

Key Concepts

Now let's look at some of the key concepts that apply to players of these ages:

- **Players can accept more instruction, and they can be held accountable to what they've learned, in a positive manner.**
Always start and end your critique with positive comments. For example, "Mikey, I like the way you kicked that ball, but you kicked it into the middle of the field in front of our own goal. Remember we worked on keeping the ball away from our goal? Play that ball wide next time. Don't worry about that mistake. Give me five, and let's get back after it. You're doing great!"
- **Players can and should begin to learn positions.**
Positions will be covered in a later chapter dedicated solely to positional play. At this point you should simply realize that players this age can grasp simple positional concepts. Teaching positions may be painful at the beginning of the season, but you will see big rewards later in the season as you watch the quality of their play develop. Remember, your players' development helps define your success as a coach.
- **Develop a routine warm-up for the players that they do at the beginning of every practice or game.**
It can be a short, 5-minute warm-up, but it should include every player using his or her ball. The warm-up will provide consistent repetition of basic ball skills. If organized properly it can develop their fundamental ball handling skills and coordination, thereby promoting further development.
- **Organize your sessions into the following format: warm-up, instruction, game.**
That model will work well for either a practice or a game night.
 - On a practice night the instruction will be longer and provide more time for repetition. The game would be a scrimmage of some sort.
 - On a game night you may only have 15 minutes or so prior to the start of the match. In that case, go through the warm-up quickly. The instruction can be as short as 10 minutes. The game then takes care of itself.
- **Promote teamwork, sportsmanship, and being coachable.**
These characteristics will help your players progress on and off the field, across any sport they choose to play, in school and in life.

- **Players in these age groups will evolve to the point of passing if you create a positional environment that allows them to do it successfully.**

The best way to teach passing is to point out those opportunities during games. Don't yell instructions to them as they play, but use breaks in the play to point out opportunities they had. When they do make a good pass, heap praise upon them!

- **Use rewards to reinforce your lessons.**

I like to give out stars after the games. I've detailed my "Stars Program" in Appendix B for you to reference.

- **A player's decision-making ability is very important to his/her future development.**

To promote the development of decision-making skills, let your players play. Coaches who constantly shout instructions to their players only really teach them to listen and obey. Players don't learn to think for themselves. Let your players play and make decisions, even mistakes, for themselves, constructively coaching them at appropriate times (i.e. breaks in the action).

I'm sure all these concepts make sense conceptually. Now let's look at how to apply these concepts, beginning with the warm-up.

Warm-up

The following is an example of the warm-up I do with my teams. There are a lot of steps to the warm-up, but it usually only takes about 5 minutes to complete. Players work back and forth across the width of the field. On each side they perform a specific exercise with the ball for anywhere from 30 seconds to a couple of minutes.

1. **Players begin by dribbling across the field with only their right feet.**
I emphasize to them using both the inside and outside of the foot with small touches (i.e. keeping the ball close to them).
2. **Players do toe touches on top of their ball.**
They start with one foot on top of the ball, switch feet, and then repeat. Players have to learn to lightly tap the ball and not step on it. They should progress to be able to perform this rapidly.
3. **Players dribble back across the field in the same manner they did in step 2, but this time they use their left foot.**
Getting comfortable using both feet is very important. Many coaches emphasize kicking with both feet but neglect developing a player's ability to dribble with both feet.

4. **Players tap the ball back and forth between their feet.**
They don't need to move around when doing this. They need to get their feet apart and develop the coordination and rhythm to keep the ball moving beneath them. As they get good at this skill, you can instruct them to move around while doing it. They can move forward and backward, or even in circles.
5. **Players then zigzag back across the field.**
They dribble with both feet, cutting the ball sharply back and forth. Emphasize "a lot of zigs and a lot of zags." This exercise will create the ability for them to turn a defender as they dribble at them.
6. **At this point I have the players perform one or two basic moves.**
They spread out and perform ten repetitions of each move. Again, we are laying the foundation for them to use these moves in a game as they progress in their ability and confidence. For some players they may apply those moves during your season. Other players may not gain that confidence for years, but you will have started their foundation. (See Appendix C for some sample moves and how to teach them.)
7. **Players return across the field with one directive: "FAST!"**
They must dribble across the field as fast as they can, keeping the ball as straight as possible. Emphasize using the top of the foot (i.e. the laces) to push the ball in a straight line.
8. **I then have the players spread out and juggle.**
Juggling is the exercise of keeping the ball in the air using any soccer-legal surface of the body. This is an advanced skill, but they can start very simply. Players can begin by just bouncing the ball off their thigh and catching it. They can then progress to two bounces before catching it. Finally they can do as many as they can before the ball hits the ground. The most juggles I've seen from a player this age has been 8, but this is great repetition to help further their comfort with the ball.
9. **Last of all they get a partner and do two-touch, short passing.**
Every time they receive a pass, they must trap it with one foot and play it back with the other foot. Players use the insides of their feet to trap the ball, moving it to a location where they can easily play the ball back with their second touch. The ball should always stay in motion, never coming to a complete stop. This exercise helps them develop a smooth flow with the ball. (Appendix C details proper techniques for performing skills.)

Practice

When it comes to “instruction,” there are a few key concepts that will allow them to be successful on the field and also add to their skill foundation. There are technical aspects of instruction, which refer to the skills of the game. There are also tactical aspects to be taught. Obviously at this age you don’t need too much focus on tactics, but there are some simple tactics that should be taught. Let’s start with Technical instruction.

Technical Drills

Technical instruction should include the skills that follow. Proper technique for performing these skills is detailed in Appendix C.

- **Passing technique with the inside of the foot**

The easiest way to start teaching this technique is to line up the players side by side and have them pass the ball back and forth as they run. The orientation of the body will make using the inside of the foot very natural. Emphasize striking the middle of the ball, so the pass stays down.

- **Shooting technique with the laces**

Proper shooting technique is to lock the ankle, pointing the toe straight down and striking the ball with the top of the foot, right through the middle of the ball. The non-kicking foot is called the “plant foot.” If players look awkward while shooting, it is usually because the plant foot is too far behind the ball. This foot should be right next to the ball.

- **Receiving technique using the inside of the foot**

Many players want to step on top of the ball to stop it. They also want to bring the ball to a complete stop to evaluate what they are going to do next. Teach your players to use the inside of their feet to receive the ball and move it into open space, constantly keeping the ball in motion.

That is really it! If your players can master those skills in their U7 and U8 years, they will have visible success on the field and will have a solid foundation of skills.

“What about dribbling?” you may ask. Do you remember our warm-up? Dribbling is extremely important, but that is what the warm-up is designed to do. It will give them dribbling and coordination repetition every time you meet. There are also some great dribbling games you can play with them that they will love:

- **Knock Out**

Players dribble around in a defined area and try to knock other players’ balls out of the area. To add intensity to this game, have the players that are knocked out come back into the game without their soccer balls to knock out other players.

- **Kick the Player**

Remember “Kick the Coach” from the younger age groups? Well this is a progression of that game that saves the coach’s shins. Designate one player as “It.” Give that player a scrimmage vest, cone, or something to hold. That player runs around while others dribble and try to hit that person with their ball. Whoever hits the person becomes the person who is “It.” Aside from the dribbling practice, you may also notice the agility the person who is “It” displays trying to avoid being hit by the ball.

- **Relay Races**

This game is the identical to that described in Under 5 and Under 6. These can be as simple as dribbling around a cone and coming back. You can get more creative as well. Make sure the relay teams are small. I like to keep them to two or three players. Here are some other ideas:

- Lay out cones for them to weave through.
- Have them crawl to a point, pushing the ball with their head before getting up and dribbling the rest of the way.
- Place a big target in the middle of the field, such as a trash barrel. Have the players dribble to it and hit the target with their ball before returning to give the ball to the next teammate.
- When exchanging the ball with their teammate, have them dribble behind the person and play the ball through their legs.

- **Obstacle course**

Set up a little obstacle course, and let the players compete for the best time going through the course. In order to get repetition, let them do it a few times without being timed. That will allow you to get the players going quicker and keep them from standing in line. The very last thing you do is to time everyone going through the course and honor the winner.

Tactical Drills

The beauty of soccer for young children is that it is a game that simplifies very well. As a parent-coach you don’t need to be a tactical genius to teach some simple tactics to kids this age. In fact, keeping the game very simple is best for these players.

Ultimately the best played soccer is where players make good decisions instinctively. Giving too much tactical instruction to kids this age will make them think about the game too much. The game will be slower and less fun. However no tactical awareness will result in what is commonly called “Blob” or “Ameba Ball.”

Here is what I recommend teaching:

1. Playing the ball wide on defense

Naturally players want to get the ball up field toward the opposing goal, and they understand the quickest way to do that is in a straight line.

Players need to be taught to take the ball wide, away from their own goal, and then up the field. This will take the ball out of a dangerous area and reduce the silly goals against your team. Players also need to be taught that it is okay to kick the ball out of bounds on the defensive side of the field, preferably over the sideline as opposed to the end line.

A. A simple way to teach this tactical concept is to serve balls to players facing you. Have them receive the ball, making good use of their first touch, take it wide around a cone, and kick it hard up the field (*See Figure 1 below*).

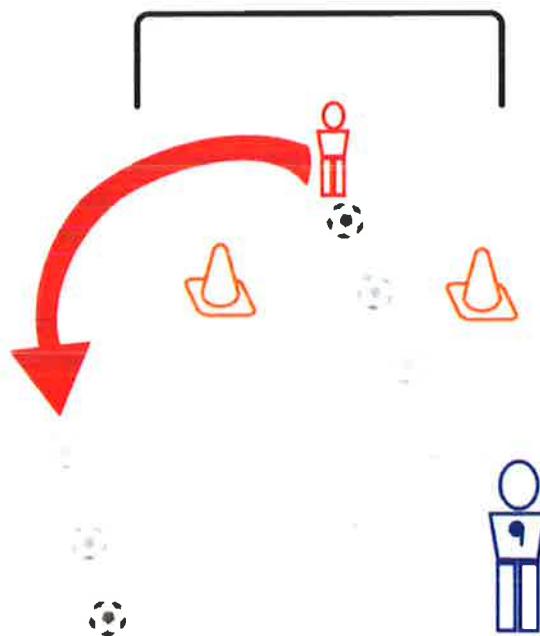


Figure 1: Receiving the ball

B. Continue the same exercise, but have the players stand with you facing the goal they are defending to simulate chasing down a ball headed toward their goal. Serve the ball into the defensive half of the field. Have each player chase the ball toward their goal, turn it wide, and then kick it hard up the field (*See Figure 2 below*).

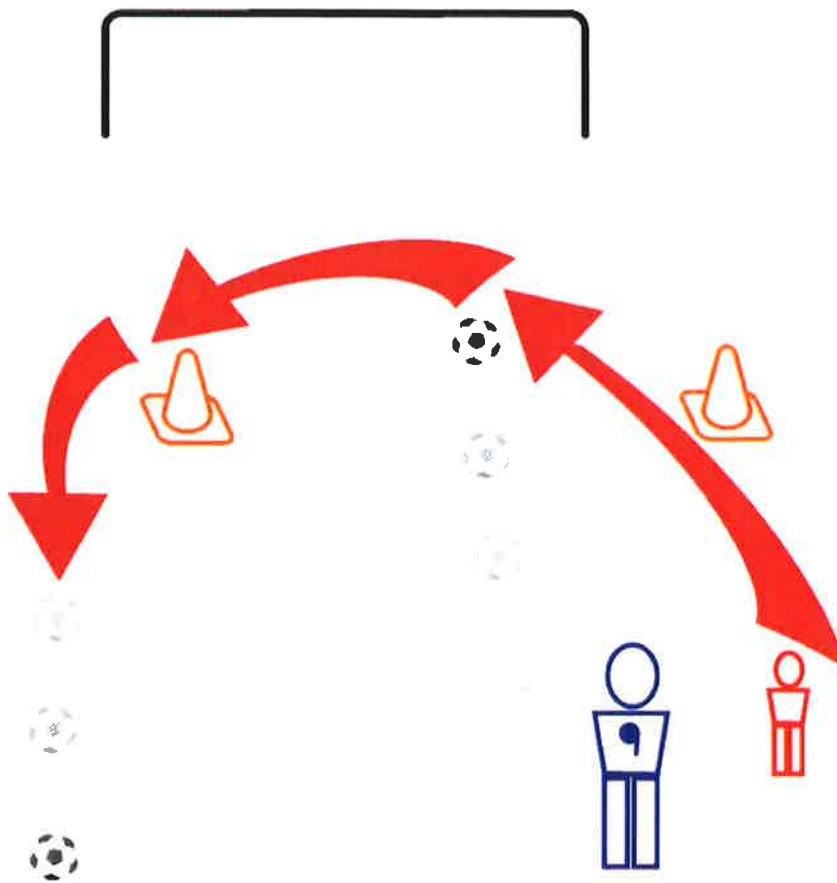


Figure 2: Chasing the ball

2. Crossing the ball

This is the first step to really learning to pass the ball. Teach the players to play the ball across the face of the goal from the sides of the field. Your players need to be taught that they don't always have to shoot. If they are on the flanks of the field, simply playing the ball across the field puts the ball in a good position for the team to score.

3. Framing the goal

This concept is simply the organization of players in front of the goal to receive crosses. Obviously if you are trying to teach your players to cross balls from the flanks, then having players in position to score just makes sense. Once your team scores a few goals from crosses, they will catch on and do it like crazy! The actual organization in front of the goal

depends on the number of players you use in your league. However, the most important areas to cover are the “far post” and the “slot” (See Figure 3 below). Even if your team plays 4v4 or 5v5, you should be able to cover these areas in front of the goal.

1. The “far post” is the area in front of the furthest goal post from the ball. Make sure your players don’t stand right at the post. They should leave enough room for the ball to be crossed between them and the goal.
2. The “slot” is the area directly in front of the goal. In a full sided game, this is the area between the penalty spot and the 6 yard box. On a smaller field you should adjust the spacing accordingly. The thing to remember is that this person is the most likely to be in competition for the ball with the goalie. This person also has the whole goal on which to shoot. Therefore this person should, and can afford to, leave more space between himself/herself and the goal.
 - i. Allowing the space between the players and the goal is logical to an adult. It is much easier to score facing the goal which is the reason for the buffer. However, the natural tendency for players is to get as close to the goal as possible to wait for the ball. This concept will take consistent reminding.

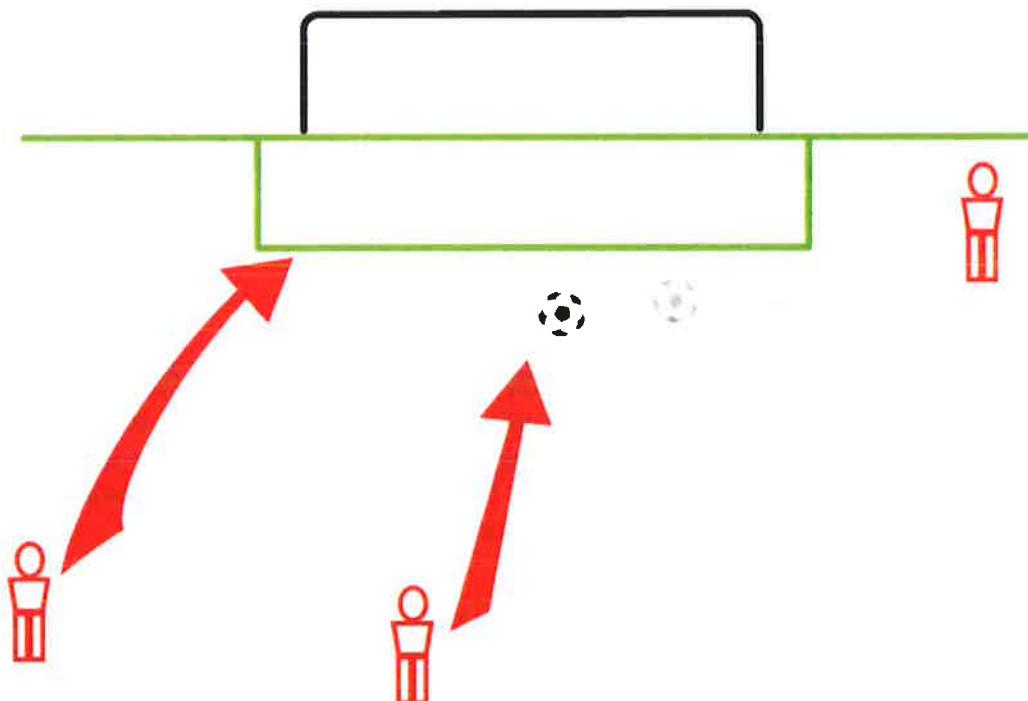


Figure 3: Framing the goal

Obviously you can practice crossing and framing the goal together, but start by having just one runner going to the goal at the far post. Work up to having two or more players running to the goal. As the players get better, add a goalkeeper to the equation and then a defender. The defender will force two things:

- ii. Make the person crossing the ball evaluate the situation and choose a good spot for the ball.
- iii. Make the players framing the goal spread out to ensure that one player cannot cover both or all of them.

Scrimmage

The last part of your session format is a game. When practicing before a game, the game obviously takes care of itself. However, in true practice sessions the game takes the form of a scrimmage. To make your scrimmages more effective, begin the game with some restrictions to force them to use the concepts you've taught during the instruction portion of the session.

For example, if your instruction was crossing the ball, you might start out the scrimmage with a restriction that shots must come with a player's first touch, meaning the players cannot dribble or trap before shooting. This restriction would force them to pass the ball for someone to shoot with his first touch, thereby manufacturing some crossing opportunities. Another way to handle this situation would be to award 1 point for a regular goal, but 2 points (or more) for a goal scored from a cross, thereby inspiring them to look for crossing opportunities.

After your players have played and have had some success with the restriction on the scrimmage, lift the restriction and see how they do. Let them play, but continue to coach to the points you made during the instruction part of your session. Help guide them to apply the techniques or tactics that you taught.

Summary

The U7 and U8 age groups are a lot of fun to coach. The players are capable of learning a lot about the skills and concepts of the game. Their game can begin to take the shape of recognizable soccer, which is very rewarding. Keep in mind that players vary greatly. Don't be afraid to revert back to U5 and U6 activities to begin the season and introduce more structured activities over time.

