
Chapter 1

Caution: Children At Play, Proceed With Care

“Play is the Key to Open Many Doors.”

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In the 21st century, children ages 5 through 12 years old are playing soccer in vast numbers throughout North America. And the number of players has increased significantly over the most recent several years. In 2003, there

were over 19 million total soccer participants in the U.S. with over 8 million soccer participants under the age of 12 (SGMA, 2003).

However, fewer than 20 percent of our youth sport coaches have received any type of training to become coaches (Marten, 1990; Stewart & Sweet, 1992). This translates into an imperative need to educate parents and volunteer coaches. Recent studies show that more than 73 percent of all kids who play organized youth sports end up quitting by the time they reach the age of 13 (Time Magazine, July 12, 1999).

Some things that parents should know or inquire about before enlisting their children into organized soccer include:

- Is your child ready (physically, mentally and socially) to participate in team sport activities?
- What is the coach's philosophy?
- Will the parents be responsible for transportation, communication, fundraising, dues, snacks, etc.?
- Must the parents attend training and games?
- What are the costs involved?
- Will my son/daughter play as much as the others?

State and national youth coaching courses have been specifically designed for coaches of under-6 through under-12 players. Your US Youth Soccer State Association or local league can provide scheduling information about the courses.

Children and Play

Children benefit in many ways from playing games if the games are appropriate for the child's mental and physical development. Chances are good that the child will have a positive experience in the games.

Most young children from ages 5 to 8 like to run, jump, roll, climb, skip, fall down and shout while involved in play. All this makes a strong case for them to play soccer. This behavior should be considered when adults set up a playing environment.

Activities should fit the developmental levels of the children. Avoid the opposite approach of having the children fit the activities. If an activity does not fit the needs of the child, the child will show either frustration if it is too difficult or boredom if it is too easy. Coaches should be well aware of a child's varying

developmental levels and how their development affects the way they play soccer.

Soccer is natural for young children because soccer players experience body awareness and they use various body parts. How they use balance, agility, coordination, vision and social interaction can determine how they develop physical and social skills.

As players get older, their development (i.e. psychomotor, cognitive and psychosocial) levels mature. This growth allows coaches to create more complexities in the training environment. For example, under-6 players must each have a ball; under-8 players should use one ball in pairs; under-10 can share one ball among four players and one ball for eight players is appropriate for under-12 players. The imbalance of more players and fewer balls forces more abstract thinking by the players. Remember, in games soccer coaches can't stop the run of play to get everybody on the same page.

Now that we have touched on the idea of what is developmentally appropriate, let's describe how coaches can implement it. Players are grouped by similarity of age, but their developmental stages might not be equal. Coaches must prepare and implement a training environment that allows for each player to find success in the activity. Muska Mosston, a leading physical education teacher, introduced the concept of an instructional approach known as the "Slanty Line." The Slanty Line is a conceptual approach with very real implications. It is built on the belief that in every activity, each participant should have the opportunity to take part at their own ability level.

Imagine the old game of "High Water/Low Water" played with a rope. Two children held the rope at a certain level and everyone jumped over it. If you were unable to jump over the rope you were eliminated. The rope continued to be raised until the best jumper was determined. The paradox here is that the individuals who needed the most practice jumping, received the least.

Activity Box

Each player with a ball. The players must toss their ball in the air and clap as many times as they can before catching the ball. The coach then asks each player how many claps they did before they caught the ball. (Players are to be congratulated whether they clapped twice or six times). They are then asked if they think they could beat their number with a second try. The answer hopefully will be, "I'll try".

Mosston would like to take the same game, but slant the rope. Now all participants can receive the same amount of turns and when a child is ready to try a new height, the opportunity is still there.

It is this concept that we would like to challenge all coaches to implement. Can you present activities in practice in which all players receive the same practice opportunities and are able to improve their skills? We believe this is more than just a theoretical concept, but an instructional method that should be the foundation of all coaching and the right of every youth soccer player.

For example, if a player performs 15 ball taps in 30 seconds, challenge the player to perform 20 ball taps. If another player completed 22 ball taps, challenge them to perform 25 ball taps. Place both players in a potential situation of personal success. We all need some form of success in whatever we are trying to accomplish. Why should young soccer players be any different?