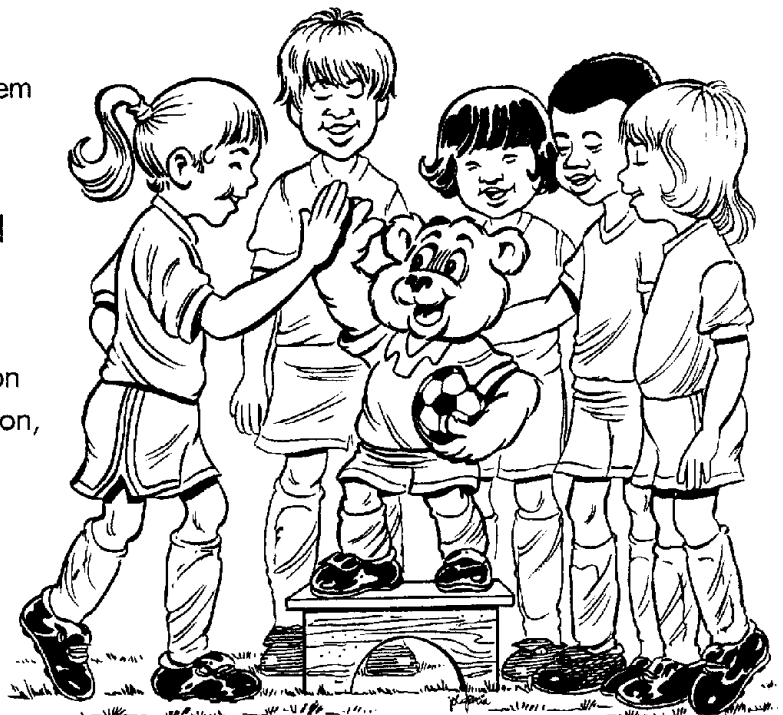




Before we begin to try and understand why small-sided soccer provides a better playing environment for the children within these age groups and why developmentally appropriate activities put in the context of "fun" games is so important – we must do so with the understanding of the mental, physical and social characteristics representative of these age groups. In other words, we need to get a grasp on exactly whom we are coaching and what we can expect as the coach. Be sure to keep these characteristics in mind as you go through your season and reference them from time to time just to keep things in perspective.

## Characteristics of U-6 Players

- Short attention span.
- Can attend to only one problem at a time.
- May understand simple rules that are explained briefly and demonstrated.
- May or not understand or remember: what lines mean on the field; what team they are on, what goal they are going for. We need to be patient and laugh with them as they get 'lost' on the field.
- Easily bruised psychologically. Shout praise often. Give "hints", don't criticize.



- Need generous praise and to play without pressure. No extrinsic rewards (trophies, medals, etc...) should be given for winning.
- Prefer "parallel play" Will play on a team, but will not really engage with their teammates. Thus, in a 3 against 3 game is, in reality, a 1 against 5 game because they all want the ball at the same time.
- Very individually oriented (me, mine, my).
- Constantly in motion, but, with no sense of pace. Go flat out! They are easily fatigued, but recover rapidly.
- Development for boys and girls are quite similar.
- Physical coordination limited. Eye-hand and eye-foot coordination is not developed. Need to explore qualities of a rolling ball.
- Love to run, jump, roll, hop, etc...
- Prefer large, soft balls.
- Catching or throwing skills not developed.
- Can balance on their good feet.

### Things You Can Expect As Coach

As coaches of these young players there are things that we know that we expect during training and games. If we know what to expect, we will be more effective in dealing with the hundreds of situations that come up. This will help us relax and, in turn, allow us to enjoy the unpredictable nature of working with these children even more. Here are some of the things that we can expect.

- Most players cry immediately when something is hurt. Some cry even when something is not hurt.
- No matter how loud we shout, or how much we "practice" it, they cannot or will not pass the ball.
- Someone will come off the field in need of a toilet. Somebody will stay on the field in need of a toilet.
- Don't even consider teaching positional play.
- Twenty seconds after the start of the game every player will be within 5 yards of the ball.
- Several players will slap at the ball with their hands, or pick it up. Several parents will yell at them not to do that.





- A model rocket that is launched from a nearby field will get 99% of the player's attention. By all means, stop whatever you are doing and go watch for a couple of minutes.
- During a season, you will end up tying 40 – 50 shoelaces.
- They will do something that is absolutely hysterical – Make sure that you laugh!

## Coaching Rational

It is important to understand that at the outset that players coming to any sport prior to the age of 6 years old, in general, do not do so by their own choice. As a result, their coaches need to give them something about which to get excited. Further, at this age, learning to play soccer is secondary to most other things in their lives.

With the above assumptions, let's look at some things that we can do to energize the U-6 players, and, hopefully, get them to the point where they will enthusiastically sign up for next year!

- Each session should be geared around touching the ball as many times as possible. Involve the ball in as many activities as possible. Basic movements such as running, skipping, hopping, etc... need to be emphasized. If these can be done while kicking, catching, rolling, or dribbling a ball . . . all the better!
- Training should not last for more than one hour. This is primarily due to physical fatigue and attention span considerations. Train once or twice a week. Any more than this may lead to their and your burnout. *(As part of the Youth Developmental League we recommend One 1 – hour action packed practice a week).*
- Have as many different kinds of activities ready as you can get into one hour. Emphasis needs to be placed on what is FUN!
- Every player should bring his or her own size #3 ball.
- Remember, although they may have very similar birth dates, their physical and/or mental maturity may vary as much as 36 months. Activities need to accommodate these individual differences whenever possible.
- Team play and passing is an alien concept to these players. They know that if they pass the ball, they may never get it back. In fact they often will steal it from their own teammates. Do not get uptight if they do not pass, let them dribble till their heart's content.
- Plan plenty of water breaks their cooling system is not as efficient as in older players.



## Characteristics of U – 8 Players

- Attention span is a bit longer than U- 6 players, but still not at a “competitive” stage.
- Inclined towards small group activities.
- Always in motion: scratching; blinking; jerking; rocking...
- Easily bruised psychologically. They will remember negative comments for a long time. Shout praise. Give “hints”.
- They want everybody to like them.
- Developing physical confidence (Most are able to ride a two wheeler).
- Starting to imitate older players or sports heroes. Want the same “gear” as them.
- Still lack sense of pace – they go flat out until they drop.
- Skeletal system growing rapidly. Often results in lack of coordination.
- Cardiovascular and temperature regulation system is not developed. Their heart rate peaks quickly and they overheat quickly. Make sure they get adequate water breaks.
- Limited understanding with personal evaluation. “If they try hard, they performed well” regardless of the actual performance. Thus, they need to be encouraged constantly, and asked, “Now, can you do this?”
- Better at recognizing when the ball is out of play, and remembering what goal they are going for . . . but, in the heat of battle, they will sometimes still forget. They will still find it difficult to really be aware of more than one thing at a time.

## Things You Can Expect As Coach

6, 7, and 8 year olds are a bit more compliant than their U-6 counterparts. They will be able to follow 2 or 3 step instructions and are starting to have a good understanding about what it means to play a “game”. They are also starting to cooperate more with their teammates. In fact, they now will recognize that they even have teammates by the fact that they occasionally, and I mean occasionally, will pass the ball to a teammate, on purpose. Often, they will repeat the phrase “I can’t do that!”, but will quickly run to you to show you that they can, even when they only think that they can. Some other things that you can expect to happen during a season with this age group are:



- There will be at least 200-300 falls during the season, but now they usually pick themselves back up.
- The puddle in front of the goal is still too tempting to resist.
- Keep a spare pump in your bag as the players usually do not realize that their ball is flat until they try to kick it, or the coach tells them that it is flat.
- Some of the girls are a lot tougher than the boys.
- They will still want to wear a pinnie, even when the color is identical to their shirt.
- It will be impossible to remember who is whose best friend as you try to make up teams.
- School conflicts will come up...please, let them go (they must face their teachers five days a week).
- They will wear their uniform to bed.

### **Coaching Rational**

Some of the players that are playing as a 7 year old have had two years of soccer experience and thus have already touched the ball a few thousand times in their lives. This, however, does not mean that that these players are ready for the mental demands of tactical team soccer. True, they do have some idea of the game, but the emphasis still needs to be placed on the individual's ability to control the ball with his/her body. They are still there to have fun, and because some of the players may be brand new to the sport, it is imperative that activities are geared towards individual success and participation. Following are some more items that a coach of U-8 players should consider.

- Small-sided soccer still is undoubtedly the best option for these players. Not only will they get more touches on the ball, but also it is an easier game to understand.
- Because of rapid growth spurts during this age, players will go through times when they seem to have lost control of their body. What they could easily do 2 weeks ago now seems unattainable. Be patient!
- Passing is not an important part of their game, no matter how much anybody yells at them to do otherwise, it is much more fun to dribble and shoot. Let them.
- Training once or twice a week is plenty, and should not last longer than one hour and fifteen minutes. *(As part of the Youth Developmental League we recommend One 1 – hour action packed practice a week).*



- Each player should bring his or her own size #3 ball to training. Learning how to control it should be the main objective. They need to touch it as many times as possible during fun activities that will engage them.
- Challenge them to get better by practicing on their own. There is no rule which states that they can't learn by themselves, no matter how important we think we are.
- Incidental things are important. They are forming the habits that will impact their future participation. Ask them to take care of their equipment (water bottle included), cooperate, listen, behave and try hard. Realize, however, that they often forget and will need to be reminded often.
- Ask them to work with others to solve a particular challenge. Start them with just one partner and work from there.