Coaching Curriculum for Age Group: 8 and Under

Although children 8 and under may begin to be far more physically strong and mature that children 6 and under, we must remain patient and not try to force them to develop too quickly. Dribbling still needs to be the primary focus of our efforts, though passing and shooting should be introduced at this age as well. Players 8 and under tend to work best when in pairs and we should allow them to work in pairs (coach selected) often. Similar to children 6 and under, we need to make sure that fun is a central theme in training. Player development will occur most appropriately and expeditiously if all players are enjoying themselves.

Typical Characteristics of players 8 and under:

- **tend to work well in pairs** - unlike children 6 and under, these children enjoy playing in pairs. Try to set up the pairs yourself to control the games, manage skill level and personalities
- **are now able to take another’s perspective** - they now have a sense of how other’s are feeling
- **still unable to think abstractly** - still do not have this capability, be patient
- **heating and cooling systems still much less efficient than adults** - still need frequent water breaks during training and games
- **limited attention span (on average 15-20 seconds for listening, up to 20 minutes when engaged in a task)** - this may vary greatly on any given day depending on school, diet, etc. Try to gauge each day and do not fight crankiness
- **have an understanding of time and sequence** - they now understand: if I do this, then that happens
- **many have incorporated a 3rd or 4th speed into play** - not all players, but many players now have incorporated a speed or two between stopped and fast as possible
- **extremely aware of adult reactions** - be very aware of your verbal and nonverbal reactions, as they look for your reaction frequently
- **seek out adult approval** - be supportive when they ask about performance or try to show you skills. They very much need reassurance and you need to help build their confidence to try new things at this age
- **begin to become aware of peer perception** - a social order is beginning to develop. Be sensitive to this
- **wide range of abilities between children at this age** - children develop at varying paces. You may have a 8 year old who seems more like a 10 year old and one that seems more like a 6 year old. Your challenge is to manage this range in you practice in a way that challenges each player at a level that is reasonable for that player
- **some will keep score** - the competitive motors churn faster in some than others. Surely some parents are fueling the motors with their own. Regardless, we do not need to stress winning and losing at this age. Results should not be important at this age. The question to ask of the players is “did you have fun?”
- **beginning to develop motor memories** - by attempting fundamental technical skills they are training their bodies to remember certain movements
• **less active imagination than 6 and under players** - still have active imaginations by adult standards, but some of the silliness that 6 year olds allowed will not be appreciated by this group.

**Skill Priorities:**
Dribble with all sides of both feet
Dribble out of trouble
Dribble past someone
Shielding
Soft first touch
Introduce proper shooting technique
Introduce passing

**Recommended games for Players 8 and Under:**

1. **Free Dribble** - Everyone with a ball, use inside, outside and sole of the foot. Have players dribble with speed (outside of foot), change direction, and perform moves. Coach calls out moves or changes in direction and sets the pace as the manipulator of the session. Players dribble towards someone and try a move. **Version 2:** As players get comfortable, coach can walk around and put pressure on players as they are performing dribbling tasks. This adds fun and interaction.

2. **Knock Out** - In the same space as previous activity, have players dribble balls while trying to knock other players balls outside of the grid. Players can never leave their own ball. If their ball gets knocked out have them retrieve it quickly and get back into the game. (You may wish to have them perform a skills task before re-entering such as 10 toe touches or juggling 5 times).

3. **Shield Steal** - Half of the players in the group have a ball and half do not. Players that do not have a ball need to steal one from someone who does. If the ball goes out of bounds, the person who touched it last does not get possession. You can teach players the technical points of shielding as a group at the start of the activity. Show technique with wide body sideways, arm providing protection, ball on the outside of the foot, knees bent, turning as defender attacks, using feel to understand where the defender is going. Fix technical
shielding errors throughout this activity and make sure the entire group knows how to properly shield.

4. **Marbles** - Players are in pairs, each with a ball. This time instead of chasing each other, one player plays out his ball and the partner passes his own ball in an attempt to strike the ball his partner played out. Players should keep track of how many times they hit their partner’s ball. **Version 2:** Once players understand this game, make it fast paced by having the players take turns at trying to hit each other’s ball without ever stopping. If player 2 misses player 1’s ball, then player 1 immediately runs to his own ball and tries to hit players 2’s ball. After player 1 has a chance, then player 2 immediately tries to hit player 1’s ball right back, etc. etc. This game is continuous and players should keep score. (hint: if 2 balls are very close to each other, a player should kick their ball hard at the other players ball so when they hit it, it is more difficult of the other player to hit their ball back).

5. **Gates Passing** - Players are paired up and must successfully pass the ball though the cones to their teammate to earn a point. Have players pass only with their left foot or right foot, or the outside of their foot. Players try to accumulate as many points as possible in the time allotted. Have players repeat and try to beat their score. Place smaller gates central to challenge skilled players and wider gates around the perimeter to challenge less skilled players. Add a very small gate in the center for 2 points. **Version 2:** Challenge players to redirect the ball when receiving instead of trapping the ball.
6. **Triangle Tag** - Set up cones in a triangle formation with each side of the triangle being roughly 1 yard long. Every triangle has a pair of players, each with a ball. Similar to the tag game, one player is being chased and one is “it”. However this time the player who is “it” tags the player by kicking her ball and hitting the other player’s ball or hitting the player below the knee. Players can dribble in either direction around the triangle and must stay close to their own triangle. Neither player can go through the triangle. *Version 2:* Allow the player being chased to go through the triangle. When in the triangle she is safe. However, after going through the triangle, the player must go completely around the triangle before she can go through the triangle again. She cannot stop inside the triangle. *Version 3:* Allow pairs to move from triangle to triangle (incorporates speed dribbling and traffic). If two pairs are at the same triangle at the same time that is fine, but players still only compete with their partner. Note: to increase difficulty, do not count hitting a player below the knee as a tag.

7. **Get outta here** - Place two small (2 yard) goals at the end of a 15 x 10 yard field. Split the players and place each behind a goal or to the left and right of the coach on the line. The coach will play out a ball and the first two players run out and try to score on each others goal. If the ball goes in the goal or out of bounds the coach yells “get outta here” and plays in a new ball for the next two players. *Version 2:* Coach can stop yelling “get outta here” and see if the players recognize when balls go out and are attentive. *Version 3:* Coach can vary the service of the ball. Sometimes play it to one player, sometimes toss the ball up in the air. *Version 4:* Have the first two or three players from each group come out each time a new ball is played and play 2v2 or 3v3.
8. **Clean Your Backyard** - Break group into two teams and have each team stay only on their half of the field. Place a 6 yard buffer zone between halves that no one can enter or cross. Each player needs a ball. Place three small (2-3 yard) goals at the far end of each side of the field. Have both teams shoot balls at the other teams goals in an attempt to score through any one of the small goals (below knee height). Players cannot cross the buffer zone or go into the other half. Balls get recycled naturally in the game. During the first couple games, do not allow them to play defense. After a couple games allow them to play defense, but NO hands. This is a competition and teams need to keep score. Only shots with laces should count as goals.

9. **2 vs. 1 Keepaway** - In a 10 x 15 yard grid, three players play 2 vs. 1 continuous keepaway. Two attackers combine to keep the ball away from the defender. When the defender wins the ball, he or she immediately combines with the attacker he or she did not win the ball from and the attacker who lost the ball becomes the defender. Balls out of play are dribbled in or passed in.

10. **1 vs. 1 to Endlines** - In a space that is wider than long (15 x 20 yards) each player defender one endline and attacks the other. Players score by dribbling the ball in control over the opposing players endline. *Version 2:* You can make this 2 vs. 2, 3 vs. 3 or 4 vs. 4. Adjust the space size as needed.

**Every training session should end with a scrimmage**

**US YOUTH SOCCER recommendations for 8 and under:**

- Play 4 vs. 4 (without a goalkeeper)
- Field Size: 25-35 yards long x 20-30 yards wide
- Ball: Size 3
- Training time: Limit to 60 minutes