



U-8: 1st and 2nd Graders

Soccer is still all about having fun with the ball and encouraging the children to want to have the ball at their feet. The numbers should still be one and two players to a ball.

GAME APPLICATION

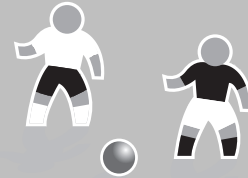
Game Form: 3 v 3 is best option for these ages

GK Status: Optional. Players should not be limited to playing one “position”

Field Size: 4 v 4 (40 yards x 25 yards)—3 v 3 (30 yards x 20 yards)

Ball Size: 3

When ball goes out of bounds, the game is restarted with a kick-in or dribble-in. No throw-ins.



■ SOME THOUGHTS ABOUT THIS AGE

These children are still young. By the end of this phase, (around eight- years-old) children are beginning to be able to apply past experience to the present situation. For example, at a simple level, they can remember what they were shown or what they tried with the ball from last practice. At the same time, this ability is not present on a consistent basis. They are still not able to imagine consequences (i.e., if you do this, what will happen?). Let them learn through experience.

Do not attempt to replicate organizational schemes that you have seen older teams doing. Seven and eight year olds are not capable of playing anything that resembles organized soccer. For example, team concepts such as combination play or positions should not be introduced at this age.

Do use older players as mentors and role models. Often the younger players will learn simply by watching how the older players move or by what they can do with the ball.

GOALS FOR PRACTICE, GAMES AND SEASON

■ PRACTICE:

There should be a lot of playing with the ball in small numbers for relatively short periods of time. A key focus for this age is to encourage players not to fear the ball. Give each player plenty of opportunities to experience the ball at his or her own pace. For example, organizing games where there are multiple goals and balls for the players to work with. Also, games where they are changing direction and changing how fast they run, and dealing with balls on the ground and with bouncing balls.



“I don’t believe skill was, or ever will be, the result of coaches. It is a result of a love affair between the child and the ball” – Manfred Schellscheidt

■ **DURATION, RATIO OF BALL: CHILD**

Practices should last 45 to 60 minutes. For most of the practice, each player should be actively involved with a ball. Games of 1 v 1 or games up to 3 v 3 with multiple balls involved (2:1 ratio of player to ball) and games to goals are also enjoyable and effective for this age.

■ **GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF WHAT SHOULD BE HAPPENING DURING PRACTICE**

No Lines. No laps. No Lectures. Attendance is still optional. Provided there is adequate supervision, children at this age should be allowed to come in and out of practice as they please. At this point, if you have not already done so, you may want to introduce some boundaries. However, don’t allow the boundaries of the environment to hinder the training time by producing frequent stoppages of play because the ball goes ‘out of bounds.’ Try to keep the flow of the game going. Encourage informal play without pressure to “perform.” Encourage the basic skills and give the players a lot of time with the ball. This will ultimately build their confidence. Make sure to always include games to goals.

■ **GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF INFORMATION THAT IS COMMUNICATED TO THE PLAYERS BY THE COACH**

Similar to the U-6 age group, the coach/parent should be positive and encouraging of each child. Specific soccer-related information should be limited to basic ideas of how to best keep the ball from running out of bounds too often, as well as some simple ideas for maneuvering in tight spaces and past opponents. Coaches should exclude discussions about positions or other team concepts. When addressing technique, consider that kids learn much by watching and copying. A good picture of proper technique can be a very powerful learning tool. Coaches should say things such as, “See if you can make it look like this.” Limit time spent breaking down the mechanics. Instead, try to do most of your teaching of technique by offering a picture and then set up fun games where the objective of the game is for players to practice certain ways to control the ball. This approach allows the player a certain amount of freedom to develop their ball control and accept that there is more than one way of doing it. This is applicable at least through U-12.

■ **GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF WHAT SHOULD BE HAPPENING IN MATCHES**

U.S. Soccer recommends that there be no organized matches at this age. Consistently set up mini games at practice for your kids to compete with and against each other, according to their age. There will be no need to keep score or even be very involved, except to enjoy the players and their effort and joy. Every player should look forward to opportunities to have the ball at his or her feet



and to score. It is the coach's responsibility to encourage this fear-free culture. For the 7- and 8-year-old groups, these games should only be seen as another fun activity that happens to include a soccer ball. They are not ready for specific soccer type information and there should be no emphasis on team concepts or positions. They will have plenty of opportunities to play in "real soccer games," as they get older. Most of the information from coaches during these times will pertain to each player's individual relationship with the soccer ball — to want it, how to find it, deal with it, feel more comfortable with it, keep it close, etc.

■ BEST QUALITIES OF A COACH FOR THIS AGE PLAYER

This coach must clearly understand the capabilities and limitations of this age and appreciate the power of learning by watching. He or she must have the ability to demonstrate or to use older players to demonstrate.

■ NUMBER OF MATCHES PER CALENDAR YEAR

No organized matches where the score is recorded.

■ BREAKS FROM ORGANIZED/MANDATORY SOCCER

Children at this age should not be participating in a mandatory soccer program and should be free to participate at their own pace. There should not be a penalty or consequence for missing practice and no discussion about "commitment." An effort should be made to include any child that wishes to play soccer. It is healthy and appropriate to group players according to ability level, but movement between groups should be open and fluid in order to reflect changes in ability and individual development from year to year or every six months.

■ TRAVEL

None.

■ TOURNAMENTS, FESTIVALS, ETC

None.

■ STATE, REGIONAL AND NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIPS

None.



CONSIDER THIS: How can the coach help all his or her players to develop to their potential? First, help your weaker players to develop their confidence with the ball. At the same time, continue to challenge your stronger players to expand their creativity and confidence. Confidence is the key. The more time they spend during practice and games with the ball at their feet, the more comfortable they will become, the more confident they will become, the more they will look to get involved, and the more fun they will have with soccer.

Remember that the level of skill and competence that a 9-year-old exhibits is no indication of the skill and competence that he or she will exhibit at 16 or 18 years of age. You cannot predict which 9-year-old will develop into a real player. Therefore, work to encourage all your players to be competent and comfortable with the ball. This will give all your players the same opportunity to reach their potential.

Work during practice to move all your players forward at their own pace. Do not be concerned with match results. Be concerned that all your players want the ball at their feet and they want to score. If you can accomplish this, you have successfully allowed your group to grow as soccer players. Unlike practice, you cannot add more balls/goals during games to give kids more chances with the ball. But you can emphasize certain themes for the players to focus on, such as getting involved, attacking the goal, taking chances, and then spend the length of the game reinforcing these points. This approach will give your players the green light to experiment and be creative - qualities that, unfortunately at the younger ages, are often discouraged on game day, in the name of being safe and winning.