

Understanding Your Child's Soccer Development.

The development of young soccer players is a very complex issue that is constantly being studied around the world. People doing the studying are often trying to understand not only what contributes to technical and tactical development, but also to mental attitudes towards the game.

In developed countries in past years, children were involved in many more physical activities than they are now. A variety of activities contributed to their motor-skill development, including jumping rope, climbing trees, carrying and throwing and of course daily physical education classes at school. Children learned their soccer skills mostly from older siblings, parents, or simply by watching games, then trying out what they had seen, while playing mostly unstructured pick-up games.

Unfortunately, these natural learning tools have all but disappeared except in developing or under developed countries. In developed countries it has become the job of the coach to try and re-create these situations and activities. Truth of the matter is that there is just not enough time for a coach to do all of these things when he/she typically has two hours per week to work with the child. Most young soccer players do not spend any time playing on their own in an unstructured environment. In reality, to become proficient at even an amateur level, children between six and sixteen should be in contact with a soccer ball daily. Most importantly the love for the game is developed mostly from unstructured free play.

Sometimes, parents do not understand the process of development, and this often leads to dissatisfaction with the coach. The purpose of this article is to look at the roles and responsibilities of all partners in the development of a soccer player.

Let's look first at the different phases of development, and then the types of training and other activities that contribute to proper well-grounded development. It is generally accepted that there are three levels of development, each having a different way by which children learn and develop:

1. 4 to 10 years old – The age of discovery
2. 11 to 15 years old – The age of investment
3. 15 to 17 years old – The age of specialization

The following chart indicates what is expected of each of the stakeholders at each age group.

5-10 Years Old – The Age of Discovery

Player	Parent	Coach	School
Daily contact with a soccer ball. Join in a variety of free play activities that promote basic motor skills and coordination	Encourage physical activity: rolling, tumbling, jumping, climbing, wrestling, skipping. Positive encouragement Encourage unstructured play	Simple, interesting training that allows players to learn by discovery. Use a variety of games and limit drills. Focus on comfort and composure with the ball. Tactical issues, except for 1v1 behaviour should be avoided. Use unstructured play regularly to teach players.	Provided proper physical education classes, including calisthenics, and a variety of sport opportunities

Learning takes place by experimentation and discovery. Children copy what they see therefore it is important that they are painted the proper picture. If the coach cannot paint the correct picture, then a player or video clips should be used. The coach must have patience and allow enough time for players to try things. Attention span is short, consequently practice activities should be varied and interesting, focusing on running with and controlling the ball, and on general coordination.

11-13 Years Old – The age of investment

Player	Parent	Coach	School
Commitment to the sport. Dedication to practicing on their own Desire to improve	Guidance, patience and encouragement. Understanding and communication with coach and club Assist with social development and decision making	Winning is secondary to the development of the player, but nevertheless it is important. Bedding in of technique Focusing on improvement. Education in maintaining the body (nutrition, rest, sleep, recovery methods) Coaching in game-like situations Basic small group tactics introduced At the end, simple large group and team tactics. Use of regular unstructured and structured play to teach Invest in the player’s future by developing the player, instead of the team.	Social development Support for sport of choice. Cross training opportunities (variety of sports)

The investment is made in the development of the individual. The cost may be losing games, or not being consistently at the top of the league table, because putting the children in positions where they will learn may mean that they will make mistakes and possibly lose games. The results doing the correct work during this phase is mostly seen at ages 16-20. The focus is on skill development using repetition, emphasizing on receiving, passing, shooting, heading and defending. Team tactics are kept to a minimum.

14 –17 Years Old – The age of specialization

Player	Parent	Coach	School
Commitment to the sport. Dedication to practicing on their own Desire to improve Mental toughness, ability to work through the pain of hard training	Guidance while “letting go”. Encouragement. Communication with club and coach. Rewards for good decision making	Perfecting individual technique. Game plans and advanced strategies Role- playing in games. Specialized tasks. Advanced strength, speed and conditioning training.	Safe, supportive environment. Recognition of student/athlete. Continue to encourage focus on academics along with sport.

Only at 16 in girls and 17 in boys can winning become the main objective. The coach can now focus on the correction of errors and refinement of skills, and in the later part of this phase more structured tactical practices (as opposed to structured games) can be used.

Once we understand the phases of development, we can see that the coach is not super-human, and simply does not have enough time to do all the things that are listed above. In addition, a coach often has to take a step backward in order to go forward. If the players that he gets are technically weak, yet have been winning by virtue of size, strength or aggressiveness only, the team will probably lose games while the coach attempts remedial work.

Add to this, the fact that when we get the players into the club at eleven or twelve years old, they are typically already two to three years behind in soccer development. The coach therefore has not only to keep up with providing current training, but must also try to rectify the technical weaknesses that are inherent in the players.

The most important help a coach can receive is children that are encouraged to play and practice on their own. According to Thord Grip, the assistant coach of the England National Team, two practice sessions per week are simply not enough to learn the game. Players must be able to play and practice on their own.

If children become proficient in the game, and they learn in a challenging, fun environment, they will stay in the game longer.