

Below is some general knowledge information about youth soccer, provided by SoccerHelp, www.soccerhelp.com. Copyright 1999-2009, David and Kay Huddleston. For Howell Soccer Club specific policies, please refer to the Howell Soccer Club website located at <http://howellsoccerclub.com>.

Using the SoccerHelp Method

Basic Information & Tips for Beginning Coaches

THE SOCCERHELP SYSTEM AND PHILOSOPHY

Soccer is very much a team sport, and coaching begins to make a great difference by age 9. After that age a well-coached team will almost always beat a poorly coached team, even if the poorly coached team has better athletes. By "well coached" we mean players and teams that have been taught in practice the skills, teamwork, and other things they need to know so they can have fun and be successful playing soccer. One advantage of the SoccerHelp method is that your practices will be much more efficient and effective, and your players will improve faster. You should be able to achieve 50% more in practice, and the result will be that 4 practices will be equal to 6, and your team will improve 50% faster.

Soccer is a game played primarily with the feet. The head & other parts of the body can be used but the hands & arms (up to & including the shoulder) cannot be used except on a "Throw-In" and by the Goalie in certain circumstances. If you've ever played basketball, many of the concepts you learned such as "give & go", "inbound plays", "getting open", "support", "man-to-man", "zone defense" & others are very applicable to soccer. You will also find similarities in many other team sports including hockey, rugby & American football, & concepts such as "follow through", "staying on your toes" & a "quick first step" are used in most field sports.

TYPES OF SOCCER

There are two types of youth soccer programs; one is called "recreational" (or "rec") and the other is called "select", "club" or "travel".

- a. "Recreational" soccer is what most youth participate in. There are usually fall and spring seasons, the sponsoring organization lines up the coaches & recruits the players, during the season there is usually one game per week, fun & good sportsmanship are stressed & each player plays at least 50% of each game. Coaches are usually parent volunteers.
- b. "Select" soccer is more competitive & teams often practice several times per week & play year-round. There are usually try-outs for these teams, players can be "cut" and playing time is not guaranteed. The focus of these teams is often on winning tournaments & that is how their success is judged. They are sometimes called "travel" teams because they travel to tournaments in other cities. These teams often have paid coaches or a paid trainer.

Recreational soccer programs are mainly run by the YMCA, churches, Jewish Community Centers, the American Youth Soccer Organization ("AYSO") or non-profit clubs associated with the U.S. Youth Soccer Association ("USYSA"). "Select" programs are usually either organized by non-profit clubs or are affiliated with a recreational soccer association. The U.S. Soccer Foundation compiles the "[Soccer Yellow Pages](#)" which lists clubs all over the world.

HOW TO DETERMINE A CHILD'S "SOCCER AGE"

Children are usually placed in age groups based on their birth date. For most leagues, the way to determine a child's "soccer age" is to ask "How old was the child on last July 31?" For example, if a child was nine as of 7/31/02, they will stay in the "Under-10" (U-10) group until 7/31/03, when

they move up to U-11. This is how it is done at all the soccer programs I know of, but you should check with your league if you are unsure how they determine "soccer age". You should keep in mind that a child with a July birthday is almost a year younger than a child with an August birthday (even though they may be the same "soccer age") & that the younger children often have shorter attention spans and often won't learn as quickly as the older children.

RULES

Soccer rules are published annually by FIFA (pronounced "FEE' fuh"), the world soccer governing body, but youth organizations usually adjust the rules to fit children. Typical adjustments are field sizes, game lengths, number of players per team, the number and frequency of substitutions, "offside" is sometimes not called, and slide tackling is sometimes not allowed. Field sizes, ball sizes, length of games & rules vary by age group. Both boys & girls play; the rules do not require separate teams. Most rules are described in the SoccerHelp.com [Dictionary of Soccer Terms, Concepts & Rules](#) TM. Discuss the rule variations with an official of your league.

EQUIPMENT

All players must wear shin guards to every practice and every game. Hard surfaces of shin guards must be covered with socks. (Referees will check this). Encourage parents to buy properly sized shin guards that have a hard surface (plastic or fiberglass) and padding to cover the anklebone.

No shoes with front cleats may be worn (i.e., no baseball or football shoes if they have a front cleat, unless you cut it off). Only rubber cleats are allowed; metal cleats are not allowed. (Referees will check).

No jewelry, metal devices, or hazardous equipment may be worn.

Each player should bring a plastic water bottle to games and practices. Coaches should allow adequate water breaks during practice & bring extra water (some players will always forget to bring water).

Each player should have a stitched ball (as opposed to a hard seamless ball) of proper size. (Soccer balls come in three different sizes: 3, 4, & 5. The ball size is shown on the ball. Also, look for a stamp that says either "official size & weight" or "FIFA Approved". Even if a ball is the official weight, some balls are heavier & harder than others. Don't get a ball that is too heavy or hard (some seamless balls are especially hard). Some balls are so hard that it is painful to kick them. If you have a choice, a shiny, waterproof surface is best because it won't absorb water & will last longer. Test the ball to see if it's round & will fly straight by tossing it into the air with a lot of spin on it to see if it wobbles. U-6 & U-8 (i.e., Under-6 & Under-8) use a size 3; U-10 & U-12 use a size 4; and U-13 & older use a size 5 ball).

To games, each player must wear a jersey or shirt, shorts (most leagues don't object to long pants if it is cold; note that the FIFA rules say that if thermal undershorts are worn they must be the same main color as the shorts), shin guards, stockings or socks that entirely cover the shin guards, and footwear.

Goalkeepers must wear colors that distinguish them from the other players and from the referees. Mostly they either wear a special goalkeeper jersey, a mesh training vest (also called a practice vest or pinnie) or a T-shirt. Caution: Don't put a long sleeved Goalie jersey on a player in hot weather. It is dangerous because they can become overheated.

Check with your league for other requirements.

PRACTICE ATTENDANCE

You really can't punish a child in a recreational league for not coming to practice because it's usually the parent's fault. However, I do think it is fair to tell them that because soccer is a team sport, it is only natural that those who come to practice the most might play the most & might get first preference for the positions they prefer to play. Try to motivate players to come by making practices fun & playing games like those described in the section titled "Soccer Practice Games". Also, explain to them that soccer is a team sport & the team will play better & have more fun if everyone comes to practice.

TEAM NAMES & CHEERS

Most teams choose a nickname. Young children also like a cheer that they can do before or after the game or at halftime. If your team's name has a "rhythmic" spelling, you can spell it (e.g., M-A-G-I-C, GO Magic!). The best one I've heard is "Play Hard, Play Fair, Have FUN". Players usually gather round & touch hands while doing their cheer.

PLAYING TIME

Most recreational leagues require that each child plays at least 50% of every game he or she attends. Even if your League doesn't require this, it is a rule you should consider adopting for your team.

WHEN YOU CAN SUBSTITUTE (a.k.a. "Subbing")

Youth Leagues usually either allow "unlimited substitutions" (which usually means the coach can "sub" as many times as he wants during the game but only at certain times such as goal kicks) or only allow subbing between quarters. If "unlimited substitution" is allowed, you can usually sub at these times (check with your league to see if they follow these rules): after a goal kick is called for either team, after a goal by either team, after a throw-in is called for your team (not the other team), at halftime, and at an injury time-out if the other team replaces a player (but you can only sub as many players as they do). You usually cannot sub on corners, or free kicks. Except at half-time or between quarters, substitutions may only occur with the Referees permission (you can get his attention by yelling "sub"). Players entering & leaving the field should only do so at the halfway line. The rules technically say that a player must leave the field first before his sub can enter the field. Many referees don't enforce this in youth games because there is so much substitution. However, if the Ref says "call them off first", this is what he means. Often, midfielders are subbed the most because they run the most.

GOALKEEPERS (a.k.a. Goalie, Keeper or GK)

Except in a small-sided play, each team must have a designated goalkeeper. Except for a "Throw-In", he is the only player on the field who can legally use his hands and then only in certain circumstances. He must wear a shirt or jersey that is recognizably different from all other players (goalkeepers often wear special jerseys with padded elbows). Note: In hot weather, do not put a goalkeeper jersey on a player. They can get too overheated & become sick. Instead, have them wear a different-colored shirt (one shirt only) or a mesh training vest over their shirt. If your goalkeeper has a strong leg, let him take goal kicks. If he has speed, encourage him to play aggressively & if you "Push Up" your Fullbacks on the attack, to come out to the edge of the Penalty Box or beyond to play like a "Second Sweeper". If he picks up the ball & no opponents are close, encourage him to drop the ball & dribble it out & then kick it. (Once he drops it or when out of the Penalty Box, he can play like a field player but can't touch the ball). Encourage him to play aggressively & to take chances, everyone will have much more fun if you do & more kids will want to play goal. I've had our goalkeeper run up field many times to take a corner kick & we've never given up a goal as a result (obviously, only do this if your Goalie has speed). One season I

even had a goalkeeper who I would bring out to take throw-ins on the far end of the field. There was really very little risk, but everyone got excited by it. Goalkeepers tend to get blamed for goals when most of the time it isn't their fault (if the other defenders are doing a great job there won't be any shots on goal). You should tell your goalkeeper before the game that the other team is expected to score goals & that it isn't his fault if they score. Do not let anyone else (players or parents) blame the goalkeeper. In fact, after the game you should have the rest of the team thank the goalkeeper, even if he or she did make mistakes. If your team is under age 11, you should encourage everyone to take a try at playing goalkeeper. You will be surprised who is good & you really can't tell until they actually play the position. At the very least, it will give all the players respect for how tough the position is & they will be less likely to blame the goalkeeper when goals are scored. However, do not make a child play goalkeeper if he or she doesn't want to.

INJURIES

If a player is injured, play will continue until the whistle is blown. The referee will stop the game if a child appears to be seriously hurt or if there is blood. If the game is stopped for injury, you should have your players immediately stop and sit or kneel down where they are. It is recommended that each coach become familiar with the proper procedures in the event of an injury. An injured player should sit out and receive appropriate treatment.

ENCOURAGE LEARNING & TOLERATE MISTAKES

If your team is learning & trying new things, they will make a lot of mistakes. You must accept this fact & be tolerant of mistakes. If you aren't, you will discourage them from trying new things. Encourage them to try new things & encourage the effort even if it doesn't work. Examples: "Great try. Keep it up." or "Good idea; try it again."

REWARDING OR PUNISHING PERFORMANCE

Never punish or scold a child for lack of ability. All you can expect them to do is their best (e.g., Don't make those who lose a game or come in last run laps, or do jumps, or sit out while others play). Tell everyone, including the unathletic players, that you are proud of them if they are trying hard. You will have some athletic players and some unathletic players. Measure each player's performance by their personal improvement & effort, and not by comparing them to someone else. Try to motivate in a positive way that builds self-esteem. See "Incentives" below for ideas about rewarding practice and game attendance, hustle and effort.

MEASURING SUCCESS

In recreational soccer, consider measuring success in these ways:

- a. Is everyone having fun? (If it's not fun, it's not good).
- b. Are they learning about teamwork?
- c. Are they learning something about soccer (i.e., are they improving?). (This one only applies to U-8 & up).
- d. Are they hustling, enthusiastic & doing their best?

BE A GOOD ROLE MODEL

To a large degree, your players & parents will follow your lead. Be a good sport & don't yell at the referees or at the other team. After the game, seek out the referees and shake their hand and thank them, even if they made some bad calls.

THINGS YOU SHOULD AND THINGS YOU SHOULD NOT DO

Positive encouragement and instruction of your players from the sidelines (the coach's box) is allowed. Negative criticism, hostility, abuse or anger are things you should not do. You are a role model and must set the example of good sportsmanship and insist upon it from your team.

- Cheering when the other team makes a mistake is bad. Cheering when the other team makes a great play is good.
- Never criticize the referee. It is a tough job. If an appealable mistake is made, talk to the referee and then the Director of Referees after the game. Remember, you are the role model and must set the standard for behavior. It is good to thank the referee and linesmen after the game.
- You should stay two steps back from the sideline during games so you don't block the Assistant Referee's view of the line.
- Don't run up the score. It's not good for either team if the game is a mismatch, but sometimes it happens. If your team gets 5 goals ahead, you should be a good sport & do one of the following:
 - Put your weakest scorers up front (use this as an opportunity to let them be forwards).
 - Try someone new in goal & at fullback
 - Pull a player off the field & "play short". If it is still a mismatch, pull off another player.
 - Tell your players they must complete 5 consecutive passes before shooting
 - Tell them they can only take shots from outside the Penalty Box (i.e., practice chip shots, lofted shots at the top of the goal or power shots).

COACHING DURING GAMES

Some books will tell you that during games you should let the players play & not give instructions. That may work for older or select teams, but it isn't very practical for youth recreational teams that only practice once a week. Most leagues allow coaching from the sidelines (although sometimes only by one coach who must stay in a designated area). If the objectives are to have fun & to teach the boys and girls how to play, then coaching during the game can help achieve those objectives.

There are many things that you can teach in a game that are difficult to teach in practice, especially if you only practice one time a week (a "shifting & sagging" defense is one). I look at games as another teaching opportunity. In fact, if your League will allow it, use 2 coaches during the game, one for offense & one for defense to teach your players how to "shift & sag" & to help them learn positions. This is hugely beneficial because one coach can't watch both ends of the field at the same time. Be sure to not get in the other team's way & remember you have to coach from the side lines, not the "end zones". To be courteous, you might ask the other coach if it is okay with him.

Do I yell? Yes, I find it necessary to yell instructions to the players so they can hear me across the field. I don't yell negative or general comments such as: "You guys stink" or "Hustle". I yell specific instructions such as "John, push up", or "Matt, cover the center" or "Don't get thrown over" (or "punted over" or "goal kicked over"), or "Mark up behind a man" (on the other teams throw-ins, goal kicks, & free kicks) or, on the other teams corner kicks, "Mark a man goal-side". I try not to show frustration or irritation & try to not single out anyone for criticism unless they aren't hustling & then I will ask "John, are you sick?" If he says "No", I ask "Are you tired?" If he says "No", I say "Then hustle". However, I do make coaching comments to correct errors. For example, if a player's passes are coming off the ground, I will say "Matt, strike the ball higher". Or,

if they turn over a throw-in because their foot came off the ground I will say "Patrick, drag your toe".

AT THE END OF THE GAME

At the end of the game, players & coaches usually line up facing each other on the halfway line, walk past each other & touch hands & say "good game". Coaches are usually last in line & shake hands. It is also a nice gesture & sets a good example for the coach to seek out the referee & assistant referees & thank them. Parents usually take turns providing refreshments after games.

KEEPING CHILDREN & PARENTS UNDER CONTROL

When I started coaching soccer I had never coached before, although I did have the advantage of being an assistant coach for 2 seasons. Two of the most difficult things I've had to learn are how to deal with disruptive players and disruptive parents. I don't have all the answers, but I will share with you what I have learned:

Be a coach and an authority figure, not a "buddy". Occasionally, you will see a coach who is a natural leader. I'm not and have found that it works best for me to be an authority figure; firm, but nice. (Don't be a mean coach, be nice).

Do not tolerate rude or disrespectful behavior from players. You shouldn't have to and, if you do, you will probably regret it. I have found it advantageous to tell the parents & players from the very start what is expected. One way is to send home a letter at the start of the season that discusses your "coaching philosophy & expected behavior". Buy a whistle & use it to get attention. Six of my rules are (these may have to be adjusted for children age 6 or younger):

1. Everyone must follow all directions given by the coaches & assistant coaches
2. Everyone must hustle & do their best
3. "When I talk you must be still & listen"
4. I expect everyone to be a good sport whether we win or lose (this includes parents)
5. "No cursing or name calling".
6. Disruptive or disrespectful behavior will not be tolerated.

SAFETY RULES

Certain rules must apply regardless of age:

1. "Keep your hands to yourself" (You cannot allow anyone to get hurt)
2. "Do not kick the ball in the air unless I tell you it is okay" (otherwise you will have kids getting hit in the back of the head or the face by flying balls)
3. Dangerous behavior will not be allowed or tolerated.

Warning: Never say anything mean to a child & be very careful about touching a child. I know of cases where parents became upset and threatened to sue because a coach patted their child on the head or grabbed him by the arm.

THE IMPORTANCE OF WARMING UP BEFORE PLAYING

At age 10 and older, children become susceptible to muscle pulls. When you move up to U-11, you should have your team warm up their muscles before playing. You should have them Warm Up their muscles by light activities such as jogging or slowly dribbling a ball around the field. (Warming up with a ball is the ideal way if it is practical to do so).

The light warm up is important because it "warms up" the muscles, which makes them stretch easier & less likely to tear. If you think about it, this makes sense. (Have you ever noticed how all the horses are warmed up before a race?)

Coaches used to believe stretching was good, but an article in the March 2007 issue of Prevention magazine says: "A review of 23 studies found that stretching before an activity damages muscle tissue, which reduces muscle strength and hinders performance. Start each workout by moving your limbs through a full range of motion". Personal trainer Judy Heller is quoted as saying "You want to get the fluid in your joints flowing, so they are well lubricated and move with ease".

ALWAYS REMEMBER

You are doing this for fun & to help the kids. Be a "nice" coach who your players will remember fondly.

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