

Wait Until They're Ready

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Goalkeeping is not for 5- and 6- year olds and it could be harmful.

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I read with interest the article titled "Goalkeeping - Start Them Young" by Tony Waiters that appeared in the January/February 2000 issue of Soccer Journal. I have admired Coach Waiters as one of our prominent goalkeeper trainers. He is an excellent educator and clinician and I certainly respect his opinion but must challenge the notion that the earlier we start children as goalkeepers the better off they will be.

What has evolved over the past 10-15 years is a perspective that small-sided games for children are more appropriate for player development and the establishment of a soccer culture in the United States. Those of us, who are involved in working for the improvement of youth sports, and soccer in particular, have agreed that the small-sided game structure presents the best opportunity to learn skills, develop positive peer relationships and have fun in a relatively stress-free environment. Where Coach Waiters and I disagree is in how these small-sided games are structured and the role goalkeepers play in this structure.

In the mid to late 1980s and into the 1990s, a number of small-sided game formats were proposed and put in place across North America for young children. Among the formats were the United States Youth Soccer Association proposal of 3 v. 3 and 4 v. 4 formats and Waiters' development of Micro Soccer, for which he holds the trademark. The major difference is a philosophical one involving the use of goalkeepers.

As these small-sided games evolved, a number of coaching educators began to take a critical look at the existing youth soccer culture in the United States. Nearly everywhere one traveled, a different interpretation of what youth soccer should be was observed. It was a mess and although the picture is improving, it still has a long way to go. A critical look revealed the following: nearly 80 percent of all youth soccer coaches were novice adult volunteers with little or no soccer coaching knowledge. However, each enthusiastically agreed to coach children, who were, for the most part, involved in their first exposure to sport participation.

Often, the only vision of soccer these coaches had was of the adult version of the game they saw on television. The small-sided games version was not something they could identify with. Children as young as 4 were playing 11 v. 11 soccer on very large fields. As the participation numbers exploded throughout the 1990s, the need to educate these coaches became critical.

In 1995, I was asked to join a select group of soccer educators who were responding to a challenge posed by Timo Liekoski, then a U.S. National Team coach and director of coaching education for U.S. Soccer. The challenge was to develop a coaching education program to serve coaches of children age 12 and under. This program became the National Youth Coaching License and was included in the coaching education offerings by U.S. Soccer.

This educational program was also endorsed by the USYSA. The curriculum includes content that has grounded support in physical education, child development, educational learning styles, motor learning, psychology, sport psychology, sociology and other appropriate professional

research that supports the concept of small-sided games play for young children. The challenge was to create a program to promote a philosophy that allowed for developmentally appropriate practice in a safe environment.

The ultimate goal was to unlock the game within every child.

As the philosophy and content for the National Youth License evolved, it became apparent that many current standards and beliefs would be challenged. Through our analysis of how children best learn sport skills, it became very apparent that changes in the structure of youth soccer were needed. Much has been written about readiness and maturity factors related to a child's initial development in youth sports.

Conventional wisdom often supports an "as soon as possible" perspective, which many youth sport experts see as flawed. Evidence suggests that the earlier children begin playing organized youth sports, the sooner they drop out. This is especially true if the program in which the children are engaged does not focus on psychomotor, cognitive and psychosocial development.

Psychomotor (physical) issues

Coach Waiters implies that the earlier children start to be goalkeepers, the better. There are a number of growth and development issues (psychomotor domain) that one must look at carefully before making such a claim. Many youth soccer programs have children organized by age with many beginning at age 5 or at a time when they begin school.

Some programs support starting at even earlier ages. Every child grows and develops at a different rate. Some 5-year-olds are eager and ready to engage in an adult organized sport program but most are not. Children at age 5 and 6 are growing from head to toe and from the core of the body outward. At this age, children are a bit top-heavy as their feet/legs and arms/hands are the last segments of the body to fully develop. Young children have great difficulty tracking moving objects, especially if they are in the air.

Most will duck or throw hands in front of the face if the ball comes toward the head. Children at this age are very reactionary in their movement behavior. Anticipating in advance where the ball might be played is a skill that has not yet developed. This ability does not really develop until age 8 or 9. Children at ages 5 and 6 want to run and kick the ball. They don't do well when told to stand in one place. If the action is at the other end of the field, a young goalkeeper will find some other activity to hold his or her attention.

Cognitive (learning) issues

According to Piaget, a noted Swiss psychologist who studied the growth and development of children, 5- and 6-year-olds are in a preoperational stage of development that approximately spans ages 2 to 7. This preoperational stage involves the initial stages of logical thinking but the patterns are immature. It is difficult for children to orient what they have learned into sequences or complex patterns of thought. They attempt to solve one concept at a time.

Children at this age are able to process only small amounts of information at a time, and long complex instructions tend not to be successfully processed. Time and space relationships are not fully developed or understood. The task of goalkeeping does not relate to the other aspects of playing soccer for young children.

Psycho-social issues

Children as young as 5 are beginning to develop a self-concept of who they are and how they fit into the world. It is a fragile stage. Movement experiences to date are minimal and involvement with other children in grouped activities is new to most.

Children at this age develop high levels of anxiety and arousal primarily due to the uncertainty of what is expected of them. Just running and kicking a soccer ball has profound self-image ramifications. The stress presented by being the goalkeeper raises these levels. If goalkeepers are utilized in small-sided games, self-image can take a hit when a goal is scored.

Even if scorekeeping and the emphasis on winning are minimized, fingers are pointed and blame is clearly placed on the goalkeeper. This factor, as much as anything else, may cause a child to discontinue playing soccer before he or she has really started. Having players stand in goal for a couple of minutes at ages 5 and 6 will not allow them to develop goalkeeping skills and will likely lead to increased levels of stress. Remember, at this age, children are very egocentric; they are into themselves - me, my, mine. They see the world from their perspective, not the perspective of adults. They need generous praise and the opportunity to enjoy play without pressure.

The analysis of most soccer experts is that small-sided games for young children are most beneficial for learning basic motor skills, learning basic rules and fundamental concepts of the game (most commonly going in the right direction). They also learn how to interact with their peers within a game involving a ball. What is not supported is the use of goalkeepers in this format. Children want to run, kick the ball and score goals. Every child should experience the triumph and success of scoring a goal.

Striking the ball at a small target accurately is a challenge for all children. Goalkeepers restrict the opportunities to score goals to a select few players. It is not easy or unrewarding as implied in Coach Waiters' article. Young children "stuck in goal" every three minutes will not develop goalkeeping skills. Young players are more likely to get hit with the ball than to actually "save it."

It is my belief (one that is supported by my colleagues) that it is important to wait until children are better able to physically, mentally and emotionally handle the demands of being a soccer goalkeeper. We promote a small-sided (4 v. 4) format through age 8 and then introduce goalkeeping in an 6 v. 6 format beginning at age 9. This still allows plenty of time for children to grow up and be the best goalkeepers they can be and most likely keep them engaged in playing soccer for many years to come.

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