almost relearned at the next practice. Care should be taken with players, regardless of athletic ability, to address ball skill, especially in tight spaces. The faster, stronger players should not be encouraged to use their athleticism to solve all their problems. Building comfort with the ball at ages nine and ten will provide them with a variety of crucial tools they will need as they get older, and the level of ball skill and athleticism rises. Begin to introduce the players to the idea of thinking about their decisions and movement as being related to themselves and one or at most two of their teammates and one or two of their opponents.

## **A DISCUSSION ON WINNING AND LOSING AT THESE YOUNGER AGES**

Competition is a central element in a player's development. At the youth level (ages 6-12), however, a competitive environment should not be a result-oriented environment. The differences must be clear. A competitive environment at the youth level encourages decisions from player and coach alike that focus on performance rather than outcome (favoring ball skill and inventiveness as the means to find success within the rules and spirit of the game). The result is just one indicator of performance and at this age, not the most important one.

Competition among kids playing games will always exist, whether adults are present or not. Making soccer "fun" at the younger ages does not mean that competition is removed. Competition can be positive and healthy. Scoring goals and winning the game are fundamental parts of soccer. Allow the children to enjoy this aspect without making it the focus. Set up other skill based objectives as the focal point. At the same time, recognize that children will find competition in anything you set up. Let them compete. In youth and junior level soccer, the emphasis and manner of the coach will often determine if the competitive environment is healthy or not.

At the youth level, matches are important as a means to player development (enjoyment, ball skill, insight, and fitness), not as the aim. These competitive situations are a series of tests for kids. In this respect, the usefulness of the game can occur in many different forms. Focus on the process and performance rather than the outcome, but be prepared for the possibility that your team may lose some games in the short term with this approach. Keep in mind that it is actually easier to win games at this age group with teams that are "organized" but lack skill. Placing the more physically mature players down the middle of the field and just asking players to 'kick it down the middle'



or only allowing players to specialize at one position may lead to more victories. This approach, however, does not effectively teach the players the game and prepare them to continue on in the sport. Instead, a skillful approach to playing soccer should be emphasized, even though this may result in conceding goals or losing games in the short term. During the learning process, ball control and passing can lead to more costly mistakes. At the same time, the coach can manipulate the level and variety of the competition to ensure that players and teams are being given the opportunity to win and to lose games. Valuable lessons can be learned in both scenarios. In the end, it is still the responsibility of the coach and the parents, to manage how competition is addressed and managed among his or her players.

**CONSIDER THIS:** U.S. Soccer recommends that teams play in double age group brackets. This allows players to play with other players of similar ability. Instead of one team of 10 year olds and one team of 11 year olds, there are two teams of mixed ages, with each player participating according to his ability. Additionally, up through the U-14 age group, teams should play in their own age bracket. After the U-14 age bracket, teams should be allowed to choose their age bracket based upon the level of competition.

## ■ GOALS FOR PRACTICE, GAMES AND SEASON

Building the player's skill base continues to be the most important goal of the season. At this age, this can be done through the introduction of a few more players in the games the coach sets up. Depending on the skill level of the group, anywhere from 3 v 3 to 5 v 5 plus goalkeepers should be the range during practice. Keep in mind that even the more competent players will not be working effectively as a group once the numbers get beyond 5 v 5. In the smaller numbers, emphasis must still be on creating 1 v 1 or 2 v 1 duels on the field. These are key situations that will continue to confront players throughout their career. Gaining competence and mastery over these numbers is the key to preparing players for the future.

*What I hear I forget,  
 What I hear and see I remember a little;  
 What I hear, see and ask questions about  
 or discuss with someone else, I begin  
 to understand;  
 What I hear, see, discuss and do, I acquire  
 knowledge and skill;  
 What I teach to another, I master.*

*(Adapted from the Chinese Philosopher Confucius)*



## ■ PRACTICE

Keep the sessions simple and player centered. Give the players simple problem solving opportunities and plenty of opportunities to score goals. It is also important to be positive and to continue to create repeated opportunities for the players to express themselves through their ability with the ball, regardless of the outcome of their effort. Play, as both fun and as competition, is paramount. The more opportunities for each player to have experience with the ball, in fun games that allow them to go to goal, the better it will be for that player.

**CONSIDER THIS FOR AGES 8 TO 14:** How do you set up a practice that allows players to “do”? How can a coach pull together the various games into an organized practice?

First, keep things simple. Include no more than three or four exercises. For example, begin with a warm up that incorporates players moving with the ball. Then move to a game, but introduce a particular challenge or set of challenges for the players to solve (4 v 4 game with four goals; 4 v 4 game with no goalkeepers, where the players must hit the net on the fly to score a goal; 4 v 4 dribbling game; 4 v 4 with neutral players; etc.). Each of these games differs slightly in the challenges that are highlighted. However, the games still retain the essential qualities of soccer: attacking, defending, dribbling, passing, dealing with teammates and opponents, and scoring goals. Finally, let them play a game, 3 v 3, 4 v 4, 5 v 5, or 6 v 6 etc., (depending on their age and ability to deal with these numbers), where there are no particular twists to the game, but where you can verbally emphasize and encourage players to experiment and take risks confronting some of these challenges your practice has been addressing. To help ensure that your practice will add to your players’ development, consider the following principles, questions and examples.

- *Do your players have repeated opportunities to have the ball at their feet?*
- *Do they have repeated chances to score goals?*
- *Are they asked to dribble and score in soccer situations?* A soccer situation is one that includes the ball, opponents, teammates, space, pressure, rules, time and goals (KNVB: The Dutch Vision On Youth Football).
- *Are your players having fun?* Generally speaking, if players have a lot of opportunities to play with the ball at their feet, and to score goals in games that replicate soccer, they will have fun.
- *How many players are involved?* 4 v 4 is the smallest way of playing soccer without losing any of the ingredients that make up soccer. There are always opportunities to play



deep, wide or backwards because of the numbers. Players are always confronted with match situations. Also, due to the limited numbers, it is easier for children (and coaches) to recognize the different moments in soccer that are constantly repeated (KNVB: The Dutch Vision On Youth Football). Some of the variations of the 4 v 4 game have already been introduced. The basic 4 v 4 game is set up on a field that is small enough to keep everyone involved, and big enough to give players room to be successful with the ball. There is one ball and two small goals, one on each end line. The elements of soccer the coach chooses to encourage will color the game somewhat. The power of 4 v 4, however, is that even with little or no involvement by the coach, these small games offer the players countless valuable soccer lessons. Adding players and increasing the field space accordingly will both increase options for the players as well as present new challenges.

- *How big is the field?* Are the players able to stay connected in your game/exercise? Does the size of the field lend itself to what you are working on? Again, the field should be small enough to keep everyone involved yet big enough to give players room to be successful with the ball. You may find that your first try at setting up the field dimensions does not work. It may be either too small and the kids can't get anything going, or it may be so big that the game seems to be played in pockets of two or three players while everyone else watches from a distance. Go ahead and experiment with the field size until you are comfortable. With coaches, as it is with players, learning occurs through trial and error.
- *Are there enough balls/goals so that many players are able to get touches on the ball and chances at goal?* Go ahead and experiment: add/remove ball/goals, increase/decrease the field size to help replicate the soccer environment you want. For example, an exercise designed to give your players lots of opportunities to run with the ball at their feet may result in the same few players dominating ball touches because of uneven talent levels. Instead of telling them they should pass to a less talented teammate, add some more balls and maybe some more goals to your game. This allows more players to experience the soccer situation you want replicated. Do not worry that it may look somewhat chaotic, or that it is difficult to keep score. Just focus on whether or not your players are getting repeated chances to run with the ball, deal with opponents and score goals. If this is happening, then you have successfully added to your players' soccer experience.
- *How long is your exercise?* Can the players maintain their focus and discipline throughout? If not, make adjustments. Something that can help the coach anytime an exercise is not working is to give the kids a quick water break. It will give you an opportunity to make the needed adjustments, or to move on to the next exercise. Perhaps the exercise is not the problem. Maybe it is a short attention span day for your team of 10-year-olds. Don't fight it. Use your breaks wisely. Keep things moving and stay alert for waning concentration.



- *How long is your practice?* Do your players finish practice wishing to play longer, or does your practice seem to unravel in the last 20 minutes or so? Make the practice as fun as possible. This means a lot of playing soccer, some water breaks when necessary, and little or no talking. Many times players are less than interested in a lecture about the finer points of the game. Keep in mind that young players have shorter attention spans than adults; do not treat them like adults. Forty-five minutes is a good length of time for six and seven year olds to be playing soccer in an organized practice. One hour to seventy-five minutes is best for players up to twelve years old. Anything longer and you are setting yourself up for aggravation that neither you nor your players deserve.

## ■ DURATION, RATIO OF BALL: CHILD

Practices should consist of no more than 60 minutes of structured, adult-directed soccer with an additional 30 minutes allotted for free play/self expression and self-improvement.

## ■ GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF WHAT SHOULD BE HAPPENING DURING PRACTICE

As much as possible let players experience soccer through 3 v 3 to 5 v 5 games that last for no more than 10 or 15 minutes at a time. The small numbers allow the players to gain critical practice at 1 v 1 and 2 v 1 situations, while still allowing for the fun and feel of a soccer game. The time limit gives the players a predetermined amount of uninterrupted play, while also allowing an opportunity after 10 minutes for the players to refocus. At this age, players are typically ready for games or activities that help them learn when to play the ball sideways and backward. They also can begin to appreciate and enjoy playing the game skillfully.

## ■ GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF WHAT SHOULD BE HAPPENING IN MATCHES

Players at this age should be limited to a few organized matches per season, and they should require little or no travel. Remember, these are young children who have several more years to go before they will have all the tools needed to attempt soccer in the adult form. The best path to truly preparing them for the adult game is not have them practice at playing the adult game; rather it is by giving them repeated opportunities to experience soccer in a more manageable form for their age.

A team of 9 year olds who hold their positions and maintain a steady group of defenders who rarely, if ever venture into the attack, looks like a well disciplined and well organized team. However, U.S. Soccer does not recommend this as a proper approach to developing players at this age. It does not develop good soccer players. This approach hinders the player's ability to experience and enjoy the natural spontaneity of the game. It does not allow the players to have an equal opportunity to go and "find" the game based on what they see from the game or to handle



the ball and develop instincts for the game. These are skills that they will need at the older ages and that are often lacking in the older players. This approach, while “successful” in the short term fails the players in the long run because the environment does not allow the players to develop the tools they will need to be truly “competitive” i.e., prepared to deal with the game, at the older ages

## A DISCUSSION ON SUBSTITUTION PATTERNS AT THIS AGE:

Players should be given the opportunity to play soccer for extended, uninterrupted periods of time. This allows them to get a better feel for the flow of a soccer game. For example, it is more beneficial for a player to play for 12 straight minutes, than for him or her to play in two 6 minute periods. Substitution should be used to address injury, fatigue and lack of effort. It should not be used to punish a player for a soccer-related decision. At a minimum, players at this age should be playing 50% of the game. Ideally, the rosters are small enough to allow for close to 100% playing time for everyone.

### **CONSIDER THIS:** Do You Notice an Uneven Skill Level within Your Team?

Often times on younger teams (8-10 years) you will notice a small number of relatively competent players per team who always seem to be around the ball. They have some quality(s), speed, strength, tenaciousness, and ball skill, that separate them from their teammates. The rest of the kids are more like on-field spectators, never actively seeking to participate. If the ball does land at their feet, they look to get it as far away from themselves as possible, as quickly as possible. A consistent problem for the youth coach and players is that the ability level on a team is very uneven. This is a normal situation for most younger teams across the country, especially, but not limited to the recreation level. There are several reasons for this imbalance: 1) Children start playing at different ages. There could be first-timers playing alongside kids who have been playing for several seasons. 2) Children in this age bracket develop at different rates, both physically and emotionally. 3) For many kids who lack the basic soccer tools, a full-out match can be intimidating. To address this challenge, try playing games with 3 balls going at one time. Another option is to be creative when choosing your groups for ‘mini-games,’ putting the more confident players together playing against each other and the more developing players playing in a different area. Occasionally using these methods will allow for all of the players to be challenged at a level that is appropriate to their own developmental level.

### ■ GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF INFORMATION THAT IS COMMUNICATED TO THE PLAYERS BY THE COACH

The coach should make comments that help players to stay involved and keep track of things without giving them all of the answers: “Join the game,” “Find the ball,” “Go get the ball,” “Don’t hide.” The coach for this age group does not focus on positions, yet encourages everyone to take



part in attacking and defending. Try to manage the amount of information or feedback your players are receiving immediately after practices or matches. In today's youth soccer landscape, kids at these ages are being overloaded with adult feedback and evaluation. Too much or inaccurate information can be counterproductive to your goals.

## ■ BEST QUALITIES OF A COACH FOR THIS AGE PLAYER

Energetic. Plays while facilitating practice. Stimulates ideas.

## ■ NUMBER OF MATCHES PER CALENDAR YEAR

It is recommended that players play up to 20 matches per calendar year for their clubs. There should be a ratio of 2 or 3 practices per one match. Players should be given two days rest per week. In league play, there should be no more than the equivalent of 1 game per weekend. There should be no standings or post season playoffs and a limited number of small-sided round robins. Tournament play should not be encouraged.

## ■ BREAKS FROM ORGANIZED/MANDATORY SOCCER

At these ages, it is recommended that parents discourage their children from specializing in or playing only soccer and encourage participation in a number of different sports and activities.

## ■ TRAVEL

In state travel only with a 1 hour maximum travel time.

## ■ TOURNAMENTS, FESTIVALS, ETC.

May attend a few jamborees or festivals per year where no results are compiled.

## ■ STATE, REGIONAL AND NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIPS

None.

**CONSIDER THIS:** At the latter stages of the youth level (U-10 through U-12), the goal is to provide training and game environments that promote the continued growth of ball skill, an increased game awareness, and an appreciation for taking calculated risks in the attack through the 3 v 3 to 9 v 9 (U-12) game model, all in an environment that the players enjoy.

The small-sided game model is an effective method for developing ball skill and game awareness because it increases opportunities for players to have contact with the ball and to both attack and defend without the tactical regimentation that can occur in 11 v 11 soccer.