

Mental maturity: Find your players' level

Using psychology to make training age-appropriate
by **Lothar Linz**, licensed sports psychologist

Training must meet players on their level. For example, we know that U8 training needs to provide a wide variety of physical activities so players can develop basic coordination. But did you know this variety is also necessary because young children can only concentrate on a given task for a short time? Children need mental variety as well as physical variety. Sports psychologist Lothar Linz gives us an overview of mental development and how it affects training at each age level.

Adapt your training to your players

Coaching youth soccer is an art in itself. In the eyes of the public, and sometimes even within your own club, you get little credit, yet you're laying the foundations for the later development of players who will hopefully go on to excel. In some ways, working with young people is much harder than working with adults, the main reason being that children are rapidly changing, both physically and mentally. As a result, you need to know exactly which methods are appropriate for which age level, what your players are ready for and what they're not.

Fortunately, the awareness of these challenges is growing — just look at the youth soccer articles published in *Success in Soccer!* And many coaches understand that certain exercises are simply wrong for youth soccer because they're physically too demanding for kids.

However, discussions of age-appropriate training still tend to revolve mainly around physical content: technique, tactics, condition, coordination, etc. But youth training needs to be age-appropriate in terms of psychology as well, and many coaches and train-



The most important thing at any age is to build confidence and communicate on the same level.

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ers are unsure exactly what they should do about this.

One example is the often intense fixation on success exhibited by many coaches. Of course nine-year-olds want to win too, but the ambitions of many parents and coaches, not to mention the system of competitive play, over-emphasize winning at the expense of the enjoyment of play and physical activity.

Recommendations for every age level

The tables on the following pages provide an overview of important factors for each age

level from a sports-psychology perspective. For each level there is a list of critical characteristics and their consequences for training. Note that the age data is based on current averages for male youth players, although girls tend to develop more rapidly than boys. Girls' coaches need to be aware of these different developmental criteria and may want to look ahead to the next level, starting around age 10. And of course, individual children may deviate significantly from these general descriptions. As always, finding the right way to deal with your young players is ultimately a matter of having a feel for the situation.



BEFORE PUBERTY: Ages six to 12

By nature, small children are very curious and love being active, but they quickly become impatient. Their perspective is completely self-centered. In other words, they think the whole world revolves around

them. As they get older, especially after age 10 or so, they learn to look beyond themselves. This gives them a different understanding of their teammates, of positions and of formations (defense, midfield, attack). They learn

to think more in the long term and work more systematically toward success.

TABLE 1 U8 PLAYERS: Characteristics and consequences

| Age-specific characteristics | Consequences for coaching |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● completely self-centered perspective: “I’m the only one that matters!” | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Put each child at the center of the practice session with small group exercises (no bigger than 3 v. 3). ● Provide opportunities to demonstrate individual abilities. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● strong urge to move | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Make sure all children are active and moving for the majority of practice. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● desire to play | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Use lots of practice games. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● desire to try out new things themselves | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Keep rules to a minimum; provide lots of different activities and let kids find their own solutions. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● powerful need for external positive reinforcement, highly susceptible to criticism | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Give each child lots of recognition and praise, avoiding criticism as much as possible. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● focus on own performance | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Provide plenty of positive experiences, e.g. shooting. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● opponent frequently seen as a playmate | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Reinforce fair play; stop unfair behavior with a brief explanation. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● short attention span | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Vary exercises frequently, providing something new every few minutes (at least every 15 minutes). |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● poorly developed intellectual ability | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Keep explanations short (as few sentences as possible) and tailored to children’s intellectual ability. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● most effective way of learning: learning by example | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Explain, then immediately demonstrate. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● well-developed sense of fairness | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Treat all children the same, ideally giving each the same amount of attention. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● winning relatively unimportant | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Incorporate “no-win” games and keep the focus on the fun of playing. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● strong need for security | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Be a strong leader, giving clear signals and instructions. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● powerful curiosity and desire to learn | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Provide opportunities for novel experiences and new ideas. |

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BEFORE PUBERTY: Ages six to 12

TABLE 2 U10 PLAYERS: Characteristics and consequences

| Age-specific characteristics | Consequences for coaching |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● continued belief in own importance | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● See Table 1; provide lots of positive experiences. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● increasing identification with teammates | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Gradually develop a sense of the team with games and exercises in which players build connections: relay races, partner exercises, etc. ● Emphasize outward symbols of commonality (jerseys, etc.) but don't worry about self-centered play (dribbling instead of passing). |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● first understanding of common objectives | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Formulate common objectives. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● experience of the game often more important than winning | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Support risk-taking; measure effort, not results (losing is allowed); emphasize the fun of playing and keep parents in check if necessary. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● desire for lots of activity and movement | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● See Table 1. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● coach seen as a model in terms of lifestyle and attitude toward soccer | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Make sure your conduct is exemplary (e.g. control aggressive behavior). |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● strong need for security | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● See Table 1. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● curiosity | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Provide opportunities for novel experiences and new ideas. |

TABLE 3 U12 PLAYERS: Characteristics and consequences

| Age-specific characteristics | Consequences for coaching |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● individual perspective becoming less dominant | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Introduce position-specific play but don't start specializing; keep roles general (front/back, left/right). |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● team mentality becoming more important | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● See Table 2; start reinforcing behavior that benefits the team. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● common objectives a bigger priority | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Before the season or before each game, list common objectives and visualize them in an age-appropriate way. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● experience of the game still often more important than winning | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● See Table 1. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● recognition of connections, first understanding of delayed gratification (i.e. today's efforts will eventually lead to desired result) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Make training more systematic, using exercises that build on one another. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● improved problem-solving ability | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Let players discover and try out their own solutions for game situations. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● increased capacity for self-assessment and self-criticism | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● After practices and matches, ask for self-assessments; discuss and provide feedback. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● increased ability to concentrate | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Incorporate exercises requiring more concentration. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● desire to start taking individual responsibility | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Assign little duties and let players help organize individual exercises. |



DURING PUBERTY: Ages 12 to 16

At this age, kids experience an internal conflict between the loss of childhood and an aspiration to join the world of adults. This stage is often very difficult for coaches, in

part because early or late development causes additional problems for some players. At the same time, though, they are laying an important foundation for the development of their

personalities, which means they need plenty of help and support from you.

TABLE 4 U14 PLAYERS: Characteristics and consequences

| Age-specific characteristics | Consequences for coaching |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● recognition expected and demanded | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Start treating players more as partners. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● emotional variation (moodiness), open to (almost) anything but therefore quite susceptible to distractions | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Be tolerant and understanding of mood swings and the increasing influence of peers. ● Act as an advisor, providing clear rules and principles and model behavior. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● increased ambition and desire to win, pleasure in comparing oneself with others in competition | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Start holding back with the praise (and even more with the criticism) while cultivating players' internal motivation. ● Formulate common and individual objectives, but don't overemphasize them. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● increasing ability to concentrate | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● See Table 3. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● desire for more personal responsibility | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Give players more responsibility, both on and off the field. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● more of a long-term perspective | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Work together to develop long-term training objectives. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● increasing identification with the team | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Cultivate team spirit on and off the field. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● need for individual improvement and development | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Treat everyone in basically the same way while providing more individual encouragement. |

TABLE 5 U16 PLAYERS: Characteristics and consequences

| Age-specific characteristics | Consequences for coaching |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● increasing mental maturity and capacity for self-awareness and self-criticism | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Focus more on the mental demands of match play (emotion, willpower, single-mindedness). ● Train players to assess themselves, e.g. by keeping match journals with regular feedback from you. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● conscious awareness of stress and pressure to perform | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Teach simple stress relief methods. ● Cultivate realistic expectations and separate them from the expectations of others. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● conscious, sometimes exaggerated utilization of emotions | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Be tolerant of frustration while providing and embodying an appropriate degree of enjoyment. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● development of individual identity | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Provide structure via unambiguous actions, tolerance and clear rules. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● search for right lifestyle | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Be exemplary in your behavior. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● uncertainty about entering world of adults | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Treat players even more as peers. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● desire for individual responsibility | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Let players structure parts of the training program themselves. |



AFTER PUBERTY: Ages 16 to 18

Players' personalities are now more established and their actions more consistent, so you can spend less time on shaping your relationship

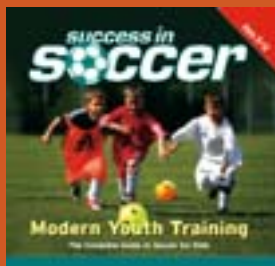
and more on optimizing their behavior on and off the field. Treat them as equals and encourage them to

take on more responsibility and play a more active role, but don't lose your leadership role and the respect you are due.

TABLE 6 U18 PLAYERS: Characteristics and consequences

| Age-specific characteristics | Consequences for coaching |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● increased ability to concentrate | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Provide complex technical/tactical exercises (follow-up plays, etc.). |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● increased ability to deal with stress | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Teach various methods of dealing with performance pressure. Use match-quality practice games. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● more self-awareness and self-assessment | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● See Table 5. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● control of own actions during match play | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● In short practice games, let players select their own objectives, but add complicating factors (e.g. increased time pressure, external distractions, need to achieve a certain score). |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● fully responsible | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Set common rules and let the team regulate them themselves. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● capacity and need for communication as equals | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Speak to players as adults. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● desire for support in personal and/or professional life | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Be available to give advice. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● interest in experiences outside soccer | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Include non-soccer activities and unusual experiences. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● identity more firmly established | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Promote a positive team identity while providing opportunities for individual expression. |

MODERN YOUTH TRAINING: THE BOOK



This book shows youth coaches and managers how to run age-appropriate practice sessions and matches for players between the ages of five and 12. The comprehensive training section provides specific recommendations for attractive, child-oriented exercises that build a solid athletic foundation while teaching the basic techniques and communicating an appreciation for the game of soccer. With an abundance of age-appropriate small-sided soccer games and sample practice sessions, both indoor and outdoor, this book is a gold mine for every youth coach!

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