

ADVICE TO COACHES AND PARENTS OF U4-U6 (INSTRUCTIONAL) PLAYERS

Overview: At U4-U6, the number one priority for the kids is to have fun! Not only will they enjoy the experience more now, but for those who might be destined to play at a competitive level when they are older, they will go much further if they love the game. So don't worry about the scores and don't worry about skills and tactics. At this very young age, it is enough to get them exposed to the game and for them to begin to get comfortable with a soccer ball and how to control it – not an easy task for them! Just like at school, they are still learning their ABCs and numbers, with basic reading and math skills among the older ones in this group. For soccer, the basic education is how to control the ball.

Practices: Practices at this age should be no more than once a week, for an hour or less. It is play, with the soccer balls as the “toys”. There are many different activities and games to play with the kids. And the more balls/toys out there at one time, the better! Sometimes a player (or two) will just “not be in the mood” – don't try to force participation. A few minutes of time doing something else with an adult (either a parent/guardian or an “assistant coach”) often will get them through that rough spot and they will be good to go.

Games: They may be sorted into teams, but it's pretty much “every boy/girl for themselves” at this age. It's not 3 against 3, it's 1 against 5. After all, the object of the game is to get the ball! The only introduction to “team tactics” should be when the ball goes out of bounds. On a kick-in (NOT a throw-in), the player has to give away the ball so at least they can try to get it to one of their teammates! Coaches are advised not to try to defend kick-ins, goal-kicks, or corner kicks by “tight marking” – just have your team drop back a couple of yards and get ready for play to resume!

Age-Appropriate Skills:

Appropriate for this age: Kicking the ball without “toe-poking” it; receiving (stopping) a ball (preferably without using the toe); passing the ball to a teammate or into the goal for a score! And lots of exercise and movement.

Should be encouraged, but not required: Using both feet instead of just their dominant/favorite foot; changing direction when dribbling forward (i.e. going around or through cones); glancing up during dribbling instead of looking down at the ball at all times.

Not yet (unless they do it of their own choosing!): headers or juggling (really anything that has the ball off of the ground); shielding/contact during play; changing direction (a “turn”) while dribbling.

Age-Appropriate Game-Day Tactics:

Appropriate for this age: Orientation -- which way are we trying to score? “How to Play” – Basic Rules of Play. That's it!

Not yet: Just about everything else will come later, probably much later.