

Spark Coaching Guidelines

Characteristics of the Developing Player

- Players are still developing basic coordination. Combine activities that involve basic movements with activities focused on soccer-specific skills.
- Children this age want to **PLAY**. Use imagination in communicating and make every activity fun!
- Players learn by getting many, many touches on the ball and by experimenting.
- Players should be given simple responsibilities (“cone picker upper” or “soccer ball collector”) so they can learn how to be a good teammate.
- Praise effort and risk-taking; young players need the confidence.

Skills to Focus On

1. Ball Manipulation
2. Hiding/keeping the ball
3. Running
4. Jumping
5. Turning
6. Starting and stopping
7. Throwing
8. Dribbling
9. Shooting

Practice Principles

1. Practice once-twice per week for 45-60 minutes.
2. Every player should have a ball.
3. Avoid lines when you can. If you must put players in lines, limit them to just four players.
4. Keep activities to less than 10 minutes.
5. Come to practice with a plan and set up early. This will reduce breaks and the distractions that go with them.
6. Give players lots of repetitions at everything.
7. When correcting players, always tell them what they *should* do, rather than what they should *not* do. Use questions like “can you show me”

What They Should Learn

- ✓ Handling the ball with *both* feet and the hands.
- ✓ Running, jumping, and stopping with and without the ball.
- ✓ Skills:
 - Control freeze(1 foot on ball)
 - Toe Taps
 - Pull back move
 - Step over move
 - Scoop move
 - Pop Corn (inside-inside)
 - Inside Chop move
- ✓ Moving forward when attacking and falling back when defending.
- ✓ ***A love for the game.***

The SPARK

(U4 U5 & U6)

The introduction to soccer coincides with the onset of independence from parents and increased self-confidence in most children. Children also begin to play cooperatively with others. This does not mean, however, parents should fully pass the responsibility for learning to the club coach. The parent has a very important role in encouraging the child to play at home. Practice sessions should occur once or twice per week and players should be encouraged to play multiple sports and activities.

What you need to know about development

The first five years (4-9 years of age) of soccer participation provide the foundations for future performance. Failure to establish fundamental movement and **ball skills** can dramatically limit the player's performance and subsequent participation in soccer. SPARK players focus on learning essential physical, psychosocial and cognitive skills that form the building blocks for future participation in all sports. To this end, we must not underestimate the value of quality child-centered coaching with the youngest age groups.

Understanding some basic physical, psychological, cognitive and behavioral characteristics of children aged 4 5 and 6 will help the parents, coaches and club in two ways. First, they will understand the logic behind selection of content and teaching methodologies. Second, they can anticipate the desired results of these choices. For example; knowing 4-6year-olds are mostly self-centered (individualistic) will help adults to understand why 'their' ball is difficult to share with others and why *passing is unnatural and difficult to coach*.

Translation to Player Development

Child-centered coaching assumes a commitment on behalf of the coach to embrace a natural starting point in development for each player. The coach's role is *not* to create parity (all players the same), but to develop all players to the highest level each individual's commitment, attitude, enthusiasm and talent will allow. To ensure participation in soccer is enjoyable for players and adults, parents and coaches of U4 U5 and U6 players need to embrace and work with the players' developmental characteristics, not against them.

Translated to player development this means:

- Teaching fundamental movement skills – running, jumping, skipping, throwing, etc.
- Focusing on ball familiarization and dribbling skills – one ball per child
- Planning sessions that are simple, fun, creative(superhero's cartoons animals etc), and have variety
- Selecting activities that do not place undue stress on the body
- Repeating activities regularly – young players need lots of reps to master skills
- Including activities that are brief (5-10 minutes), due to players' short attention spans
- Disguising technical information by using names, characters and stories.

- Encouraging trial and error
- Making session's fun and challenging using hurdles, hoops, ladders, bean bags, etc.
- Including competitive games, **but emphasizing effort**
- Providing constant encouragement
- Keeping instruction to a minimum and **activity constant**
- Including 'games and matches' in every session
- Rotating all players through all positions

Tactical Focus

At this age, players should simply focus on learning how to return to their original positions when an action is finished. Most are not prepared to concentrate on staying "in position" *and* executing the basic movements and soccer-specific skills emphasized in training. Encourage protecting the ball and not just kicking it. Ask players "can you keep it?" "can you hide the ball?" "can you dribble in to space?"

Player Competencies and Assessment

The JASA Player Development Curriculum offers parents and coach comfort by ensuring there is a plan to guide a child's soccer playing experience from the time they enter the program to the end of their youth playing experience. Part of this planning process is identifying the performance expectations/competencies for each stage of development. In addition, regular player assessment will enable coaches to know a player's ability and take the necessary steps to provide appropriate instruction. Assessment also allows coaches to provide feedback to parents regarding a child's progress and identifies how they can help in the player's development.

With this in mind, the following table provides players, parents, coaches and administrators with a comprehensive list of soccer competencies (skills, techniques, knowledge, tactics) for SPARK. The matrix represents the recommended time for introducing a competency (+) and the time when the player should become competent (✓). Note players are not expected to become competent in many competencies by the end of the end of the SPARK program.

Spark Stage Competencies Matrix

CHRONOLOGICAL AGE	U4	U5	U6
Fundamental Movement Skills			
Run with stops and starts	+		
Run and change directions	+		
Gallop	+		
Skip	+		
Lateral movements - side-step	+		
Rolling, bending low, arching	+		
Balance - on a line	+		
Balance - on one foot	+		
Throwing – both hands	+		
Jump - make shapes in air	+	✓	
Jump - one foot to another	+	✓	
Jump - stride and bound patterns	+		
Jump – hurdles	+		
Quick feet and crossovers	+		
Running technique	+		

Soccer Skills			
Turns – Pull back, chop, step over	+		
Dribbling Toe taps, popcorn, tick-tock	+		
CHRONOLOGICAL AGE	U5	U6	
Ball manipulation	+		
Feints and dribble		+	
Control – Foot		+	
Attacking an opponent 1v1		+	
Shooting at an open goal		+	
Physical Prep and Conditioning			
Dynamic warm-up		✓	
Mental/Cognitive Conditioning			
Confidence	+		
Concentration	+		

Key:

(+) Introduction of the skill

(✓) Expected time when the average player should become competent

SPARK Programming

U4 U5 & U6 SPARK Program

- *Co-ed:* Boys and Girls combined
- *Player-to-Coach Ratio:* 7-9 players to 1 coach and assistant coach; parents are highly encouraged to be in attendance at every session.
- *Session Length:* 45-60 minutes
- *Training-to-match ratio:* 1-2 training sessions per week (Saturday Games)
- *Regular Season:* Spring (10 weeks) and fall (10 weeks)
- *Assessment:* Players will be assessed at least once per season and parents will receive an assessment/certificate.

Summer Academy Technical Week

Offered as an optional program for players and parents wishing to continue their soccer experience during the summer.

The purpose of this program is to:

- Consolidate progress in the spring and prepare for the fall season
- Provide additional emphasis on ball skill mastery
- Provide an environment awarding creativity
- Utilize speed equipment to develop excellent sprinting, jumping and agility
- Develop flexibility and core strength
- Raise individual performance and strive for the next level of performance
- Evaluate progress