

Balls, cones and kids

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It never ceases to amaze me how many youth soccer coaches expect 6, 7 and 8 year old children to be able to play in (and hold) a particular position on the field. The same coaches can often be heard shouting 'spread out!' or 'stop chasing the ball!' and, no doubt, wondering why their players are taking absolutely no notice.

Similarly, I've heard children as young as 5 or 6 described as "a natural defender" or "a striker". Even worse, some young soccer players are labelled as not fit or quick enough to play in outfield positions and are stuck in goal for whole matches - even whole seasons!

In the article below, Curt Brand describes why it is usually unreasonable to expect children below the age of about ten to properly understand the concept of space and movement on the soccer field, never mind positions or 'tactics'.

soccer tactics and young children

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Six and seven year old children will quickly understand that soccer is a game played with a ball. They will more slowly learn that they cannot touch the ball with their hands, become more proficient at the skills you have tried to teach them,



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and run around the field with great enthusiasm. However, they will be much slower to learn the tactical concepts of the game. They are just not developmentally ready for this lesson yet. Having said that, teaching tactics to this age player is not appropriate. Let's talk a little bit about teaching tactics.

Soccer, although it is played with a ball, is really a game of space and movement without the ball. Unlike some other sports, (baseball, for instance), soccer does not really have positions. Rather, players have differing responsibilities which change as the ball and the other players move about the field. In a strict sense, only the goal keeper really has a "position" to play.

In your first game, you will observe that all of the players will chase madly after the ball in a pack. Occasionally, a stronger player will get a foot on the ball and it will pop out of the pack. Instantly, the pack scurries after the ball and ingests it, the ball disappearing within a forest of little churning legs. As the season progresses and the players develop their skills, you can try to teach them some tactical awareness, but don't get frustrated when you discover that they learn these principles very slowly.

Once the players have developed some skill and comfort with simple passing, you can then introduce the concept of movement. A successful pass is made not so much by the player who delivers the ball but, by the player who makes a run to get open. At the six and seven year old level, a good run is any movement which takes the player away from the pack which surrounds the football. After years of listening coaches plaintive pleas of "Don't bunch up", I am convinced that most first and second grade players have great difficulty internalizing the concept that sometimes you chase the ball and sometimes you don't. Save the truly exceptional neophyte, most young players either chase the ball all the time (whether they have a prayer of getting it or not) or never go after it (soccer as an on-the-field spectator sport). Ideally, one player will go after the ball and the

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other teammates will spread out, looking to get open for a pass. Choose the few players on your team who appear to be most advanced and try to teach the concepts of space and movement on the field. You can also yell, "Don't bunch up!" as long as you don't get frustrated when they don't listen. Relax -- space and movement are nine year old concepts.

See also:

[attack the play of 5 and 6 year olds.. or have as much fun as they do!](#)

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