

Basic Coaching Concepts for Players Under the Age of Seven Individual Technical and Tactical Issues for U-5's and U-6's

**Tom Turner
Ohio Youth Soccer Association-North
Director of Coaching and Player Development
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Coordination and Basic Motor Skills

Four and five year olds are learning to coordinate and control their body movements and dynamic balance, and are generally not very nimble or agile. Practice activities that develop these basic motor skills, with and without the soccer ball will be beneficial and fun for all young children. In addition to soccer-specific activities, practice activities for five and six year-olds should target directional sense, spatial awareness, and basic motor patterns, such as hopping, skipping, jumping, bounding and running.

Contacting the Ball

There are six surfaces (inside, outside, instep, sole, toe and heel) used for kicking, dribbling or controlling a soccer ball. For most U-5 and U-6 players, the toes and the laces are the most commonly used surfaces. Practice activities should encourage these players to experiment with different surfaces and ask them to “imagine” new ways to kick and dribble the ball. Games that cater to discovery learning and imitation are the recommended approaches to “teaching” new skills to young children.

Dribbling

Dribbling the ball is arguably the most important soccer skill at any level, and practice activities should encourage all young players to dribble and stop and turn the ball with different surfaces and to move in different directions with the ball under control.

Passing

Players as young as five will look to pass the ball to teammates, and they will do so with purpose if they are given enough time and space to consider their options. In many cases, young children are still learning how to coordinate their perception of a game situation with the muscle actions necessary to make contact with the ball. It is important to encourage beginners to take extra touches when controlling the ball so that passes (or dribbles) are attempted with a purpose in mind, rather than as a means of kicking the ball to safety.

Shooting

A player's first thought in possession should always be “Can I score a goal from here?” Goals in practice should be wide and high enough to encourage shots from various distances and angles, and coaches should reinforce to players through their practice activities that the objective of the game is to score more goals than the opponents in the time allowed. Soccer games and other activities with no stated “outcome” are less motivating than activities that provide a way to win.

Ball Control

Time, space and repetition are the most important elements for improving comfort level and reducing the number of touches necessary to control the ball. Small-sided games and complementary one-player/one-ball activities provide opportunities for young players to begin to associate the techniques of dribbling and controlling the soccer ball with the three tactical applications of dribbling: moving away from pressure, running into open space, and dribbling towards goal. Beginning level players will rarely try to control balls coming out of the air, and bouncing balls present another very difficult coordination and emotional problem for five and six year-olds. The secret of good ball control is a soft first touch; the most damaging coaching advice to give five and six year-olds is to kick the ball away.

Heading

Five and six year olds will not head the ball.

Support

Young players should not be restricted in their movements on the field and moving should become a natural extension of passing. Passing to other players should be expected and encouraged at this age, although dribbling the ball is the most likely method of advancing the ball. Instruction that limits players to a particular area of the field does not allow for the natural emergence of supporting positions and angles that become so important for positional play in later years.

Spaces versus Positions

For all players under the age of eight, positional coaching of any kind is irrelevant and detrimental to their fun, enjoyment and progress. Rather than be told what position to play, young players should be encouraged to “find” new supporting positions away from teammates so that passes can be exchanged.

Vision

Most young players have little or no visual awareness of their immediate surroundings, and, in particular, the proximity of teammates and opponents not directly in front of them. Receiving passes when facing away from the opponent’s goal is a difficult skill, even for accomplished players, and most children will not look up until they have received the ball, secured possession, and turned to face forward. Often, young players will simply let the ball run past them into what they hope will be open space.

Defending

“Defending” at this age should be no more complicated than encouraging the children to try and win the ball back when possession is lost. Players will often naturally transition from attack to defense and recover towards their goal, but it is also true that young children will often stop playing when the ball is lost. While these players should be “gently” encouraged to participate in the game, they should never be scolded for their decision to “take a rest.” When the ball comes their way they will become involved again. Because players should be encouraged to move forward when attacking, there will

be many situations when no one is at the back of the team when the opponents gain possession. This should be anticipated as a natural aspect of play for young children and one reason why scores are generally much higher in small-sided games.

Transition

When the ball turns over from the attacker to the defender or from the defender to the attacker, the game offers chances to demonstrate awareness of two very important concepts: immediate recovery of the ball and immediate counter-attack to goal. Players should be assessed on how well they understand these concepts and encouraged to react as quickly as possible to any change in possession.

Creativity

Because five and six year-olds are learning to coordinate ball manipulation with body control, “creativity” is more likely to appear as good ball control or faking or feinting movements. Players who can change speed and direction and retain control of the ball are applying their techniques in a creative way. Players who can move their bodies from side to side in an effort to unbalance a defender are showing signs of creativity. Players who experiment with different parts of their feet or control the ball with different body parts, are showing signs of creativity. At this age, allowing children to think and to fantasize and to create their own solutions to the game’s problems is a critical element of coaching.