



Let the Kids Play

This article was written by Bobby Howe, the Director of Coaching for US Soccer at the time; it appeared in US Soccer Magazine in summer 1997.

Surveys of young players over the last few years have shown that the primary reason for players under 12 dropping out of soccer is that they were not having fun. The secondary reason is that they did not like their coaches.

Both reasons would indicate that those players were not exposed to an appropriate playing environment for their age and/or ability levels. Too much at too young an age would cause players to become disenchanted with the sport. Too little activity in practice session (drills) and games (too many players on the field) would cause players to become bored.

As coaches and administrators of our sport, we must listen to the players. We must create the environment for players to learn the game at their own pace without the pressure of impossible decision making or the stress created by parental (adult) influence. We must allow kids to be kids and allow the game to provide their enjoyment.

Over the last few years we have seen a gradual move towards small-sided games for our youngest players. Many people have recognised modified and micro soccer as the most successful vehicles for the development of players under 12 years of age.

Fewer players on the field:

- Reduces the size of the "swarm";
- Creates more touches;
- Does not allow players to "hide" or be excluded from the activity;
- Presents realistic but simple soccer challenges;
- Requires players to make simple but realistic soccer decisions.

If all of the above is presented in an environment which downplays the importance of winning, the result creates great enjoyment for the players.

Realistic experience + Fun = Improvement in play.

For all players the game itself is a great teacher and for our youngest players (6, 7 and 8 years of age) it should be the only teacher. However, as players become older, good coaching can accelerate the learning process. At what age should we start to give the game a hand?

The time between 9 and 11 years of age has been recognized by educators as the most productive in terms of ability and desire of children to team. It is no less applicable to soccer. Children at this age are coordinated and eager. They have a great relationship with parents, teachers and coaches. It is important, therefore, that the influences in their lives are providing the best possible information.



Physiologically and psychologically, the ages of 9-11 are ideal for player development: at that age children have grown out of infant instability but are not yet encumbered by the awkwardness of their early teens. This is ideal for challenging skills practice.

This age group also observes the important crossover from "selfishness" to the ability to socialise. In soccer terms, through this age period, children learn to understand the importance of cooperation in team play.

The age of 11 is generally accepted by most soccer educators as the age to begin "11-a-side play." Players must be given time to experience and develop within the "adult game" before exposure to the pressures of tournament play.

- It is time to abandon the idea of tournament play for 11 year olds.
- It is time to abolish all-star teams for 11 year olds.
- It is time for adults to realize that team building to win games does not equate to development.
- It is time for coaches of 11 year olds to fully understand technical coaching points and simple principles of play.
- It is time to allow 11 year olds to develop their skills.
- It is time to reduce burnout and disenchantment with the sport created by too much pressure too early.
- It is time to allow 11 year olds to play!

It is one of the responsibilities of our National U14 Coordinators to help State Associations create the appropriate playing environment for players 10-13 years of age. I am very optimistic that the influence of the National Youth License, which will be implemented at state level in 1998, will also help to create a better understanding of the requirements of play between the ages of 6-12.

With the cooperation of the states we can dramatically reduce the numbers of players dropping out of our sport before the age of 12 and increase their enjoyment of the game.