



Practice Tips

In the past year I have had the pleasure to observe and teach several coaching clinics as well as attend several workshops on coaching soccer. Through all of those experiences I have been able to observe around 50 coaches. Following are commonly asked questions that the soccer coaches had after they had taken a Wisconsin Youth Soccer Association “G/Y” course.

So, what I do with my U12 team may not be appropriate for a U8 team?

Correct. As children grow and mature they go through developmental stages that affect what they are capable of doing physically, mentally, and socially. For instance, young children (for this example around 10) may lack the physical ability to lock their ankle; a skill that is necessary to accurately strike a ball. There is nothing that can be done to remedy this but let nature take its course and allow the kids to grow up. As a result, children under the age of 10 should not be subjected to a lot of passing activities. Socially, young children are not geared to interact with a large number of other individuals. Where do you young kids spend most of their time, at home! Look at kids in the sandbox, they can be right next to each other doing the exact same activity but they do not work together. Children are very egocentric; they see the world only from their perspective. As a result, young children are not going to pass the ball very well. As children get older they learn to interact with more people more efficiently, making teamwork a possibility. Children can work in pairs around age eight, groups of four around age 10, and groups of four to six around age 12. Mentally, soccer requires players to make hundreds of split second decision throughout a game. Young children, until they reach a certain developmental stage, lack the ability to “look ahead” and see what is happening. The point of all this information is that young children do not have the mental, social, or physical abilities that adults have (a soccer play will not peak till around the age of 27).

A common mistake that many coaches make is to not take into account how children differ from adults, thereby training children as if they are miniature adults. The after affect is usually disastrous. When designing practices coaches should take into considerations the different age characteristics. Activities should be picked that fit the developmental needs of the children, rather than trying to make the children participate in activities that are developmentally inappropriate for them.

What are developmentally appropriate exercises?

Developmentally appropriate exercises take into consideration the different age specific characteristics of children. Developmentally appropriate exercises fit the specific needs of the specific age group, rather than choosing an activity and making the players try to fit into the activity. The characteristics of different aged children, and what implications those have on our

coaching are talked about at the Wisconsin Youth Soccer Association clinics (G, E, and D). Developmentally appropriate activities also have implications for the game (whatever we do in practice should prepare them for soccer; we do not run laps during a soccer game therefore players should NEVER run a lap as a warm-up or for any other reason). When picking activities think about what the actual game of soccer is like. Players are moving around constantly, because everyone is moving the environment is constantly changing which requires players to be constantly making decisions. Because of this reason and many more it has been decided by the soccer experts that *practice games* are much more effective at teaching kids how to play soccer, even when dealing with techniques like how to pass the ball. Many coaches choose to do drills that involve players standing in lines waiting to have a turn. Drills do not have implications for soccer nor are they developmentally appropriate for children 16 and under. Any child under the age of 16 should NEVER be asked to stand in a line and wait a turn. There are practice games that can be used to teach any technique or tactical concept that the game of soccer has.

What should I have my players do at the beginning of practice, they always show up and want to kick the ball into the net?

There are a couple of different things you could have your players do at the beginning of practice. For kids U14 and below as they show up have them start small-sided games. When you show up set up a small field; as soon as the first two kids show up have them play 1v1. As kids come add them to the game up to 3v3 or 4v4. Once there is a 3v3 or 4v4 game going have additional kids that come start up another small-sided game. Kids love to play soccer so why not let them do it? It is important though to just let the kids play, there should be NO COACHING. You may start to notice that kids will want to come to practice earlier and earlier because they know they will get to play and have fun. Another benefit of this is that when you decide you want to start practice the kids should already be partially warmed up and mentally prepared to play soccer.

Older children may not be able to show up to practice and just play without risking injury. Those children should be encouraged to pass the ball (preferably while moving) or juggle the ball.

Is it okay to do activities in soccer practice that don't use balls. I have heard that soccer players should constantly be "with a ball" at every practice?

It's okay for some of our activities to not have balls. Take into consideration the Simon Says game. Young children have a tough time focusing on more than one task at the same time. If we start them off by asking them to focus on the ball and listen to what we are telling them to do they may not succeed. We can ease them into the activity by doing one round where they do not have a ball and then add a ball for the other rounds.

Also, we want to spend time not only developing their soccer abilities but their body awareness as well. Young children need to become acquainted with their body and how it works. That is why some of the activities ask the children to hop like a frog or crawl like a crab. While they are

fun for the children they are also providing an opportunity for children to move in different ways and learn how to use their body. The warm-up games Simon Says, I Can Do This Can You, and Ball Retrieval are great games for teaching body awareness. In all of these games we can ask the children to do different body movements that will improve their body awareness.

How big should I make my coaching grids when I am having the players play a practice game?

This is a great question; unfortunately, there is not one definite answer. How big the grids need to be largely depends on the children and their abilities. The more space there is in a grid, the easier the activity should be for the children. Also, the number of children that show up to practice will influence the grid size. The best way to pick a grid size is to have an approximate idea of big the area needs to be; but to be flexible and willing to change the grid size after the activity starts. For example, look at a warm-up game that has everyone dribbling with a ball in an area. We want the kids to have enough space so that they are successful, but if the space is too big then the activity is not as challenging. With a small space the children have to keep their heads up to avoid dribbling into other players. A smaller space also requires the players to stay closer together so they have to interact with each other more often, which will demand the players change their direction and speed. Observe how the players are doing and then adjust the size if necessary. This same principle would apply to all practice activities (no 5v5 full field scrimmages).

What should I do if I am doing an activity and I have leftover children (for lack of a better term)?

This happens quite a bit. You want to do an activity in pairs and you have an odd number of players. The best way to solve this is to LET THE KIDS FIGURE IT OUT! In today's society kids are told everything to do; how about giving them some responsibility? Nearly all activities that can be done in pairs would still work fine if there was an extra person, see if the kids can figure it out. If larger numbers are involved, say you want to play four versus four and you have nine, what about just playing five versus four. In the game of soccer there will be plenty of times where a team will have a numerical superiority (a lot of teams play with four defenders, four midfielders, and four attackers, if both teams play that system then the forwards are outnumbered by two extra people). Another option would be to have one person play offense the whole time. If possible, we want to avoid having children sitting out of an activity doing nothing.

Why is there so much imagination used in the activities? For example, in Crabs on the Beach the players pretend to run across a beach while avoiding the crabs (players who are on all fours).

The imagination effect is just to make practice more fun for the kids. Telling them to run from one line to another is not all that exciting. However, if you throw in a beach, ocean, and some crabs the activity is more exciting.

When playing a game like Pac Man how many people should start out as Pac Men?

At least two. In Pac Man everyone is running around in an area and someone tries to dribble into the area and pass their ball off of the players running around. If only one player starts off as Pac Man a lot of pressure is put on them to be able to succeed. It is better to start off with at least two people so the pressure of passing the ball off of the people who are running to get more Pac Men does not rest on only one player.

In the past I have always had my players pass the ball back and forth to each other while standing still to teach them how to pass the ball; now, you are telling me that they should never be standing still. How will the kids learn how to pass the ball if they don't learn the skill standing still first?

This again is a very good question. Earlier, we talked about how whatever we do in practice should look like what happens in the game. The game places certain demands on the players; it requires them to do certain things in order to succeed. Therefore, everything we do in practice should prepare the players to meet those demands. In the game of soccer, players do not statically (without motion) pass the ball back and forth. Just because a player can pass the while standing still does not mean that they can pass the ball while moving. To strike a ball while moving players must get a feel for where to put their plant foot based on how fast the ball is moving. While standing still though and striking a stationary ball, players do not have to make that judgment; they can just put their ball right next to ball because it is not moving. When the ball is moving though they have to put their plant foot in front of the ball because the ball will continue to roll forward in the amount of time it takes someone to withdraw their leg and then snap it forward. The players must learn to time their kicks so that the ball is right next to their foot when they make contact. As a result, players should be asked to always be moving while they are passing. When kids start to learn to pass at the age of eight they should be moving all the time, they should never just stand across from each other and pass the ball back and forth.

Should I use exercises over and over or should I have different exercises each day?

I think a combination is good. If there was an exercise the children liked it would be perfectly fine to do it more than once during the season; however, I wouldn't do something everyday. There are a lot of practice games that have been made that require them to use the same soccer skills but in a different setting. Changing the setting (what they have to do, do they have to dribble to avoid being tagged by an evil monster or are they dribbling to get from one side on an area to another, either way they are still dribbling) can make practice more enjoyable for the players. Also, practice games usually have problems that have to be solved. For example, in sharks and minnows the minnows have to dribble from one sideline to another without being tagged by a shark that is in the middle. It is interesting to see how the children choose to solve the problem of, "What is the best way to get across the area without being tagged?" I have seen some kids wait back while their teammates charge forward; the sharks go after those players and

then the players that waited back take off and get across the area while the sharks are distracted. There are ways to “beat” or do better at many of the practice games that require creative problem solving to figure them out. Different games require different problems to be solved. Isn’t that what soccer is anyway, one big problem. How can we, my team, get this ball past 10 other people and then shoot it so that it goes past the goalie into the goal? Practice games, unlike drills, require players to think on the fly and solve problems, a complex skill that will be required when they play “real” soccer.

Do these practice games you talk about do a good job of teaching kids how to play soccer or are they more of a once in while thing to let the kids have fun?

In actuality, practice games do a better job of teaching soccer than any other method. Practice games usually have very advanced soccer skills hidden in them. For example, in Pac Men all the players are running around in an area. Two players dribble a ball into the area and try to pass the ball (below the knees) off of the players who are running around. When hit, a player then has to go get a ball and join the Pac Men. Kids actually love this game, but take a moment to think of the skill required. For the people who start without a ball, they are running, jumping, dodging, and doing all sorts of stuff to avoid being hit (sport specific fitness and body awareness). In the meantime they must also be constantly looking all around to see where the Pac Men are so they will see a ball coming when it is passed (field vision). The players with the ball have to dribble around in the area (many touches on the ball which will improve their dribbling ability) and then pass the ball off of people (they have to pass the ball while they are moving). Because they are hitting targets that are moving, they must dribble and keep their head up at the same time to see targets to shoot at (drills that require players to slalom in-between cones force players to look down so they can see the cones). In addition, the players with the balls must pass a ball so that it hits a moving target (learning how hard lead someone who is making a run). The Pac Men must also use deception so that the people running around don’t know that they are about to have a ball passed off of them (using ball fakes to make people jump and then passing the ball off of them right when they hit the ground). The list goes on and on. A simple practice game like this requires so much from the players in terms of soccer ability yet the activity is extremely enjoyable.

What are elimination games?

Elimination games are activities where players are eliminated from the activity and asked to sit out. A common example is the game knockout. In knockout, every player has a ball and is dribbling in a marked area. Everyone tries to kick everyone else’s ball out without having their own kicked out. This game does a good job of working on shielding and dribbling away from defenders. When someone gets their ball knocked out of the area they are out of the game, they have to go outside the grid and watch. Ask yourself this, this game works on shielding, who’s going to get their ball knocked out first, the players that are good at shielding and or the players that need more work? Because the players that need the most practice get eliminated first in elimination games, they have to either be modified or avoided. I prefer to modify them. Instead of having everyone get eliminated for good when their ball is kicked out, have them do a task

once they get kicked out and then go back into the game. The players play to see who can get their ball kicked out the least instead of who is the last person to get their ball kicked out. Another option would be to have two different grids. Once a player gets eliminated from one activity they should get their ball and go into the other grid. Once they get eliminated from that grid have them go to the first one again. The grids can even be made different sizes as to provide different challenges for the players (the smaller grid should be more difficult to stay in because the players have less space to dribble in).

How long should my practices be and how long should each activity be?

How long your practices are will depend on what age group you are coaching. Under 6's should practice about 45 minutes, U8's about an hour, U10's about an hour and fifteen minutes, U12's and up about an hour and a half. No team should really practice for any longer than an hour and a half. It is important to stick pretty close to these numbers too. Kids can only exercise so long before they "check out" and just can't concentrate anymore. America has a nasty habit of buying into the "more is better" policy. If I practice with my team for an hour then with two hours of practice they'll be twice as good. Due to the limitations of kids though that idea just doesn't work.

With children U12 and down you should have between five and six activities, with each activity lasting around 10 minutes. Each activity should have several rounds, lasting between 20 and 60 seconds. For example, let's say we are playing Pac Man. Each round I may put different restrictions on the players. In the first round I may just let them play. In the second round I may have the Pac Men strike the ball with their left foot only. In the third round I would have them strike the ball with the outsides of their feet only. Placing restrictions on games can bring out a certain effect. As coaches though we must be careful when doing this. As mentioned a couple of times earlier we want what we do in practice to replicate what happens in the game. If we become too specific in our restrictions we can make practice fake. If the players are doing a dribbling exercise and I say they can only dribble with the outside of their right foot, what happens if they need to go to the left? It would be unnatural for them to do a 270 degree turn with the outside of their right foot when they could just cut the ball with the inside of their right foot or the outside of the left foot. To keep this from happening, make sure when a restriction is placed on players they can still play soccer effectively. In dribbling exercises I would restrict them to right foot only, left foot only, soles of the feet, insides of the feet, or the outsides of the feet. I would have the same restrictions for passing exercises as well.

These are some of the most frequently asked questions coaches have had after being exposed to the United States Soccer Federation coaching methodology for the first time. If you have any more questions please do not hesitate to contact me and I'll do whatever I can. Thank you very much.

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