

Characteristics of Children in Soccer 4-18yrs

1 - The first age group to be looked at is the younger children between the ages of four to six. This is a special age group in that the influence a coach has on these children will last a lifetime. At this age the coach is a role model, a hero, someone they can look up to and emulate. It is essential therefore you:

- Keep Instruction to a minimum, due to the child's attention span being so short (approx 3-4mins)
- Relate to the children. Be prepared to come down to their level and make a fool out of yourself.
- Make practices fun and exciting. (You can play a dribbling game called Sponge Bob Square Pants)
- Listen and interact personally with the children. They feel great that the coach thinks they are important.
- Due to a short attention span short, you need to constantly change activities.
- Always keep instruction POSITIVE, POSITIVE, POSITIVE!

If the above guidelines above are followed, the children should respond positively. However, at this point it must be noted that children do not have a finely tuned mind, and as a result, show certain behavior traits on the soccer field.

- Children are spatially unaware. (All pack around the ball.)
- Everyone follows the ball.
- Very selfish with the ball. (Children are apt to dribble until they loose it.)
- Unaware of their teammates. (Do not understand the concept of passing.)
- Can be afraid of both ball and opponent.
- Kicks ball just to be in the game (No thought of where they are on the field and where they need to go)

These points above are given to highlight the child and the characteristics they show when they first enter the soccer arena. To highlight the success of a coach at this age, he or she needs to:

- Make the child feel comfortable with a soccer ball at his/her feet
- Ensure the children have fun
- Ensure the children make new friends
- Promote exercise (Continuous movement-good physical exercise)
- Teach players to improve listening skills, learn to follow instruction
- Follow organized lesson plans.
- Most importantly develops an enjoyment through the game, so the children keep coming back at the older age groups.

The last point is primary to the success of soccer, not only as individuals playing the game, but also as a country to expose the game to as many people as possible. It is about building a love of the game, so it lasts a lifetime increasing the profile of soccer both locally and nationally. Running a soccer team correctly at a younger age, having fun, and being positive with the children can lead to the ultimate goal of a child's exposure to soccer for life.

2 - The second age of players to look at is players six through eight years old. Children at this age are now believed to be moving into the concrete world of operations. This is a time when they start to understand the logic of situations, but are unable to envision that their can be many different possibilities.

Transferring this into soccer terms, it is important to understand how characteristics of children change from one age group to another. The points below start to highlight the changes although similar subtle differences begin to emerge.

- Attention span is longer than at U-6, but children still can only retain certain information. Activities still need to be constantly changed.
- The child begins to imitate his/her sporting heroes and role models.
- As the child is dribbling he/she, although sometimes selfish, begins to understand the importance of changing directions and not just dribbling in straight lines.
- Fear of the ball and opponent is replaced to confronting the opposing player and tackling to steal the ball to re-gain possession.
- Finally at this age the coach can start to ask questions, but still be aware that children find it very difficult to do two things for the first time.

The coach's behavior at this level is similar to the U-6 coach, although a little more structure and coaching can be given to children in more detail. The coach's traits are listed again below and are the same as before. The overriding fact which remains with young children is the ability to encourage and be positive.

- Keep instructions to a minimum, due to the child's attention span being so short (approx 3-4mins).
- Relate to the children be prepared to come down to their level and make a fool out of yourself.
- Make practices fun and exciting (You can play a dribbling game called Sponge Bob Square Pants.)
- Listen and interact personally with the children. They feel great that the coach thinks they are important.

- Due to a short attention span, coaches need to constantly change activities.
- Always keep instruction POSITIVE, POSITIVE, POSITIVE!

At the U-10 and U-12 age group, the child's mental and physical abilities are improving rapidly. For example the motor skills are becoming more refined, leading to the ability for players to stay at tasks longer and sustain more complex co-ordinated movements and sequences. Outside factors become more of an issue. These can be:

- Puberty
- Children start to spend more time with friends, and peer pressure becomes a factor.
- Moral Values; Children begin to understand the difference between right and wrong.
- At this age children become highly self critical. Negative comments and negative behavior often sees a child end their soccer careers.

As a coach, it is necessary to understand these factors and the changes children are going through at this age. Working with a team at this level, the coach should show qualities such as:

- Role Model
- Acquires an understanding of the game, to be able to teach the children through the season
- Enthusiastic and Upbeat. A fun environment to learn in, children play better when they are happy.
- KISS – Keep Instruction Short and Simple
- Constantly evolve sessions/topics make it an interesting and challenging environment for children to learn.

On the soccer field, children can now understand the game in a new dimension.

- Can fully understand the approach to goals also they are beginning to understand playing with support players (combination play).
- Starts to realize the importance of team concept and enjoys the team environment.
- When shooting the ball, children do not know when to use the power shot and when to use accuracy.
- Can now manipulate a ball a lot better, coordination improves, and with practice can juggle the ball effectively.
- Confrontation is no longer an issue. The player begins to understand the importance of making a tackle and winning the ball back.

3 - The final age to look at is the 13+. This age group is described as the period of formal operations. The child is now able to realize confusing situations and have the logic to work through them. It is at this age children gain the logic to realize confusing situations and work through them. The child now has the potential to perform problem solving activities.

Characteristics of children at this age can be seen as:

- Identifying problems on the field and solving them
- Understanding the formal thought process, realizing that there is a defiant beginning and end.
- Realizing different situations can affect the outcome of the game (e.g. weather, players available, preparation for game, lifestyle, etc.)
- Can relay past experiences to help prepare performance for future games or even adapt to different scenarios that occur during games.
- Has the ability to deal with different external factors that happen in a game, which may not involve him/her

This is transferred on to the soccer field in the following ways.

- Children are starting to develop physically and are being placed into positions on a more consistent basis.
- Starts to display different attributes and is able to carry out different techniques in different parts of the field, realizing when and where the right place is to perform these techniques
- Acquire advanced skills (e.g. they can now strike and chip soccer balls)
- Begin to understand the team concept in a more advanced manner (e.g. defending as a back four)
- Players start to become creative. They can now show creative ability to disguise passes with the inside and outside of the foot and have the talent to use a change of pace and direction.
- The player realizes when to use the power shot and when the accurate shot would be more beneficial.
- Understands the benefit of counterattacking and playing quickly
- Player has the confidence to head the ball and knows what type of header to use (attacking and defensive) in different situations.
- At these ages, the child is constantly improving and forming an understanding of the game. The child is learning when, where, and how to perform certain skills. The next step is the players can perform these skills under pressure. Continued practice in pressure situations is needed to improve the player.

To improve the player the coach now needs to take a more active role. He/she needs to evolve and show qualities such as

- Role model - Players are becoming increasingly self critical. They need to be encouraged and feel good about themselves.
- Be Supportive - As mentioned above, children are highly critical of themselves. The coach needs to listen and help out whenever and wherever they can.
- Be Positive - As a coach, realize the glass is always half full rather than half empty.
- Be Realistic - Good coaches set goals that can be achieved and realize that there is more to life than soccer.

These are just recommendations, but will give you an idea of what children can do at different ages and how a coach can interact with children to get both maximum enjoyment and maximum improvement through coaching with a player.