

COACHING UNDER 6 PLAYERS

Characteristics of U-6 players

- Short attention span.
- Can attend to only one problem at a time.
- May understand simple rules that are explained briefly and demonstrated.
- May or may not understand or remember: what lines mean on the field; what team they are on; what goal they are going for. We need to be patient and laugh with them as they get 'lost' on the field.
- Easily bruised psychologically. Shout praise often. Give "hints", don't criticize.
- Need generous praise and to play without pressure. No extrinsic rewards (trophies, medals, etc.) should be given for winning.
- Prefer "parallel play" (Will play on a team, but will not really engage with their teammates. Thus, a 3 against 3 game is, in reality, a 1 against 5 game because they all want the ball at the same time.
- Very individually oriented (me, mine, my).
- Constantly in motion, but, with no sense of pace. They will chase something until they drop. They are easily fatigued but recover rapidly.
- Development for boys and girls are quite similar.
- Physical coordination limited. Eye - hand and eye - foot coordination is not developed. Need to explore qualities of a rolling ball.
- Love to run, jump, roll, hop, etc..
- Prefer large, soft balls.
- Catching or throwing skills not developed.
- Can balance on their "good" foot.

Involving the parents

It is imperative that coaches get the parents involved. Not only are they a major resource for your team, but the U-6 player still views their parents as the most significant people in their lives. A pre-season meeting should be held with the parents so that objectives and team policies can be addressed.

Some topics that you may want to address at this meeting are:

- A means of contacting everyone without one person doing all of the calling. (Phone chains.)
- Choosing a team administrator-someone to handle all of the details.
- Complete all paperwork required by your league or club.
- Discuss the laws of the game.
- Carpool needs.
- Training and game schedules. How you feel about starting and ending on time, what your attendance expectations are, what you think is a good excuse to miss training.
- What each player should bring to training: inflated ball, filled water bottle, soccer attire, shin guards (Cleats are not mandatory.)
- Most importantly, your philosophy about coaching U-6 players. Let them know that everyone plays; that the game does not look like the older player's games; that you are there to ensure that their player is safe and has a good time, as well as learn about soccer.
- What your expectations for them is during game time. How do you want them to cheer? Do they know that they should not coach from the sidelines?
- Above all, try to enjoy yourself. If you do they probably will too.

Things you can expect

As coaches of these younger players there are things that we know that we can expect during training and games. If we know what to expect, we will be more effective in dealing with the hundreds of situations that come up. This will help us relax, and, in turn, allow us to enjoy the unpredictable nature of working with these children even more. Here are some of the things that we can expect.

- Most players cry immediately when something is hurt. Some cry even when something is not hurt.
- No matter how loud we shout, or how much we "practice" it, they can not or will not pass the ball.
- Somebody will come off the field in need of a toilet. Somebody will stay on the field in need of a toilet.
- The only player to hold a position is the goalkeeper (if you play with one). Don't even consider teaching positional play.
- Twenty seconds after the start of a game, every player will be within 5 yards of the ball.
- Several players will slap at the ball with their hands, or pick it up. Several parents will yell at them not to do that.
- A model rocket that is launched from a nearby field will get 99% of the player's attention. By all means, stop whatever you are doing and go watch for a couple of minutes!
- During a season, you will end up tying at least 40 - 50 shoe laces.
- They will do something that is absolutely hysterical. Make sure that you laugh!

Coaching Rational

It is important to understand at the outset that players coming to any sport prior to the age of 6 years old, in general, do not do so by their own choice. As a result, their coaches need to give them something about which to get excited. Further, at this age, learning to play soccer is secondary to most other things in their lives.

With the above assumptions, let's look at some things that we can do to energize the U-6 players, and, hopefully, get them to the point where they will enthusiastically initiate the sign up for next year!

- Each session should be geared around touching the ball as many times as possible. Involve the ball in as many activities as possible. Basic movements such as running, skipping, hopping, etc. need to be emphasized. If these can be done while kicking, catching, rolling, or dribbling a ball... all the better!
- Training should not last for more than one hour. This is primarily due to physical fatigue and attention span considerations. Train once or twice a week. Any more than this may lead to their and your burnout.
- Have as many different kinds of activities ready as you can get into one hour. Emphasis needs to be placed on what is FUN!
- Every player should bring his or her own size #3 or #4 ball.
- Remember, although they may have very similar birthdates, their physical and / or mental maturity may vary as much as 36 months. Activities need to accommodate these individual differences whenever possible.
- Team play and passing is an alien concept to these players. They know that if they pass the ball, they may never get it back. In fact, they often will steal it from their own teammates. Do not get uptight if they do not pass, let them dribble to their heart's content.
- Plan for at least 4, 90 second drink breaks, especially in warmer weather. Their "cooling system" is not as efficient as in older players.

Typical Training Session

Here are some items that should be included in a U-6 training session:

WARM-UP: A brief warm-up is appropriate in order to get the players thinking about soccer and to prepare them physically for the time ahead. This should involve individual body activities that may or may not involve the ball. They can chase their ball as it is thrown by the coach, bringing it back with different parts of their body. Or, they can chase someone with their ball at their feet. Static stretching is also appropriate at this time, again, hopefully done with the ball. "Soccernastics" activities are very appropriate, like: rolling the ball with the bottom of their feet, with their elbows, backwards, with the back of their neck while holding on to it; throwing it up and catching it; keeping it up with their feet while sitting.

INDIVIDUAL ACTIVITIES: Follow the warm-up with some kind of individual activity, not a real 1 v.1 game, but some kind of activity where players act as individuals in a game environment. An example would be a kind of tag game, or "Red Light - Green Light", or a game where players are trying to knock their ball through gates. Keep players in motion at all times. Avoid having them wait on lines. Play games of "inclusion" instead of games where the "looser sits".

PLAY THE GAME: Move on to the real game, but, make sure it is a 2 v. 2, 3 v. 3, or 4 v. 4 game. Switch the game every 5 minutes or so. Be creative. Play with 4 goals, or 2 balls. Play with or without boundaries. Use cones if you don't have real goals. Keep players involved. Have more than one game going on at a time if necessary. It is important that every player has a chance to shoot on goal as often as possible.

WARM-DOWN & HOMEWORK: Finish the session with a warm down. Give them some more stretches to do with the ball. You may want to review what you started the session with. Also, give them some homework so that they practice on their own. Think of some ball trick that you would like to see them try to do, like, bounce it off their thigh and then catch it. It is important to finish on time. This is especially essential if the players are really into it. Stop at this point and you will get an enthusiastic return.

U-6 Practice Idea:

"Keep Your Yard Clean"

Here is a game that involves kicking and is a good example of parallel play in that it involves all players on the team at one time, but, they are all acting as individuals during the game. This allows for individual differences in skill. The game is simple, fun, and easy to adapt to account for team size and experience.

THE GAME: Create a 'neutral area' between the two teams where no player is allowed into. This area can be as small as one yard and as big as 10 yards wide. The width is determined by how far the players can kick the ball.

Each player starts with a ball at his / her feet. On command, each team tries to keep their side of the game free of balls by kicking their ball over to the other teams side.

After an appropriate amount of time (when the balls become too scattered, or, the players are loosing focus), call the game and count which side has the most balls on their side.

Distribute the balls evenly for another try if the players are still interested.

After players have found some success with this basic game, try these variations:

- Players can only use their left foot. You may have to ask them which foot is their left/right!
- Throw the ball back. Any kind throw at first, then ask if they know how to throw like in a real soccer game.
- Punt the ball back.
- Dribble the ball around a cone that has been set up in the middle of their "yard", then, kick the ball back.

COACHING UNDER 8 PLAYERS

Characteristics of U-8 players

- Attention span is a bit longer than U-6 players but still not at a "competitive" stage
- Inclined towards small group activities.
- Always in motion: scratching; blinking; jerking; rocking....
- Easily bruised psychologically. They will remember negative comments for a long time. Shout praise. Give "hints".
- They want everybody to like them.
- Developing physical confidence. (Most are able to ride a two-wheeler.)
- Starting to imitate older players or sports heroes. Want the same "gear" as them.
- Lack sense of pace. They go flat out until they drop.
- Skeletal system growing rapidly. Often results in apparent lack of coordination.
- Cardiovascular and temperature regulation system is not developed. Their heart rate peaks quickly and they overheat quickly. make sure that they get adequate water breaks.
- Limited understanding with personal evaluation. "If they try hard, they performed well" regardless of the actual performance. Thus, they need to be encouraged constantly, and asked "Now, can you do this?" •Better at recognizing when the ball is out of play, and remembering what goal they are going for... but, in the heat of battle, they will sometimes still forget. They still find it difficult to really be aware of more than one thing at a time.

Involving the parents

It is imperative that coaches get the parents involved. Not only are they a major resource for your team, but the U-6 player still views their parents as the most significant people in their lives. A pre-season meeting should be held with the parents so that objectives and team policies can be addressed. Some topics that you may want to address at this meeting are:

- A means of contacting everyone without one person doing all of the calling. (Phone chains.)
- Choosing a team administrator-someone to handle all of the details.
- Complete all paperwork required by your league or club.
- Discuss the laws of the game.
- Carpool needs.
- Training and game schedules. How you feel about starting and ending on time, what your attendance expectations are, what you think is a good excuse to miss training.
- What each player should bring to training: inflated ball, filled water bottle, soccer attire, shin guards (Cleats are not mandatory.)
- Most importantly, your philosophy about coaching U-8 players. Let them know that everyone plays; that the game does not look like the older player's games; that you are there to ensure that their player is safe and has a good time, as well as learn about soccer.
- What your expectations for them is during game time. How do you want them to cheer? Do they know that they should not coach from the sidelines?
- Above all, try to enjoy yourself. If you do they probably will too.

Things you can expect

Six, seven and eight year old players are a bit more compliant than their U-6 counterparts. They will be able to follow 2 or 3 step instructions and are starting to have a good understanding about what it means to play a "game". They are also starting to cooperate more with their teammates. In fact, they now will recognize that they even have teammates by the fact that they occasionally, and I mean occasionally, will pass the ball to a teammate, on purpose. Often, they will repeat the phrase "I can't do that!", but, will quickly run to you to show you that they can, even when they only think that they can. Some other things that you can expect to happen during a season with this age group are:

- There will be at least 200-300 falls during the season, but, now they will usually pick themselves back up.
- The puddle in front of the goal is still too tempting to resist.
- Keep a spare pump in your bag as the players usually do not realize that their ball is flat until they try to kick it, or the coach tells them that it is flat.
- Some of the girls are a lot tougher than the boys.
- They will still want to wear a pinnie, even when the color is identical to their shirt.
- It will be impossible to remember who is who's best friend as you try to make up teams.
- School conflicts will come up... please, let them go (they must face their teachers five days a week).
- They will wear their uniform to bed.

Coaching Rational

Some of the players that are playing as a 7 year old have had two years of soccer experience and thus have already touched the ball a few thousand times in their lives. This, however, does not mean that these players are ready for the mental demands of tactical team soccer. True, they do have some idea of the game, but the emphasis still needs to be placed on the individual's ability to control the ball with his/her body. They are still there to have fun, and because some of the players may be brand new to the sport, it is imperative that activities are geared towards individual success and participation. Following are some more items that a coach of U-8 players should consider.

- Small sided soccer is the best option for these players. Not only will they get more touches on the ball, but, it is an easier game to understand.
- Because of rapid growth spurts during this age, players will go through times when they seem to have lost control of their body. What they could easily do 2 weeks ago now seems unattainable. Be patient.
- Passing is not an important part of their game, no matter how much anybody yells at them to do otherwise, it is much more fun to dribble and shoot. Let them.
- Training once or twice a week is plenty, and should not last longer than one hour and fifteen minutes.
- Each player should bring their own size #4 ball to training. Learning how to control it should be the main objective. They need to touch it as many times as possible during fun activities that will engage them.
- Challenge them to get better by practicing on their own. There is no rule which states that they can't learn by themselves, no matter how important we think we are. •Incidental things are important. They are forming the habits that will impact their future participation. Ask them to take care of their equipment (water bottle included), cooperate, listen, behave, and try hard. Realize, however, that they often forget and will need to be reminded often.
- Ask them to work with others to solve a particular challenge. Start them with just one partner and work from there.

Typical Training Session

Here are some items that should be included in a U-8 training session:

WARM-UP: A brief warm-up is appropriate in order to get the players thinking about soccer and to prepare them physically for the time ahead. This should involve individual body activities that may or may not involve the ball. They can chase their ball as it is thrown by the coach, bringing it back with different parts of their body. Or, they can chase someone with their ball at their feet. Static stretching is also appropriate at this time, again, hopefully done with the ball. "Soccernastics" activities are very appropriate, like: dribbling the ball with the bottom of their feet, with their elbows, backwards, with the back of their neck while holding on to it; keeping the ball up with their thighs; keeping it up with their feet while sitting.

INDIVIDUAL OR SMALL GROUP ACTIVITIES: Follow the warm-up with some kind of individual activity, not a real 1v.1 game, but some kind of activity where players act as individuals in a game environment. An example would be a kind of tag game, or a game where players are trying to work with a partner or small group to obtain a goal. Keep players in motion at all times. Avoid having them wait on lines. Play games of "inclusion" (where everyone plays), instead of games where the "looser sits". Be creative. These players like "crazy" games with a lot of action.

PLAY THE GAME: Small sided soccer can be used to heighten intensity and create some good competition. Play 1v.1 up to 5v.5. Be creative. Play with 4 goals, or 2 balls. Play with or without boundaries. Perhaps play to emphasize a particular skill (can only dribble the ball over a goal line in order to get a point). Use cones if you don't have real goals. Keep players involved. Have more than one game going on at a time if necessary. Switch teams often, give everyone a chance to win. Also, it is important that every player has a chance to shoot on goal as often as possible.

WARM-DOWN & HOMEWORK: Finish the session with a warm down. Give them some more stretches to do with the ball. You may want to review what you started the session with. Also, give them some homework so that they practice on their own. Think of some ball trick that you would like to see them try to do, like, bounce it off their head, then thigh and then catch it. Can one player kick a ball to a partner and then back without it hitting the ground? It is important to finish on time. This is especially essential if the players are really into it. Stop at this point and you will get an enthusiastic return.

U-8 Practice Idea:

"Get 'em"

Here is a game which involves both passing and dribbling that is fun and engages players quickly. Also, although primarily an individual exercise that allows for differences in ability level, if the players are ready, it can quickly become a cooperative game where players work together to solve a challenge.

THE GAME: Each player will need a ball. Player 'A' is "It" and is the only player to start with a ball. All the other players around the outside of the grided space.

Player 'A' dribbles and tries to hit the other players below the waist with the ball. When hit, that player gets a ball and joins player 'A'.

The game is over when all of the players have been caught.

The last player caught starts with the ball for the next game.

If you think the task will be too difficult for the one player to get another at the start of the game, start with 2 players being "It".

Encourage quick movements and sudden changes of direction to catch players off guard.

Encourage deceptive passing of the ball: look one-way and pass the other; use the outside of the foot.

Players not caught should run, jump, and use zig-zag movements.

COACHING UNDER 10 PLAYERS

Characteristics of U-10 players

- Gross and small motor skills becoming more refined and reliable. " Boys and girls begin to develop separately.
- Ability to stay on task is lengthened. They have the ability to sequence thought and actions.
- Greater diversity in playing ability and physical maturity. •Skills are emerging. Becoming more predictable and recognizable.
- Some children begin moving from concrete thinking to abstract thinking.
- Able to pace themselves, to plan ahead.
- Increased self-responsibility. They remember to bring their own equipment.
- Starting to recognize basic tactical concepts, but not exactly sure why certain decisions are better.
- Repetition of technique is very important, but it must be dynamic, not static.
- Continued positive reinforcement needed.
- Explanations must be brief, concise, and mention "why".
- Becoming more "serious". Openly, intensively competitive, without intention of fouling.
- Still mostly intrinsically motivated. " Peer pressure starting to be a factor.
- Adult outside of the family may take on added significance.
- Prefer identification with a team. Like to have good uniforms, equipment, balls.
- More inclined towards wanting to play instead of being told to play. Will initiate play more.

Involving the parents

It is imperative that coaches get the parents involved. Not only are they a major resource for your team, but the U-10 player still views their parents as the most significant people in their lives. A pre-season meeting should be held with the parents so that objectives and team policies can be addressed. Some topics that you may want to address at this meeting are:

- A means of contacting everyone without one person doing all of the calling. (Phone chains)
- Choosing a team administrator, someone to handle all of the details.
- Complete all paperwork required by your league or club. •Discuss the laws of the game.
- Carpool needs.
- Training and game schedules. How you feel about starting and ending on time, what your attendance expectations are, what you think is a good excuse to miss training.
- What each player should bring to training: inflated ball, filled water bottle, soccer attire, shin guards cleats or sneakers.
- Most importantly, your philosophy about coaching U-10 players. Let them know that everyone plays; that the game does not look like the older player's games; that you are there to ensure that their player is safe and has a good time, as well as learn about soccer.
- What your expectations for them is during game time. How do you want them to cheer? Do they know that they should not coach from the sidelines?
- Above all, try to enjoy yourself. If you do they probably will too.

Things you can expect

Some coaches say that the 9 and 10 year-old players are beginning to "turn the corner" and starting to look like real soccer players. However, games are still frantically paced and unpredictable for the most part. These players are starting to find out how much fun it is to play the game skillfully, but they will still stop and laugh if the referee gets hit in the backside with the ball during a game. Some other things that we can expect when working with this aged player are:

- They start to understand offside, but still forget themselves when the goal is in front of them.
- They will really beat up on each other during practice... especially boy's teams.
- During a game, the parents will scream out "HAND BALL" or "COME ON REF, CALL IT BOTH WAYS" at least fifteen times.
- They might cry after the game if they loose, but will forget it if you ask them if you want to go out for burgers and fries.
- You might actually catch them practicing on their own without you telling them to do so.
- Their parents are telling them to do one thing during the game, you are telling them another thing, but what they end up doing might be what their friend is telling them to do.
- You will see a pass that is deliberate. You might even see a "back pass".
- You will see your first \$100 pair of cleats during practice. They will call the other team bad names... really bad names.

Coaching Rational

Some of the players that are playing as U - 10's are seasoned veterans of the youth soccer scene. Some of them may have already been involved in traveling to play in tournaments. As a result, some of them might be very nervous about the whole process. It is our job to keep things in perspective for these young, developing players. True, some of them are becoming quite skillful and are seeing how fun it is to play the game when they can really control the ball. However, many of them are still learning the ropes. Even the more experienced players need to have the game be fun!!!

Emphasis is still placed on having players learn how to control the ball with his/her body, but now, they need to find themselves in more game-like situations. Training is more dynamic and starting to have players make simple, basic decisions such as "Which way is there more space?" or "Who should I pass to?".

Following are some more items that a coach of U-10 players should consider:

- Use small sided games as the main teaching vehicle. Not only will they get more touches on the ball, but the full 11-a-side game is still too complicated for them to understand.
- How we group players during training takes on even added significance because of the wide margins of ability levels. We need to mix players up often.
- Stretching is becoming more important, along with a good warm-up. Since the game is faster, make sure that they also have good shinguards. Safety and preventive measures take on added significance.
- Training twice a week is plenty. Sessions need not go longer than one hour, fifteen minutes.
- They should all come with their own size #4 ball. In fact, they still need to be encouraged to play with it by themselves.
- Put them into competitive environments as much as possible. This will not only keep them focused, but, it will allow the game itself to teach them. It also will keep things fun for them, and allow you to deal with issues such as 'winning' and 'loosing' which is now a very big concern for them.
- Now it is possible to teach them positional play with the expectation that they will get it some of the time. However, it is absolutely necessary that you do not allow players to specialize in any one position. They need to learn basic principles of the game, first. Having them play all of the positions is best for their individual development. Remember, our first responsibility is to develop players and let them have fun.
- Whenever possible, allow them to solve their own puzzles. Don't immediately give them solutions on how they can play better.

Typical Training Session

Here are some items that should be included in a U-10 training session:

WARM-UP:

A brief warm-up is appropriate in order to get the players thinking about soccer and to prepare them physically for the time ahead. This should involve individual body activities that involve the ball. Since there can be one theme to the session, hopefully, the warm-up will lead into the theme of the day. Static stretching is also appropriate at this time after the players have broken a sweat, again, hopefully done with the ball. Again, the warm-up should get the players ready to play. It should be lively, fun, and engaging as well as instructional. There is nothing like a good, fast paced activity to grab the player's attention and make them glad that they came to practice.

INDIVIDUAL OR SMALL GROUP ACTIVITIES:

Follow the warm-up with some kind of individual activity, not necessarily a real 1v.1 game, but some kind of activity where players act as individuals or cooperate in small groups in a game environment. An example would be a kind of tag game, or a keep-away game. Keep players in motion at all times. Avoid having them wait on lines. Play games of "inclusion" instead of games where the "loser sits". Be creative. These players like "crazy" games with a lot of action.

PLAY THE GAME:

Small sided soccer can be used to heighten intensity and create some good competition. Play 4 v.4 up to 8 v.8. Be creative. Play with 4 goals, or 2 balls. Play with or without boundaries. Perhaps play to emphasize a particular skill (can only dribble the ball over a goal line in order to get a point). Use cones if you don't have real goals. Keep players involved. Have more than one game going on at a time if necessary. Switch teams often, give everyone a chance to win. Also, it is important that every player has a chance to shoot on goal as often as possible.

WARM-DOWN & HOMEWORK:

Finish the session with a warm down. Give them some more stretches to do with the ball. You may want to review what you started the session with. Also, give them some homework so that they practice on their own. Think of some ball trick that you would like to see them try to do, like, bounce it off their head, then thigh, then foot, and then catch it. Can one player kick a ball to a partner and then back without it hitting the ground? Can they do that with their heads? It is important to finish on time. This is especially essential if the players are really into it. Stop at this point and you will get an enthusiastic return.

U-10 Practice Idea:

"Team Knock Out"

Here is a game to use in the 'Small Group Activity' phase of the practice. It is an engaging game that is fun to play and challenges players in almost all aspects of the game.

THE GAME:

- Divide the squad up into two teams.
- To start, each player on the team that is inside the field will need a ball. Those on the outside of the field do not need a ball.
- When ready, players on the outside run into the grid, attempt to steal any ball they can and put it through any one of the goals that are marked by the cones.
- Players with the ball attempt to keep the ball away from the defenders by dribbling or passing to a teammate that has lost their ball.
- If an attacking player loses a ball, they immediately try to 'steal' it back.
- The game stops when all of the balls have been kicked through the goals. Then the two teams switch roles.
- Keep track of how long it takes each team to steal all of the balls.
- If a ball is kicked out of bounds it goes over to the other team for a throw-in.

This game is good for teaching dribbling skills as players find themselves in situations where they have to dribble to keep possession as well as dribble to beat an opponent. Also, they find themselves in situations where they may have to pass to a teammate as well as find themselves playing defense as well. because there are so many balls, and so many goals, it is just a crazy enough game to be appreciated and enjoyed by a typical nine- year-old.

