

Understanding Your Players

Why does a 4th or 5th grade child play soccer?

Similar to the 2nd or 3rd grade player, these children are looking for more than just fun from their soccer experience. They do play because they want to enjoy the game but it is not the sole reason for playing. At these ages players want to be part of a team, they want to play with their friends, learn more about the skills involved to be success at the sport, form new friendships and build a relationship with the coach. Their soccer experience needs to be more encompassing. A coach needs to challenge the players, while still keeping all the fun elements involved!

What are the Physical Capabilities of players at these ages?

1. Their Skeletal System is still growing.
2. Greater diversity between players in maturity & ability.
3. Significantly Improved co-ordination in fine motor skills. Players should be challenged with more difficult techniques and be expected to master / fine tune these techniques.
4. Prone to heat loss and related injuries. Players should be given longer breaks so they can fully recover. Breaks should be tailored to the climate.

What are the Cognitive Characteristics of 4th and 5th grade player?

These ages are often described as the 'fertile period for learning' because of the following characteristics:

1. They have a better understanding of the team concept.
2. Eager to learn. They are mini sponges and should be treated that way. The more we can teach the better at these ages.
3. They are internally motivated to play.
4. They now understand the concept of space and time.
5. They begin to think ahead. This allows for tactical instruction.
6. They have an ability to sequence thoughts and actions together; Run, Strike and Think.
7. They can perform more complex tasks.

What are the emotional characteristics of these players?

Players are becoming more intense and serious about playing soccer at these ages. It is no longer the push of the parents that is the biggest influence over their recreational activities. Emotionally players are becoming more complex and have the following characteristics:

1. Whether a child enters puberty early or late has important psychological implications.
2. Girls will tend to form cliques.
3. Boys take a more broad approach to team relationships.
4. Popularity influences self esteem.
5. Players should be included in the formation of rules for the team.
6. The manor in which players interact with their teammates is based upon how they feel about themselves.
7. Treat players with respect and don't force them into uncomfortable situations.

What do these Player Characteristics mean to a soccer coach?

1. When coaching players of these ages it is still important to instill a love for the game. However, a coach should also try to implement more team building elements into the team's soccer diet.

2. What should practice look like at these ages:

- **Organized:** Coaches should prepare for every practice. It is essential that activities run from simple to complex with little change over time between them.
- **Ratio:** Numbers of players to the number of balls. 1:1 to 1:4.
- **Activities:** should be educationally focused. Activities that are physically, technically and tactically challenging are fun for players at these age groups. Competition should also be a staple of each activity at these ages. This will drive players to challenge themselves and teammate to improve.
- **Small Sided Games:** Regular games are played 8 vs. 8 including goalies in outdoor and 7 vs. 7 including goalies in indoor soccer. Small side games of 4 vs. 4 should be a staple of practice. Again, time should be allotted for free play during each practice.

3. **Coaching:** Teacher best describes a coach at this age. Players are like sponges to new information and coaches should be prepare to teach players with the following methods:
 - a. Letting the game be the teacher. Implementing activities with certain restrictions in order to bring out the technical or tactical skill you are focusing on.
 - b. Giving clear demonstrations of the skill or idea you want to teach.

- c. Talking with individuals during the flow of the activity or taking that player to the side to implement the information.
- d. Asking thought provoking questions to players or the entire group in order to guide players to solve soccer problems. This is ideally done on a natural stoppage of play as well as the start or finish of an activity.
- e. Use the **FREEZE METHOD** to teach. The freeze method is when a coach stops an activity directly after a mistake or a perfect play to reenact and teach the group. It is important that during this stoppage that you show the group exactly what you want the players to do in that specific situation. After showing the group, a coach must allow the players to practice the skill. Finally, restart the activity with the skill or the positive play performed by your players.
- f. It is important to remember that players at these ages are still bruised very easily by negative and/or demeaning comments. However, players will start to blame other players for mistakes made during practice and we must be sure to identify who and what mistakes have been made in order to teach players in the correct manor. Coaching points should be made by not only identifying mistakes made but also how to solve those problems. A ratio of 4:1 is helpful when giving feedback; one negative point should equal four positives.

4. **What should we be teaching the 5th and 6th grade player?**

Although technical development should be a key element in U12 player's soccer diet, tactical ideas start to become as important.

Small group and team tactical concepts should become a major focus of practices.

1. **Technical Soccer Skills:**

- **Ball Mastery:** using all surfaces (inside, outside, sole and laces) of both feet to move the ball in different directions.
- **Dribbling:** this should include changes or direction and pace.
- **Running with the Ball:** how and when to exploit space with the ball.
- **Turning:** Inside Hook, Outside Hook, Drag Back, Stop Turn and Step Over.
- **Moves to Beat an Opponent:** Scissors, Double Scissors, Role and Take, Stop /Go
- **Shielding:** teaching players how to use their body to secure the ball and keep possession.
- **Passing:**
 - Inside of the Foot – push pass.
 - Outside of the Foot.
 - Passing over distance and crossing with the laces.
 - Bending the ball with the inside and outside of the foot, to cross and pass
 - Introduce the weight of the pass and the choice of surface to pass.

- **Receiving the Ball:**

- Inside of the Foot Receiving.
- Receiving with the outside of the foot to turn.
- Receiving balls out of the air: chest, thigh, laces and inside.

- **Finishing:**

- With the laces from distance.
- From close range with the inside of the foot, toe poke and outside of the foot.
- From crosses – volleying techniques (inside and laces).

2) Tactical Skills:

Areas that players should be introduced to tactically are:

Defensively

- Balancing Defender
- Defending as a forward
- Midfield Defending
- Defending as a back
- How does each line defend in each third of the field

Offensively

- Role of the third attack – Mobility, penetrating runs from players off the ball
- Combination Play – Up, Back and Through (3rd man running combination)
- Attacking from wide areas
- Attacking from central areas – Final pass
- Possession vs. Penetration in each third of the field
 - Building out of the back
 - Possession in the midfield – switching the point of attack
 - Final third attacking