

COACHING THE U6 PLAYER

1. Overview

Coaching children under six years of age presents some additional challenges due to their immaturity, short attention span, and less developed muscles. You will also need to deal with a great variation between personalities, physical size, and abilities. Your objective should be for all of the kids to have fun, make friends, and learn some soccer skills that will help them should they decide to continue to the next level. You should not expect to win all of your games or expect everyone to listen to long lectures. Your goal is to introduce them to basic concepts like dribbling and kicking and make it enough fun that they want to keep playing as their bodies and minds mature. Go down to their level of thinking. Don't try to bring them up to yours. What was fun when you were four years old? The kid who is watching seagulls will tell you were the greatest coach in the world if he had fun. He will have fun when he kicks the ball or at least when he makes an attempt and gets praise instead of criticism.

Here are some good principles to follow:

1. Keep practices and matches fun. Play "games" that cause kids to learn skills, not "drills." If practice is fun, the kids will want to attend. If it is not fun, their parents will sometimes have to force them to attend and a potential star may drop out.
2. Maximize touches on the ball per player in practice. Avoid lines - the kids won't behave well while waiting for their turn to play the ball.
3. Minimize lecturing - they have very short attention spans. You have maybe ten seconds to make your point.
4. Play lots of small-sided games. 3v3 is ideal for this age. Why doesn't 7v7 or 11v11 work at this age? Imagine putting 14 or 22 six-year-olds on the field to share one toy. When Billie finally gets the ball, will he pass it? No, because he knows he won't get it back! And shy Freddie may play a whole game and get only two touches on the ball.
5. Concentrate on improving individual skills, i.e., dribbling, trapping, shielding the ball, shooting, getting around an opponent, etc. You will develop more skilful players this way and win more games in the process. Some passing will develop naturally if you play small-sided games, but you will get frustrated if you try to force it. Do not let anyone on your sideline yell, "Pass the ball!" during games.
6. Don't keep standings or statistics. The kids will be having fun playing something else an hour after the game, win or lose. Only the parents and coaches will still be replaying the goals and mistakes in their minds the next day!

2. Organization (items of particular interest to the U6 coach)

It's important to make sure parents understand what you are trying to accomplish and how you will be going about it. So, explain the objectives to the parents at the beginning of the season and get agreement. Some of the parents will be new to soccer, so give the parents a written summary containing the following:

1. Safety rules (e.g. spikes and shin-guards required at games and practices),
2. The names of all children on the roster (this will help the kids get to know each other),
3. The coach's rules or the additional guidelines that you ask the parents to commit to.

Some that are appropriate for very young children are:

1. Bring water,
2. Need to make sure kids go to the bathroom just before leaving the house,
3. You should have one ball for each child plus one for yourself. You should ask the kids to bring their own balls as most associations only give out a ball for every two kids. At this age group, it is more important than ever to get a couple or more parents to help with the practice. Believe me, you will need extra help to chase balls, tie shoes, and wipe noses to allow you to move among the kids to ensure they are practicing what you instructed. Ideally, you will have at most two or three kids per parent/coach.

3. Practices

Keep things moving quickly. Participate in all of the warm-ups and drills -in fact; exaggerate your motions to illustrate the proper procedure. Do the actions at the same time as you are explaining a stretch or a drill (not after).

Do the same warm-ups and stretches each practice. It is less important to do a lot of stretches with U7s. A warm-up regime may consist of 5 each of inside right, inside left, outside right, outside left passes and 5 gentle chest traps.

Encourage 15 min of practice at home on the days we do not practice. You may encourage the parents to participate in the warm-up exercises with their own child. This allows the coach to teach the proper technique to the parents, too, so that if they work with their child, they will reinforce proper technique. The coach may give the parents others suggestions for at home practice, i.e. dribbling and passing (working on leading your partner).

Have the kids hold a ball for the stretches where it is appropriate. This increases the fun and familiarizes them with the ball so they won't be alarmed when the balls comes their way on game day.

Avoid drills with line-ups. Try to incorporate skill development into soccer related games. They each should have the ball at their feet almost all of the time. Success is related to the attempt not the outcome. As a coach you must get excited about the attempt, not the outcome (if the attempt is genuine the outcomes will continually get better). This is difficult, because we as coaches (and parents) are conditioned to see the end results. Emphasize technique rather than speed.

At this age, there is less emphasis on progression than with older groups because they are too young to put several moves together successfully and they will get bored if there is not much variation between drills. For example, you may progress a drill to do it with the other foot, or complete a drill and then take a shot on goal, but much more than this will bore them. However, a new drill or soccer related game can work on the same type of skill. An example might be:

1. Dribble across the field.
2. Dribble through some cones.
3. Play "Pirate", all the kids dribble the ball in a marked area and the coach tries to kick a ball out.

Skills should be broken down into smaller components. For example, passing may be learned by one child rolling the ball to another, who tries to pass it back. Then have the children slowly push the balls with the inside of their feet and finally have them pass it back and forth at regular speed.

4. Soccer drills for small children

Drills for small children must be tailored to their abilities and promote the development of individual skills rather than team skills, which will come later.

5. Soccer-Related Games

Soccer-related games put the fun in learning soccer skills and teamwork so use them.

Ensure you are familiar with your association rules for matches.

Some of the kids may lose their concentration as soon as the game starts. The short attention span of children this age is why kindergarten programs are generally for a half day. Kids lose focus if they do not get to handle the ball enough. Smaller rosters and smaller sides help solve this problem. If your association rules call for a large number of players, say 7 or more, per side, try to get agreement from the other coach to play fewer players to allow all players more opportunity to handle the ball. To accomplish this, you will need some help from other coaches and parents. An ideal set-up for U5 is 4 vs 4 with no goalkeepers.

Put any difficult children in at the start of the game. That way, as they start to lose focus they can come off and you can put in more mature children who will be focused for the duration of the game. There should be unlimited substitutions at this age. Have the parents help with substitutions so you can concentrate on the game.

Depending on your local club rules, at this age both coaches may be on the field for games. Note this is an exception to normal guideline of no coaches on the field. For the first couple of games you will have to give some direction ("the goal is the other way, Johnny") but you should reduce this as soon as possible to allow the kids to find their own. At the beginning, to get them to actively participate you may only need to point at the ball or tell them to "go get it".

However remember that it is not your game! Avoid active coaching on the field as it only encourages the kind of shouting that continues on into older age groups. If the coach does the thinking for them, they will never learn to do it for themselves. Same principle applies for doing the talking for them.

As the adults on the field, both coaches should assist kids on both teams. Each coach should cover one half of the field. Try to rotate throw-ins and free kicks among all of the kids, and give the ball to a nearby kid to reduce the time wasted. It serves no purpose at this level to call most fouls as they would be called at higher levels. Allowing the play to continue keeps the kids interested and provides a much better learning experience than for the players whistling down every foul and lining up for free kicks. At this level, the idea of "keep it safe, keep it fair, keep it moving" generally applies.

Don't spend too much time setting up formations at the beginning of the game or set plays. A simple "spread out" or "give five big steps for the free kick" is enough. At this age there is a universal tendency for the kids to bunch-up around the ball. You will see a swarm of kids move around with the ball popping out occasionally. This is normal and there is nothing you can do to prevent it, so don't worry about it or try to correct it. You may assign some kids to defensive duties but they are likely to make a run for the ball like the rest when they see it.

Under 5 (3 or 4 years old) is generally too young to expect any teamwork. Even under 6 is pushing it! If you see a pass, it is more likely than not an errant shot on goal. The USYSA mandates no keepers for up through U8. Where goalies are used, the selection of a goalkeeper may create some competition among the kids. In general, let every kid have a chance in practice. For games, putting a kid who is not capable in goal may hurt their confidence and cause resentment from the other players. Tell the players that goalie is an important position and you will watch them playing and select the kid who you believe is trying the hardest. If you chance the goalie, tell him or her they did well in net and now you want them to help the team by scoring some goals. Remember the objective: **HAVE FUN!**