



Notes from the DPD - Playing Up



Youth soccer in the United States is typically organized by age groups. Effective Fall 2016, these age groups are organized by birth year (January 1-December 31).

Age groups are created to ensure that players participate with peers of similar development – skill-wise, physically, mentally and socially. However, these age groups should not be considered a “box” that kids must be a part of; since players develop at different rates, and one player may reach a higher level of development than another, players should be afforded with the opportunity to “play up” (compete in an older age group) when appropriate.

The key question is “when is it appropriate for my child to play up?” To answer this, we must consider the following questions:

1. Is my child under-challenged or bored by playing in their age group, or do they find the right balance of challenge and success? Also consider the teams they are playing against – is that level of competition failing to challenge my child?
2. Does my child have a competitive age-appropriate team that can offer a more appropriate environment?
3. Is my child physically capable of excelling in an older age group? Do they possess the size, speed, and coordination to succeed against older players and (potentially) on a larger field designed for older players?
4. Does my child have the skill (technical ability) to excel in an older age group?
5. Is my child mentally capable of excelling in an older age group? Playing in an older age group typically means the game is faster, so players must be able to make decisions as well as physically execute them faster.
6. Is my child emotionally capable of excelling in an older age group? Players mature at different rates, and handling stress, adversity and setbacks may be too much for a younger player.

When answering these questions, consider the following key words, phrases and ideas:

Excelling vs. Competing: A child playing up should excel in that older age group at the highest level of play possible. They should possess great individual skill and confidence with the ball, and should be able to make an impact in the game. Often times, parents and coaches think “holding their own” is enough to warrant a child playing up. However, there is a difference between “being competitive” and “excelling.” A child playing-up should still be able to make an impact in the game; this “impact” could take the form of scoring goals, dominating the 1v1 matchup (with and without the ball), distributing the ball and directing the team’s attack, making critical saves as a goalkeeper, etc.

If they are merely a contributing player, they are losing opportunities to develop their game to its fullest potential, and ultimately may stunt their growth. For example: a player who is good at dribbling in their true age group may not have the same success or opportunity in an older age group due to the increase in the game’s pace, and is forced to become more of a passer to remain competitive. An important aspect of this player’s development – in this case, dribbling - is negatively impacted by playing up.

In other words, the player should be a leader of the pack and not a follower or role player.



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Physical, Mental and Emotional Abilities, and Technical Skill: When determining if playing up is appropriate, all four variables should be considered. Ideally, a player competing in an older age group can do so because all four factors are strengths. A player lacking significantly in one of these areas may be reason enough for them to play in their own age group.

Birth Year vs. School Year: Some players may wish to play up to be with a particular schoolmate or previous teammate, as defining age groups by Birth Year results in the formation of teams with multiple grade levels represented on the roster. Often times this rationale is used to justify the social element of the game (e.g. playing with their friends), which is an important aspect of youth sports. However, a player placed in an older age group may stunt their development, and fail to achieve success at this level, which ultimately impacts the main reason children play sports: to have fun!

A comparable example would be the higher levels of classroom subjects – there is a reason why some students in the same grade study calculus while others are in trigonometry, and others are in algebra. You could move the student in algebra to calculus so they're in the same class as their friends, but ultimately that student's comprehension of mathematics will be underdeveloped, and their success in and enjoyment of that subject will be limited.

Returning to Their Age Group: Returning to one's age group is likely inevitable. While not definite, players and families should understand this will most likely occur and discuss this possibility to make the transition smoother. This transition should not be viewed as a demotion but as a decision to better develop the child's abilities to their fullest. It can also be viewed as a challenge to the player to raise their level of play to warrant advancement to the older age group.

Playing up should be evaluated on a seasonal or annual basis. Consider the child's experience the previous season – if the sport is becoming less fun and more frustrating, or if their development is slowing, it may mean the child should return to their age group.

Opinion of the Technical Staff: It is important that when making the decision as to the best interest of the child, the family (parents and player) trust and respect the opinion and position of the club's Technical Staff. Where this may be the family's first experience with playing up, it is likely not the Technical Staff's, whose years of experience and knowledge can guide them in the right direction.

Conclusion: Players who have the ability to excel in an older age group should be afforded the opportunity to do so. However, this opportunity should be properly examined from all angles and justified, as the player's best interest and development must be kept in the forefront.