

COACHING THE YOUNG SOCCER PLAYER

Coaching the young (4-7) soccer player is different than any other age group. The purpose of this session is to prepare coaches for the special, idiosyncratic needs of coaching in these divisions.

That said, these drills can be modified with progression to meet the needs of all age divisions.

Goals: Coaches should have the following goals in mind before starting.

- 1. Have fun.** – Remember no one is keeping score or standings. Worry less about soccer fundamentals and more about if the kids having fun. The soccer skills will follow without them knowing it.
- 2. Keep things active** – the goal is to get the kids to have as many touches of the ball as possible. Try to avoid line-up drills and be as organized as possible. The more touches the kids have the faster they will improve.
- 3. Be safe.** Keep things simple and therefore safe. The whistle is your friend. Let them know that the whistle means stop and continuously incorporate it into your activities.

How Am I Going to Achieve These Goals?

Before sharing specific drills, the following general guidelines might help direct coaches as they prepare for the start of the season.

- 1. Start slowly and gradually** – Most of our players have never played organized sports, let alone soccer. Some have not participated in organized activities. Most have little control of their bodies and cannot handle complicated activities. Some are challenged to understand simple instructions. **Lower your expectations** and keep things simple, and gradually add as the season progresses. I guarantee you will see some improvement from the start of the season to the end.
- 2. Divide and Conquer** – In order to better communicate and reach this age group; it is easier to work with smaller numbers. Coaches can divide the group into smaller groups and use stations. Involve parents when appropriate, especially at the beginning as children are learning the activities.
- 3. At first you don't succeed ...** Don't be discouraged if a drill is unsuccessful the first time out. See what works and modify accordingly.
- 4. Put aside the soccer tactics and strategies for now.** Do your best to organize for the game but leave the tactics for an outside discussion with the few kids ready to take them in and/or the older divisions. Try to focus on the fun and touches aspect of the game.

5. Check your humility at the door – everyone has his or her own style but it is my experience that BIG AND BOLD is most effective.

GETTING TO KNOW THEM

You can't coach them if you don't know their names.

USE NAME TAGS - Nametags, nametags, nametags – perhaps for the first two weeks, maybe more.

NAME ACTIVITIES

1. NAME GAME – a warm up that will help you get to know the players names and a little about them.

Players form circle with coaches. Coach introduces him/herself and his exercise of choice. “My name is Coach Michael and my exercise is...” And then he demonstrates it. (Jumping jacks, knee lifts, big stretch, shaking of hands, doesn't matter, etc)

All others repeat “That's Coach Michael and his exercise is...” And they do it. Coach chooses another player in the circle and he/she offers name and their exercise. The rest repeat his/her name and exercise and all others that preceded him. This is repeated and performed until all players are included.

2. CIRCLE GAME

In a large circle or two smaller circles coach stands in middle and passes ball while shouting player's name. Player returns it to coach. Don't worry about technique at the beginning focus on names. Game can **progress** by eliminating coach in the middle and kids calling other kids names and passing across the circle. Gradually bring in proper technique.

PHYSICAL STRUCTURE OF PRACTICE

Each team has half the field to use for their practice activities. I suggest dividing the practice space into two formations. This can be done with orange cones borrowed from the shed.

- 1) **Grid** – Using cones outline an area where all grid activities will take place. Grid can be a **circle or rectangle**. Make the grid larger for the younger divisions and gradually reduce the size as then season progresses.

*** For younger divisions I suggest planning some activities around establishing the boundaries. eg. Running around grid, going in and out of cones, etc**

2) **Pairing Structure** – Line up a series of cones in a line leaving ample space between them. I suggest a row of 6 (4 division) or 8 (other divisions) Mirror the line up with cones at an appropriate distance in front. The younger the player the smaller the distance.



This structure is ideal for practicing soccer fundamentals. (passing, dribbling, trapping)It’s also useful for bringing in parents into the practice, eventually being replaced by a teammate.

This two-formation structure will help coaches to accomplish most, if not all, practice goals. By dividing the players into two distinct sections, they can get more attention and will be easier to manage.

Switch sections midway through practice or alternate each week.

GRID ACTIVITIES (NON BALL)

Structure (1)

Although it is a goal to get the kids as many touches of the ball as possible, I suggest you start your activities/drills without the ball. Once they are familiar with the drill, and you’re confident in the safety, introduce the ball in the same drills as a progression. (Just add ball to the activity.)

In no particular order...

1. Duck, Duck, Goose – Traditional Parks and Rec favourite.. Players sit in circle. One player circles his/her teammates gently touching the heads of each player offering a “duck, duck ...goose” The player who is goosed gets up and chases his teammate who tries to beat him to the vacated spot. (**Variation: Change method – running, skipping, backwards etc**) (**Progression: Add ball**)

2. Red Light Green Light – A soccer variation of traditional game. Coach can choose a start/finish line or not. Coach holds up a green pinnie to let players go, red to stop. **Progression is adding a ball. Advanced: add left turns and right turns and a u-turn.**

3. Follow the Leader – old stand by, anything goes. Find your inner child. Skipping, hopping, running etc. Coach starts but eventually passes lead to player. **Progression: Add ball. Add defender.**

4. Simon/Coach Says: Traditional Simon says, replaced by “Coach says” “Coach barks instructions to players using “coach says” prefix... Players follow. An order without the prefix is not valid and punishable by 5 jumping jacks or something comparable or silly. Players are not eliminated. **Progression: Add ball.**

5. British Bulldog/Sharks and Minnows/Cops and Robbers: Establish start and finish lines. One person in the middle tries to tag others who try to get by without getting touched. If they’re touched they join in the middle. **Variation: Crab walk for those in the middle. All crab walk. Hopping etc. Progression: Bring ball into activity.**

6. How fast? Choose a marker (another coach, parent, landmark outside of grid) and have players get there and back as fast as possible. Run, crab walk, hop, and skip, backwards. Add additional markers. Time them to beat their record.

7. Tag – All played within the grid. Adjust grid to increase or decrease difficulty.

a) **TRADITIONAL TAG-** traditional game gets kids used to running in an enclosed area with HEAD UP.

b) **BIB TAG-** start with a player holding a bib or pinnie This player is “it” in a simple game of tag. He throws the pinnie at others to get them it.

c) **BLOB TAG/AMEOBA TAG** – all the players are in the grid. The three designated “its” form a blob by holding hands. As a group they try to tag players without breaking their blob. If a player is tagged he joins the blob. Last player out wins.

4. FREEZE TAG – if a player is a tagged they must freeze and spread their legs. They should be encouraged to shout “help” as loud as possible. To get unfrozen another player must go under the legs of the frozen player. Progression: Add ball, kick ball between frozen player legs to unfreeze.

5. BUMP TAG – players are put in pairs locked at the elbow. One player not in a pair is “it”. If he/she touches a pair, he joins the person he touches and the other part of the pair disengages and is now “it.”

***** Sometimes it’s nice to have a safety zone like a cone or mat, sometimes it can be soccer related. eg. Put a few balls in the grid where they are safe if they move the ball continuously between their feet.**

GRID ACTIVITIES WITH A BALL

Structure (1)

Once they have mastered the grid introduce the ball in a variety of games including the activities listed above where appropriate. In addition try these more specific soccer drills. All activities take place within the grid.

1. Ball Gymnastics – (basic soccer skills, without movement)

Roll Ball with bottom of foot forwards and backwards, to the right and left. Repeat from side to side. Roll ball in a circle. Roll ball between two feet. Pass ball between two feet. Increase speed. Dance on ball ball. Trap with feet, elbow. head. Rudimentary juggling, foot, thigh... Etc

2. Beehive (movement with the ball) Provide basic instruction, inside and outside of feet – not toe! Emphasis should be on control and keeping head up.

Dribbling with both feet, in control. Introduce stopping and starting, body part traps, cuts (left, right, back, reverse) toe taps, change of direction, increase speed. etc. **Progression: faster pace.**

3. Shadow Dribbling

Have players pair up, each with a ball. Leader dribbles while second player follows, also dribbling. When leaders alters dribbling, follower mimics. Remind players to keep their head up. Encourage creative dribbling – changes in direction, pace and techniques. Stress control and change leaders frequently.

4. King of the Ring

Each player has a ball except one player (or coach) who is it. Players start to dribble while trying to avoid have their ball kicked out by the player who is "it". Players can reenter the grid after retrieving the ball.

5. Attack and Protect

Each player has a ball. Players dribble around the grid trying to kick each other's ball out of the grid while protecting their ball

6. Freeze Tag With Ball

In a grid formation each player with a ball except for one. The player without the ball is 'it' and tries to freeze you by touching (not kicking it away) your ball. When this happens the player is frozen and must lift the ball above their head and spread their legs wide to create a "goal." The player can be 'un-frozen' when another player kicks the ball through the frozen players legs. Play until all players are frozen or the player that is it is exhausted.

If your players are not able to get everyone frozen add a second chaser.

7. Musical Balls

Players dribble around the grid. They should be moving at a decent pace and in control. On the whistle player have to leave their balls and go outside the grid and touch one of four cones. While they are out of the grid coach removes one of the balls inside the grid. Once they touch the outside cone they must run back in the grid and get a ball, not necessarily their own. The player without a ball must leave the grid and practice designated skill (juggling). Achieve a designated goal and they can return to grid with ball.

8. OUCH or Hit the Coach (dribbling, shooting, throw-ins)

Each player has a ball. The younger the children, the smaller the playing area should be. On the coach's call, the game starts. The players dribble the ball around and try to hit the coach, who is running all around in the inbounds area.

Tighten the area into a small circle and, after practicing throw-ins have player try to hit coach below the waist. Doesn't count if there is an infraction. (no throw-ins for 4 divisions)

PARING STRUCTURE

Structure (2)

While grid activities are going on, half the team can be in another section working on different activities with another coach.

Line up cones across the field as below.

2) * * * * *

eg.

1) * * * * *

(Two sections of six or eight depending on division and numbers that night.)

As most of these kids lack the confidence to venture off on their own, their parents are your friends. Use them, especially in the beginning, to help build confidence and familiarity with the drills.

Begin by having parents go to a cone in section (1). Have kids run to their parents with their ball. (dribble to them?) Get parents to take steps backwards to the cone in section (2). There should be a small distance between parent and child. This is the basic setup for a variety of drills that practice passing, dribbling, receiving the ball etc...

Eventually parents will be replaced by a teammate. Eventually players will be able to run to an open cone of choice.

Structure (2) Activities

1. CATCH: Never mind the “there’s no hands in soccer.” Pass ball back and forth by throwing and catching it. Keep distance short for maximum success. Give them a success target to shoot for. Let’s see if we can get three without dropping. **Progression:** **Add another ball and throw one and kick one.**

2. PASSING: After demonstrating proper passing and receiving technique have kids practice passing and receiving the ball. Progression: Both Feet. Increase distance. Advanced: Specify number of touches.

3. TARGET PRACTICE: Have parents give kids a target of between the legs. How many out of ten can they do? Right foot. Left foot. Distance.

4. RECEIVING/TRAPPING: Starting with the ball in the 2 position, have parents/teammate toss ball back to kids for trapping and ball control. Once they have it under control they pass it back: Progression Knees? Chest? Head?

5. PASS/TRAP/RUN: Once basic passing is achieved, parents stop pass and take three steps backwards. Child runs forward and passes to parent again. Go down the field this way until you reach the end line. Reverse roles on the way back, children stopping the ball and taking step backwards until you reach original position.

6. DRIBBLE: Kids **dribble** around parents. Go one way. Then the other. Extend the distance. Both feet. Inside foot. Outside Foot. Have kids dribble through parents and back.

7. Traffic Game – have parents/teammate extend the distance between players. Everyone has a ball. On the whistle they each start dribbling, passing each other in heavy traffic... Once they reach their destination they turn around and return to where they started. Progression: One side comes from the north. One comes from the east.

8. Other activities...limited by your imagination

*****All these activities are meant to be repeated. With familiarity comes success.**

MISCELLANEOUS ACTIVITIES

These activities can be incorporated easily into any practice either in structured formation when appropriate or otherwise. Some are more complicated than others and should be chosen relative to the kids' development.

1. HOW MANY KICKS ...? (kicking, accuracy)

Pick a target, any target and challenge the kids to hit it in as few kicks as possible. Goals will be set up on the field and might be used as target. Left foot. Right foot..

2. SOCCER BOWLING

Line up a ball on a cone. Have player knock down a ball using right and left foot. Add distance. **Can be used with parents in pairing formation.**

3. TOPPLE BALL (shooting accuracy)

Set up a cone in the middle of a large circle with enough cones spaced around it for all players. Each player gets a ball and stands by a cone. The cone in the middle has a ball balanced on top of it. On the coaches' call, everyone shoots and tries to knock the ball off. Have the players run and retrieve a ball and set up to play again.

4. EGG HUNT

Have more balls than players. (can be borrowed from shed) Have the player's line up on one end of the field. Take their balls and spread them around the field. These are the "eggs". At the other end of the field is the "basket". (net?) Get them to put the eggs in the basket by retrieving ball and dribbling to the net and shooting. No taking away other players balls. Once they get one they turn around and go for another. Time it to see how fast they can do it.

7. MONKEY IN THE MIDDLE

All players form a circle or in small groups with one/two/three players in the middle. The players in the circle pass one ball between them while the person (s) in the centre tries to gain control of the ball. When the player intercepts a pass he/she goes in the middle.
Progression: Remove static circle. This is excellent for encouraging movement without the ball.

8. TEAM KEEP AWAY (initially movement without the ball, eventually passing, trapping, defense, teamwork)

In small-sided teams (3-5 per team) have people throw a pinnie to each other. Once it's caught, they have to remain in spot. If it's dropped, other team takes over. **Progression: Once the concept is mastered replace pinnie with a ball, still throwing it. Eventually ball will be at their feet and we will have evolved into 3v3 situations.**

9. KEEP YOUR YARD CLEAN

Create a neutral area between two zones each with a team of players. Neutral area can be as small as one yard or as big as ten relative to age of children. Each player has a ball.

On command each team tries to keep their zone free of ball by kicking the ball into the other team's zone. After a set time (when kid's are losing interest or balls are scattered, stop and count the balls in each zone. The team that has the least is the winner.

10. RELAY

Depending on the number of players, divide them into 2 or 3 equal groups. Vary the distance between players based on skill and type of pass you have them execute. Start with simple instep passes. The first player in line passes to the next who must trap the ball and make the turn to pass to the next player. Begin with the players making their own choice in which foot to use and then increase the complexity. Have them trap left, pass right, or trap right and pass left. Vary the type of pass as required. There is no end to the different ways to do this game:

This can be used for throw-ins with players trapping the ball and throwing it to the next using proper throw in technique.

11. TEAM BUILDING RELAY

Divide teams into 2, 3 or 4 teams depending on numbers. Designate a finish line. Line the players up in evenly spaced parallel lines facing forward.

On the whistle the first person takes a step forward and drops to his or her knees. The second person hops over the first and makes a tree with their legs spread wide. The third person hops over the first, goes through the legs of the second and lies flat on the ground in a horizontal position. The next person jumps over the first, goes through the legs of the second and jumps over the third and goes back to the knee position to start the pattern all over again. . Once all players have gone the first person gets up from their position and

Team that crosses the finish line wins.