

Fun stuff: Coaching the little ones

Seven guidelines for training and playing with very young players

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All photos this article: Axel Heilmann

Age-appropriate training must be based on the needs, interests, and unique characteristics of the age group in question. Preschoolers are exceptionally curious, with powerful imaginations and a strong urge to play and be active. Their physical skills are just developing, they can't concentrate for long and they get tired quickly.

What does all this mean for coaches at the U4–U6 level? We'll show you in the pages that follow, with guidelines and sample games you can play.

CHILDREN'S SOCCER: GUIDELINES AND SAMPLE EXERCISES

1. Let them play!



- Many children, even preschoolers, don't get enough physical activity in their daily lives. With few outlets for their natural urge to move and play, they spend long periods of time sitting. So it's no surprise that the first things kids want to do after a long, desk-bound school day is run around and let off some steam.
- Therefore, every play session should begin with a period of relatively unstructured play. Provide a variety of balls and let the kids spend a few minutes playing any way they want to play.
- For your first structured activity, you might choose a simple, fast-moving ball game or a game of tag to instantly satisfy your players' desire to play: It's fun and eases their transition to the games that follow.
- Sample game: **Put the balls in the goal**

YOUTH U4–U6

The world our children live in

Thanks to increasing urbanization, rapid growth in vehicular traffic and many other restrictions, kids today have very few truly free spaces available to them. They have little choice but to spend more and more time indoors instead of playing outside in the street.

As a result, many children grow up with very little experience of physical activities and games. The effects of this sedentary lifestyle are clearly visible in the many preschool-age children who are overweight and have poor posture and/or motor skill deficiencies. Counteracting this trend is an essential function of organized sports. And soccer clubs have a special responsibility here, since many children get their first taste of athletics on the soccer field.

Children's soccer today

What we call “children's soccer” spans the U4–U10 age levels and has its own methods, objectives and activities. Coaches at this level must create appropriate opportunities for kids to play and learn. And even the most physically active preschoolers are still just beginning to develop physically; many of them still don't know how to run backwards or hop on one foot, for example.

With so many kids today playing organized soccer before they start school, this age level also represents the first stage of basic soccer training. Physical activity, games and sports can have a huge influence on the development of a young child's entire personality. Fast runners, good catchers and agile climbers get lots of praise. Physically talented children radiate self-confidence and are popular playmates.

Comprehensive movement training

Before they can learn soccer-specific techniques, kids need a broad foundation of general motor skills. However, many youth players have significant coordination problems. Their movements are clumsy and they have trouble tracking a moving ball in the air or even on the

ground. So your first job is to offer your players the widest possible variety of activities, including all sorts of little games and contests.

Many creative activities involving running, jumping, climbing, throwing and catching can be built on the strength of small children's powerful imaginations and intense curiosity. Stories that spark children's imaginations are another great motivator. Try building a game around a story sometime, and you'll see how much fun it is for the kids.

Enjoyment of the game

The most important objective in children's soccer, however, is to have fun playing the game. Kids' first impressions of “training” often determine their level of interest in the sport. By providing an exciting soccer program filled with positive experiences, you can take advantage of children's enthusiasm for sports to instill attitudes and habits that will ensure their long-term emotional attachment to the game. Just remember that for kids to have fun and be creative, you have to give them the freedom sometimes to try things out for themselves.

Playing and practicing with preschoolers

The traditional division of a soccer training session into warm-up, main activity and cool-down is not appropriate for small children. They don't need to start each session with a structured warm-up program the way older children do; for preschoolers, the best way to “warm up” is with a period of unstructured play so they can let off some steam.

You can then spend the rest of the session alternating between little games and various physical activities. Since preschoolers are unable to concentrate on one thing for very long, no single activity should last longer than 15 minutes.

Training sessions at this level should therefore consist of a series of games and motivational activities, which is why we refer to them as “play sessions.” The guidelines on the following pages will give you more tips for training and playing with very young players.

Setup

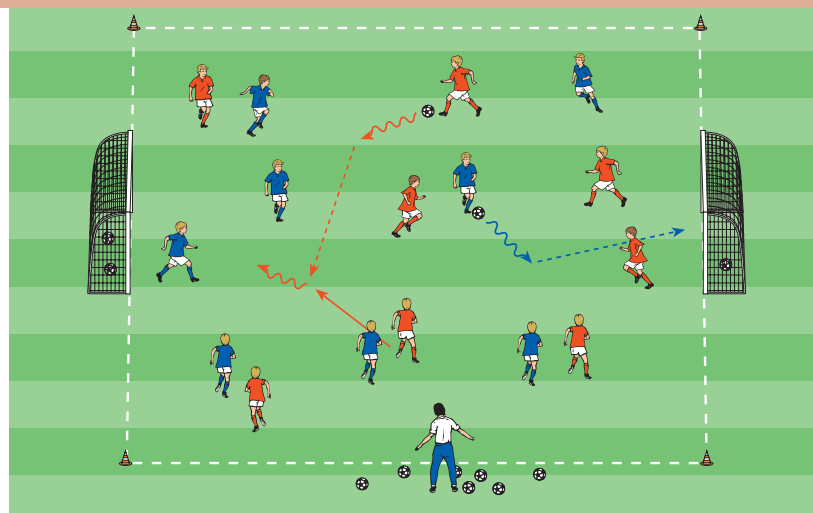
- Two teams play without keepers on a field with two small goals.
- Each team has a ball, and 10 more are placed by the centerline.

Sequence

- If a ball goes out, players play it back into the field. If it goes into a goal, the coach plays in another one so that there are always two in play.
- The game is over when all the balls are in the goals.
- Which team can score more points?
- Play one or two rounds, depending on how long one round takes.

Variations

- Add goalkeepers (coaches, assistants or players).
- Add a third ball.



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2. Tell them stories



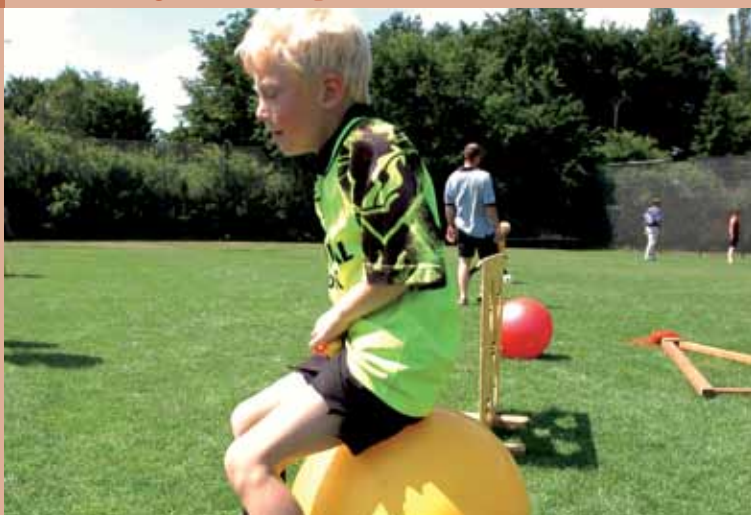
- Children love role-playing, so you should try to incorporate little stories into your games whenever possible. Turn your players into police and thieves, pirates on an exciting treasure hunt or a band of dwarves pestering a giant. This motivates them to participate in a way that taps into their ideas and experiences and sparks their imaginations.
- In the gym, you can create entire worlds with common gym equipment. Let your players climb high mountains (boxes), swing from dangerous cliffs (ropes) or balance on narrow bridges (gymnastics benches). On the field, your best bet is to tell stories in which the players do different tricks (circus), “greet” each other in different ways (trip around the world) or imitate wild animals (trip to the zoo).
- Sample game: **Trip to the zoo**

3. Play with them



- A successful play session depends to a great extent on having a fun-loving coach who praises children, gives them encouragement and plays with them. He can be a funny storyteller, an organizer of fun games and a friendly shoe-tier as well.
- Games and activities in which children compete against adults—and win!—are extremely popular. Pretend you’re a hunter trying to catch rabbits, or bet the kids they can’t score 10 goals against the giant.
- A good acting performance, with well-chosen, age-appropriate words and gestures, makes these games even more fun for kids. Not only is it motivational for them, it shows your own excitement and sense of fun.
- Sample game: **Police tag**

4. Play children’s games

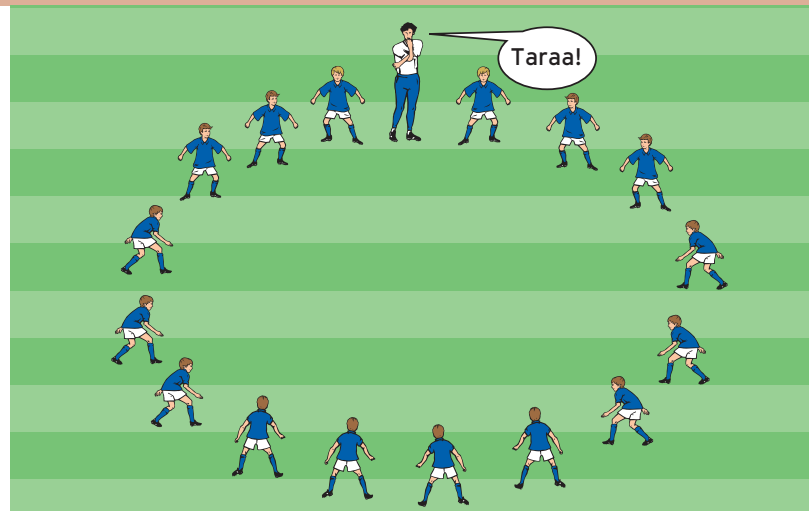


- Many preschoolers are unable to run backwards or stand on one foot, and they have trouble judging distances and orienting themselves in space. Whereas children used to play plenty of games and sports on playgrounds and in vacant lots, today organized sports must fill that need.
- Therefore, an exclusively soccer-specific training program is not appropriate for small children. It’s more important for them to build general coordination by playing tag, running relay races and doing simple gymnastics. Fortunately there are plenty of popular children’s games you can use for this purpose, such as red light/green light.
- Sports equipment can also provide valuable athletic experience for kids. Hop balls, rings, stilts and gym scooters are all great for this.
- Sample game: **Sack relay**

Sequence

The coach tells the story of a trip to the zoo as the kids act out his descriptions:

- The elephants greet each other with a loud “taraaa”!
- The meerkats stand on tiptoe and look all around.
- The cranky lion is annoyed by the noise and walks around hissing.
- The sloths wake up and roll around sleepily on the ground.
- The proud peacock struts back and forth.
- The flamingo is feeling a little shy; he stands on one leg, tucks the other underneath him and lays his head on his shoulder.
- Meanwhile the baby monkeys are loving all the noise; they make funny monkey noises and do one somersault after another.



Setup

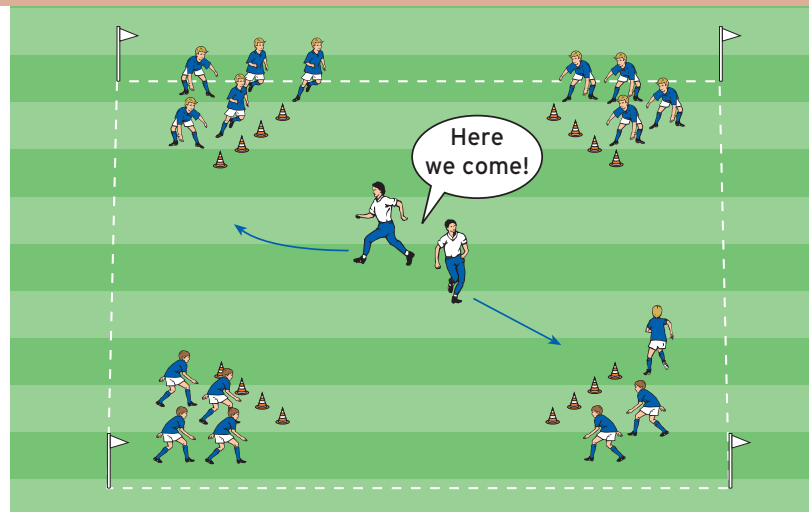
- Mark out a 20 x 20-yard field and set up a “wall” of four cones in each corner. The children are robbers running away from the police (coach and assistant).

Sequence

- The police close their eyes and count aloud to five. Then they call out, “Here we come!” Meanwhile the robbers hide behind the walls, which players are not allowed to run through.
- Robbers who are tagged sit down and get “tied up.” However, they can be freed if two other robbers come and help them up.

Tip

- The robbers should be able to free each other again and again until the police give up in frustration—much to the children’s delight!



Setup

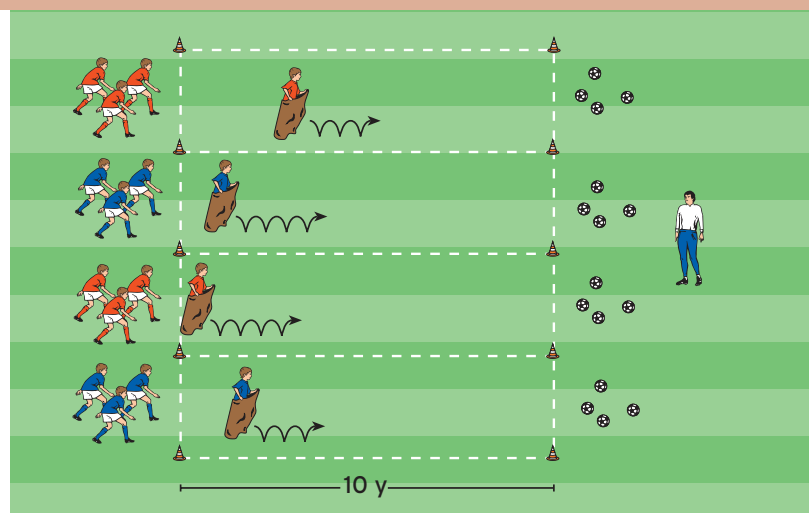
- Divide players into teams of four. Mark out a 10-yard course for each team, with a large sack at one end and four balls at the other.

Sequence

- On command, the first player on each team gets into a sack and hops to the other end of the course. There he gets out, puts a ball in the sack and runs back to the starting point with it, where he gives the sack to the next player.
- Which team is the first to bring back all four of its balls?
- Do three rounds, giving players a new challenge every round.

Variations

- Players hop back with the ball.
- Players hop around a third cone in the middle of each course.



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5. Hold competitions



- Relays and races are always lots of fun. Kids like to test themselves against others, and they love the challenge of a competition. Basic movements, such as running, climbing, crawling and hopping, can easily be turned into exciting races, with changes of speed and direction.
- Of course, exercises focusing on the ball are especially popular. There's nothing quite as exciting as shooting! Keeping track of points or goals adds extra motivation: Who can score the most goals? Which team is the first to score 15?
- Always make sure everyone has a chance to succeed. In children's soccer, that means small groups, short distances and big targets.
- Sample game: **Shooting race**

6. Play small-sided ball games



- Small-sided ball games combine various types of movements, such as running, shooting and throwing. This helps children develop a feel for the movements of rolling, bouncing and flying balls. They learn to stop the ball, run with it and even change directions.
- At the preschool level, ball skills like these are taught mainly through simple ball games and competitions. Mindlessly drilling soccer techniques is not age-appropriate; it's too hard for little kids and it does little to satisfy their desire to move and play.
- For a fun change of pace, you can also use different kinds of balls. Foam balls, tennis balls and soft plastic balls can all be played with feet, hands and heads; you can even use balloons or taped-together wads of newspaper.
- Sample game: **Mountain climbers**

7. Play soccer!



- Of course, every soccer play session also needs to include some soccer! Small-sided games on goals (3 v. 3 to 5 v. 5) are especially exciting. A kid-sized field, lots of touches and short distances to the goal give all players plenty of opportunities to succeed and feed their love of the game.
- However, preschool-age children are unable to focus on any task for too long. If they start getting bored, stop the game and take a little break. A simple variation, a change of teams or a quick shooting contest is all it takes to get them excited all over again. Tournaments in which kids play the roles of their favorite teams or players are especially motivational.
- Sample game: **Card tournament**

Setup

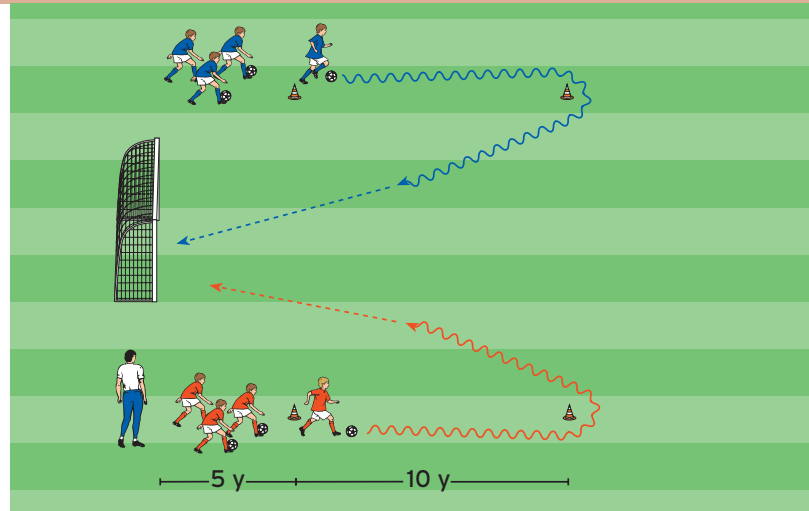
- Set up a shooting station for every eight players (see diagram).
- Divide players into two teams of four, one at each starting cone.
- Each player has a ball.

Sequence

- The first two players take off on the coach's signal, dribbling around the far cone and then shooting from wherever they want.
- If they hit the goal they score one point, and the one who hits it first scores two.
- Play to 15 points and then have the teams switch sides.

Variation

- Players play square passes from the starting cone, then run around the far cone and control the ball or shoot directly.



Setup

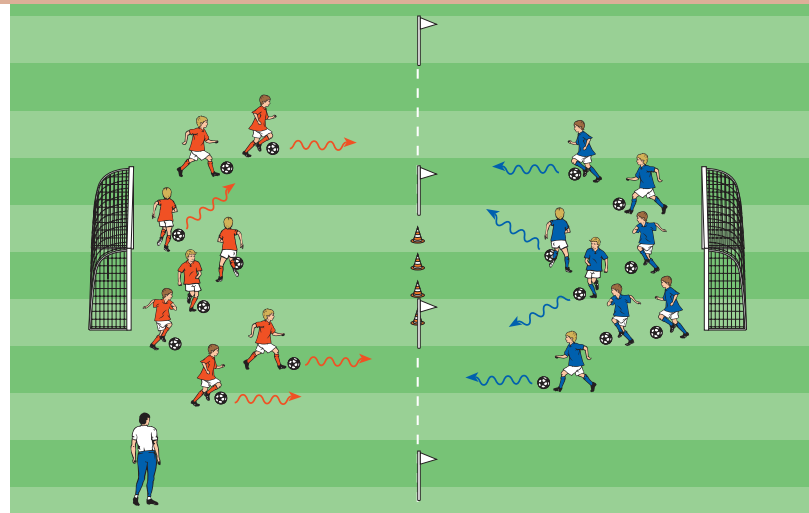
- Use poles to mark out two passageways ("crevices") and cones to block off the space between them.
- Divide players into two teams and assign each to a goal.
- Each player ("mountain climber") has a ball.

Sequence

- At the coach's signal, players dribble through the crevices into the other half and shoot at the goal from wherever they want.
- The first team to get all of its balls into the goal wins.
- Which team is the first to win five rounds?

Variations

- The coach blocks off one crevice so players can't dribble through it.
- Players bounce their balls, then throw or roll them into the goal.



Setup

- Mark out two 20 x 15-yard fields with two mini goals each.
- Put together a deck of soccer cards consisting of 16 players from four teams.
- Each player draws a card and then finds his teammates.

Sequence

- Round-robin tournament: Teams play 4 v. 4 with no goalkeepers.
- Each game lasts three to five minutes.
- The coach keeps track of the scores and announces the champion.

Tips

- Kids love to play the roles of players they admire.
- Soccer cards are available at sports collectible stores, toy stores, comic book shops, etc.

