

Chapter 5: U-8 | Igniting the Passion

Me, the ball and my friend

The objective of the fundamental stage is to learn all basic movement skills by building overall motor skills. During the fundamental stage [Table 8] an opportunity occurs for a lifelong turn-on to the game.

Igniting a passion for the game must be the number one objective for coaches of this age group. The aim of the coach is to keep their soccer experience fun, enjoyable and to foster a desire to play. This love of the game keeps people in the game for a lifetime.

There can be differences now in the motor, cognitive and social development capabilities of the players in this age group. Individual and small group play, especially pairs, is essential for both touches on the ball and learning at their own pace.

The emphasis on movement education and body awareness continues with this age group and is expanded to involve even more activities with the ball. These activities should include eye-hand and eye-foot coordination games. This is essential to overall coordination and a well-rounded physical fitness approach.

Now is the opportune time for encouraging skills with either foot as the muscle movement patterns are a clean slate. Ambidextrous skill is certainly a goal for a coach committed to player development. Show players that passing is another option to dribbling. This is not just a technical objective but a psychosocial one since the basis of all teamwork is cooperation between partners. Many U-8 activities will be done in pairs to promote communication, cooperation and the conceptualization of soccer principles. Furthermore, encourage them to get better by practicing on their own with the ball.

Children in the U-8 age group still play predominately as individuals and occasionally with a partner. The coach must set up numerous activities where the players are together but are still involved in individual play. This age group prefers individual activities, but it is possible to successfully get them into activities where they can work in pairs.

The attention capacity for this age group is still limited to one task at a time. They are quite rightly focused on the ball. In a 4v4 match the opposition for the player with the ball is generally 1v7 even though partner play is now emerging. So during a match, the players need to focus on the task at hand, trying to control the ball. Unfortunately, they are often distracted by adults giving advice from around the field. Now they have to make a choice: either play the ball or listen to the adults. If the adults want to help the children play their best, they need to be quiet while watching the children's game.

From parallel play, as described in the U-6 age group, to learning to share with others, these milestones are passed by the end of this age. Thus, players need encouragement to share and approval for trying. Ask them to work with others to solve a challenge. Start them with just one partner and work to a

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variety of partners from there. It is important for early childhood coaches and administrators to teach this reality to the player's parents and to let everyone know it is OK to play swarm ball at the U-6 and U-8 age groups. Swarm ball may actually help players improve their dribbling skills and decision-making ability.

Six, 7 and 8 year olds are starting to understand what it means to play a game. They are beginning to cooperate more with their teammates. In fact, they will now recognize that they even have teammates because they will occasionally pass the ball to a teammate purposefully. Some U-8 players will have played for more than a season; however, this does not mean these players are ready for the mental demands of tactical team soccer. True, they do have an idea of the game with regard to scoring or preventing goals, but the emphasis still needs to be placed on the individual's ability to control the ball. They are still there to have fun, and because some of the players may be new to soccer, it is imperative that activities are geared toward individual success and participation. Parallel play may occur in training sessions for U-8 players, too. The coach must set up numerous activities where the players are together, but still involved in both individual and partner play.

General Characteristics of the U-8 Age Group

- Like to show skills – need approval
- Beginning to develop some physical confidence (most can ride a bicycle)
- Lack sense of pace – go flat out, chasing the ball until they drop
- Still in motion – twitching, jerking, scratching and blinking are all second nature physical movements
- Still into running, jumping, climbing and rolling
- Boys and girls are still quite similar in physical and psychological development
- Attention span is a bit longer than the U-6 age group
- Developing playmates
- More into imitation of the big guys (sports heroes becoming important)
- Still very sensitive – Dislikes personal failure in front of peers, making ridicule from the coach in front of the group very destructive
- Still do not believe in the intensity of the team at all costs
- Inclined more toward small group activities

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“Practice – learning anything – hurts somewhat. You see how bad you are at it and with encouragement there is improvement. With practice comes discipline. The best road to getting there runs not through the land of fear and punishment but through the land of connection, play, practice, mastery and recognition. He/she learns how to be coached.”

- Dr. Edward M. Hallowell, child and adult psychiatrist specializing in ADD/ADHD

Using game-like activities, which allow for trial and error, exposes children to the components of the game. The key training activities are body awareness and maze games. Introduce a few target games too. They need to touch the ball frequently during fun activities that engage them. Small-sided games are still undoubtedly the best option for these players. Not only will they get more touches on the ball, but it is also an easier game to understand. 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 *US Youth Soccer Handbook for Small-Sided Games*. All of the adults associated with the club should be familiar with the philosophy promoted in the US Youth Soccer Vision document. All resources can be found on USYouthSoccer.org. Remember that the game is for all players and everyone should be encouraged to participate.

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 a well-rounded player. Here are the blocks within the components of the game for this age group.

Components of the Game for the U-8 Age Group*

Technique: Experiment with the qualities of a rolling or spinning ball. Introduce ball lifting, juggling, block tackle, receiving ground balls with the inside and sole of the foot, shooting with the inside of the foot, toe passing and shooting and dribbling while changing direction. Introduce the push pass.

Fitness: Agility, eye-foot and eye-hand coordination, balance, leaping, bounding, tumbling, catching, throwing, pulling, pushing, warm-up activities and movement education. Continue education on sports nutrition with players and parents.

Psychology: Encourage working in pairs, sportsmanship, parental involvement, how to play, emotional management, creativity, dynamic activities, participation of all players and a safe and fun environment. There is still a short attention span unless the player has peaked (keep interest high). Like to show what they can do – encourage trying new things. Developing self-esteem – activities should foster positive feedback and attainable positive success.

Tactics: Back line and forward line, 1v1 attack and choosing to dribble or pass. Introduce the names of positions (fullbacks and forwards). Institute games of 2v1, 1v2 and 2v2, playing with the ball with a purpose and promote problem solving.

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

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The training session must be player-centered with the coach as a facilitator of the soccer experience. With this age group it is necessary to be adaptable. Use guided discovery and the coach's toolkit, as discussed in The Primer section, which allows youngsters to play with little coaching interruption and gets them thinking. Throughout the season, allow the players to experiment and discover the ball skill being taught on their own. The coach should occasionally demonstrate skills, or have someone demonstrate a few times during the session. Also during the session, call out one or two of the key coaching points on how to execute a ball skill. 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. While it is still important for the training session that each player has a ball, paired activities will now be done as well as individual ones. Encourage the players to cooperate through passing or helping on defense by running back toward goal. Cooperation in pairs is the foundation to teamwork. Now that children are at an age where they can play together purposefully and toward a common objective, work on cooperative partner activities.

Typical U-8 Training Session

- Should not exceed one hour.
- Free play or a warm-up, each player with a ball, dynamic stretching and soccerastics.
-approximately 15 minutes-
- Some individual body awareness activities.
- Introduce partner activities.
- A mixture of individual and partner activities. Add more maze-type games. Introduce target games with a variety of player combinations: 1v1, 2v1, 1v2 and 2v2.
-approximately 25 minutes-
- Conclude with a Small-Sided Game of 4v4, two goals and no goalkeepers.
-approximately 20 minutes-

Coaches should devote the end of each training session to playing 4v4 practice games. Fun games can also be played involving small numbers, especially 1v1, 2v1, 1v2, 2v2, 1v3, 2v3 and 3v3 leading up to the final activity of 4v4. Through these games, expose the U-8 age group to the principles of play. 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 is irreplaceable. Be well prepared and have a selection of game-like activities planned while keeping in mind these young children have short attention spans.

Developing a general understanding of the basic rules of the game is an objective in working with the players. U-8 players must play at least 50 percent of each match they attend. They should not play a season longer than three months and must have at least one full month off between seasons of play.

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

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Coach's qualities: Sensitive teacher, facilitator, patient, enthusiastic, imaginative, able to demonstrate, understand technique and preferably young at heart.

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. No organized matches where the score is recorded. If scheduled matches must occur then they should be seen as another fun activity that includes a soccer ball. There should be no emphasis on team concepts or positions. Outcome based matches are in their future. Playing for results must not be part of the U-8 match.



Please read thoroughly the Ball Control and Creativity section in the *Best Practices* guide.