

Chapter 4: U-6 | The Fundamental Stage

Individual – Me and My Ball

The fundamental stage covers ages 6 to 9 [Table 8]. The objective is to learn all elementary movement skills by building overall motor skills.

In terms of motor development, cognitive development and social development, generally there are few differences in the capabilities of the players in this age group. Individual and small group play is essential for both touches on the ball and learning at their own pace. The emphasis should be on letting the children play. Over coaching unfortunately occurs at this age group.

Prior to a player being expected to learn ball skills the child must first be in control of the body. This growth in athleticism is a long-term evolution. It is imperative for children to acquire a base of general balance, coordination and agility before soccer skills. How can the coach expect them to control the ball before they can control their bodies? That is why it is essential for youngsters be exposed to movement education²⁴. The foundation of movement education must be laid during childhood. This requirement is of primary importance to the youngest players, making ball skills secondary in importance. Do not use a calisthenics approach; instead, keep it fun and enjoyable to foster a desire to play. This intrinsic motivation will grow a passion for the game that could last a lifetime.

The fascination for the ball, the desire to master it and the thrill of scoring goals provides the launching pad into a lifetime of soccer participation. The joy and skills of the game are best nurtured by encouraging freedom of expression and organizing children's play in small groups. This is the fun phase where a passion for the game must be sown.

"...children in the 21st (century) have been transformed from net producers of their own toy and play culture to net consumers of play culture imposed by adults."

- David Elkind, American child psychologist and author

What many adults have forgotten from their own youth is that children of this age can only focus on a limited number of tasks at one time. It takes the full attention capacity of a U-6 player to control the ball because they are still developing basic balance, coordination and agility. Also, in a 3v3 match for U-6 players, the opposition for the player with the ball is generally 1v5. So during a match the player needs to focus on the task at hand, trying to control the ball. Unfortunately, they are distracted by adults yelling from the touchline. Now they have to make a choice, either play the ball or listen to the coach

²⁴ Developing and applying coordinated and rhythmical body movements in learning situations.

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and parents. If the adults want to help the children play their best, they need to be quiet while watching the game.

Players in this age group are egocentric – a me, my, mine mentality. Young children do not play together; they play next to one another, meaning they do not necessarily interact as they play. This psychosocial reality is called parallel play. Each child is engaged in his or her own game and is not sharing or cooperating in a game. In soccer, this is most evident in the U-6 age group and still occurs to a lesser degree in the U-8 age group. Players in these age groups swarm around and go after the ball because it is the only toy on the field. They have not yet learned the



social skill of sharing, hence why passing (sharing) the ball occurs by chance. All adults around the field when these age groups are playing must realize the children are not small adults. Why should the children suddenly display the social skill of sharing when they do not yet truly display that talent in any other setting? The child's enjoyment at this age is derived from playing in a group. Preschoolers enjoy playing in the presence of others, parallel play, even though they may not always watch or interact with them. However, at this age there is no real interest in competition or outcome. The coach must set up numerous activities where the players are together but still involved in individual play.

Through the use of game-like activities, trial and error exposes children to the components of the game and the principles of play. The primary training activities are body awareness and maze games. Age appropriate activities can be found in US Youth Soccer's *The Novice Coach Vol. 1 Under-6 to 8 years*, *US Youth Soccer Skills School*, *US Youth Soccer Coaching Principles of Play through Small-Sided Games*, *US Youth Soccer Positive Parenting for Youth Soccer DVD*, *The Official US Youth Soccer Coaching Manual* and the *US Youth Soccer Handbook for Small-Sided Games*. The club should follow the recommendations in the US Youth Soccer Vision document. All resources are available on USYouthSoccer.org. Remember that the game is for all kids, and everyone should be encouraged to participate.

The training session must be player-centered with the coach as a facilitator of the soccer experience. It is necessary to go with the flow and be adaptable with this age group. Use guided discovery and the coach's toolkit, as discussed in Part 1: Primer of this *Model*, which gets children thinking and playing with little coaching interruption. Throughout the season, allow the players to experiment and discover the ball skills being taught on their own. The coach should demonstrate the skills a few times during the session. Also during the session, call out some of the key coaching points on how to execute the ball skills. Praise loudly and positively when a player does a skill correctly—positive reinforcement. Encourage them to try to do new things with the ball throughout the soccer season. It is very important that each player has a ball for every training session.

Section 1 - General Characteristics of the U-6 Age Group

- Catching skills not yet developed

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- Constantly in motion – love to run, jump, roll and climb
- Eye-hand and/or eye-foot coordination is primitive at best – not ready for bouncing or flighted balls
- No sense of pace – go flat out
- Physical coordination is immature – can balance on dominate foot
- Controlling the ball is a complex task
- Prefer large soft balls and foam balls
- Only understand simple rules
- Individually oriented (me, my, mine) – little or no concern for team activities
- Believes in Santa Claus, but will not discuss with peers – lofty imagination
- Physical and psychological development of boys and girls are quite similar
- Psychologically, easily bruised – need generous praise
- Short attention span – tends to one task at a time
- Limited understanding of time and space

U-6 players must play at least 50 percent of each match they attend. They should not play a season longer than two months. They must have at least one full month off between seasons of play.

The components of the game are the building blocks of player development. Coach and player must work jointly throughout a player's career to reinforce and add to these building blocks. The core goal is to create a well-rounded player.

Section 2 - Components of the Game for the U-6 Age Group*

Fitness: Introduce the idea of how to warm-up and movement education. Begin education about nutrition with players and parents. Balance, walking, running, how to start and stop, jumping, hopping, rolling, skipping, changing direction, bending, twisting and reaching.

Technique: Dribbling (stop and start) and shooting. Experiment with the qualities of a rolling ball.

Psychology: Sharing, fair play, parental involvement, "how to play" and emotional management.

Tactics: Where is the field? The concept of boundary lines, at which goal to shoot and playing with the ball wherever it may go.

**Please note that the components of the game are in a priority order for this age group.*

Section 3 - Typical U-6 Training Session

- Should not exceed 45 minutes.
- Every child should have a ball.
- Free play or a warm-up, including movement education challenges and soccerastics.²⁵
-approximately 15 minutes-
- Game-like activities, mostly body awareness and maze games.
-approximately 15 minutes-
- Finish with a 3v3 game with two goals, no goalkeepers
-approximately 15 minutes-

Coaches should devote the end of each training session to playing 3v3 practice games. During these practice games is the best time for the coach to teach rules of the game to the players. Fun games involving small numbers can be played, especially 1v1, 2v1, 1v2 and 2v2 leading up to a final activity of 3v3. It is important to ensure each child has a ball and to focus on fun games. The benefit of the increased number of touches on the ball in those games is irreplaceable. Coaches should be well prepared and have a selection of game-like activities planned, while keeping in mind these young children have short attention spans.

"Who can play 3 on 3 successfully can play soccer!"

- Cesar Luis Menotti, won 1978 FIFA World Cup for Argentina, coach

Please ask the club director to arrange an age appropriate coaching clinic by calling the US Youth Soccer State Association technical director.

Coach's qualities: Uses the games approach to learning, not drill oriented. Act as a facilitator rather than a coach. Other characteristics are: good humor, friendly helper, organizer, stimulator, ability to see soccer from a child's perspective, patient, able to demonstrate movements and simple skills, enthusiastic and imaginative.

License Recommendation: Volunteer coach – U-6/U-8 Youth Module Certificate or National Youth License. Paid coach – National Youth License.

The Game: Preferably these should be unstructured pick-up game style matches. If scheduled matches must occur then every effort must be made to reduce the *us versus them* mentality and outcome-based expectations that surround too many youth games.

²⁵ Fun activities with or without the ball which challenge a player's coordination, balance, flexibility, ball skill and creativity.