

Understanding Your Players

Why does this age want to play soccer?

The three most popular reasons include: **1)** They have a sibling that plays **2)** A parent signed them up to play **3)** They have friends that are playing. However, if a player has had previous soccer experience they may choose to play because they enjoyed the experience and / or they want to learn more about the sport. Whatever the reason for playing, all children participating are looking for the same basic outcome; they want to have fun!

Why do children stop playing soccer?

The number one reason is that they are not having fun! There are several things that contribute to not having fun: 1) They are not playing with friends 2) They are sitting on the bench rather than playing 3) They are hearing too many harsh words and/or criticism from their parents or their coach.

What are the physical characteristics of a first grader?

1. Ever growing skeletal system.
2. They have increased control over their body mechanics; balance has improved.
3. Improved but still immature eye, hand, and foot coordination.
4. They have poor temperature regulation.
5. Their cardiovascular system has improved but is still no where near as efficient as an adult.
6. They still have high energy levels but only for short periods of time.

What are the cognitive characteristics of a first grader?

1. Players at these ages have an increased ability to share.
2. **No concerns for team concepts;** Players are still very self-centered but they are becoming increasingly focused on me and a friend.
3. They are beginning to understand the concept of space and time.
4. They want to be accepted.
5. Limited ability to execute more than one task at a time.
6. They prefer playing to watching.
7. Parents are still the biggest influence.
8. Need constant positive reinforcement and praise.
9. Fear of failure – they have easily bruised ego's.

What can players deal with emotionally?

1. Their focus is no longer just on themselves. Players want to make friends.
2. Although players still do not identify with the idea of team, they are looking for acceptance from their peers and coaches.
3. Players are easily hurt by negative comments from coaches and teammates, which transfer into a great need for approval and positive feedback.

What do these characteristics mean to a soccer coach?

1) The key areas of coaching for these ages should be:

- Keep practice and game day **FUN!**
- Keep communication **SHORT** and **SIMPLE**; players attention spans are very short. When speaking to your players you will probably only have their attention for a few seconds rather than minutes. Therefore, it is important to keep activity explanations, team talks and wrap ups short and succinct.
- Provide an environment where players can **EXPERIMENT**. Activities you use during practice should allow for fun and success yet be challenging. The most important element is that players feel comfortable to try new things and do not fear making mistakes. Players do not fulfill their potential without being able to try, fail and ultimately find their own success.

2) What should practice/game day look like?

- **Ratio:** 1 ball with every player OR 1 ball with ever 2 players. Activities should be chosen around this concept.
- **Activities:** these should still be fun based but have a consistent message throughout. Keep it simple. In order to maximize learning, focus on one or two concepts per practice session.
- **Small Sided Games:** We play 4 vs. 4 **without** a goalie. Let the players play the game. This is their time to experiment and be creative.

3) Technical Soccer Skills: The first and second grade player can start to handle more soccer related skills. These areas have been identified as age appropriate technical topics to introduce to your players:

- Ball mastery using balance and coordination
- Dribbling with control
- Turning and changing direction with the ball
- Moves to beat an opponent
- Introduction to passing and receiving
- Introduction to Finishing

4) **Tactical Soccer Skills**: As players becoming more aware of friends and they are beginning to understand the concept of space, they should be able to handle limited tactical instruction. **NOTE**: this should not be the focus of training; however it should accompany technical direction. Tactical concepts that can start to be introduced include:

- When to dribble
- When to beat a defender
- When to turn and change direction
- When to try and pass
- Introduce the concept of spreading out.

These areas will be very complex to players and you will find limited success when trying to teach them. What we are attempting to do with these tactical concepts is to '**Plant the Seed**' so that as a player develops he or she will recognize these simple concepts.

5) **Coaching**: the term facilitator best describes a coach for this age group. The coach/facilitator prepares the playing environment and organizes the games/activities to be played. Coaching at these ages should take the form of:

- Let the game be the teacher.
- Demonstrations – giving players a visual of the correct technique.
- Asking questions to the group to help guide players to correct their mistakes – for example, when we dribble in a crowded area should we take big touches or small touches to keep control?
- Talking with individuals to correct technique or decision – taking a player to the side of the activity and explaining the desired result.

In all these areas of coaching and giving feedback, it is important not to be positive with the comments made. One approach that can be used when giving feedback to a player is the 4 to 1 technique. Provide four positives to every negative.