

passing + feints + friends + shots
dribbling + teammates + agility +
fitness + strengt
tactics + g + bent
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confidence + runs + compactness
communication + volley + depth +
rhythm + half-volley + fakes + slic
character + sportsmanship + driv
passion + support + attack + team
combinations + defend + marking
pinching + scissors + trapping + j
analysis + instep + deceleration +
thirds + strength + FUN + PASSION

Part 6

A Parent's Guide to U11/U12

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Created & Compiled for Arlington Soccer Club with Material From
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Part 6: A Parent’s Guide to U11/U12

Introduction

Young players are frequently introduced to skills and concepts that are often too advanced for their skill level and ability which results in an overload of information too early in their development as soccer players. As a result, players fail to develop the foundational skills that are required for future success. While players may be physically capable of executing more advanced, or “impressive” skills at a young age, they rarely develop the understanding and decision making that will allow them to use those skills effectively in later years. Additionally, by failing to focus on key developmentally appropriate skills at the time where a child is most receptive to learning those skills, we are creating holes in the child’s soccer foundation that are likely to create significant challenges down the road when the player is playing at a faster, more intense, and more complex level. Just like a house may look fine on a sunny day, cracks in the foundation will become extremely apparent when the house is exposed to a more intense environment.

By focusing on skills and concepts at the time when a child is naturally best prepared to learn them, we can maximize the efficiency of the learning process, ensure there are no gaps in the child’s soccer development, and ensure that each player experiences soccer as a fun and positive activity. Although it is fun to watch players demonstrate “advanced” skills, it’s essential that we all remember that successful player development is a long-term process, and players will learn the more advanced skills in due time. It is important that as parents you are well informed as to what your child should be learning and at what stage of their development they should be introduced to the various concepts and skills.

Priorities During Development

At each age, children are particularly well equipped to learn certain skills. By teaching players these skills during the optimum window for their development, players are able to learn them in an efficient and effective manner. Additionally, teaching players the skills and concepts that they are best suited to learn allows them to naturally ingrain the cognitive, movement, and behavioural patterns into their play. The table below displays and what the 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th priorities are for the U11/U12 age level. While the first priority is likely to be the focus of much attention, all of the elements will come into play in most practices.

1 st Priority	Technique
2 nd Priority	Tactics
3 rd Priority	Psychology
4 th Priority	Fitness

What Your Child Should Be Introduced To & When

Below is a table of the skills and concepts that should be a main focal point in your child’s training session at the U11/U12 age. The tables focus upon Technical Skills, Tactical Skills, Physical Fitness, Ability & Health Skills, and Psychological Skill/Mental Strength Development.

Technical skills relate to a player’s technique when they are contacting (or about to contact) a ball. The focus on how a player controls (and propels) the ball with different parts of his or her body. Tactical skills are the decision making skills. They focus on cognitive knowledge and understanding of the game, and most importantly making decisions. Players must take in a lot of

knowledge and make quick decisions to be effective soccer players. At the youngest ages, simply being aware of the lines on the field is a complex tactical task. As players age, tactical skills will become much more advanced, including anticipating runs by fellow teammates, identifying space in which to run, and decisions about whether to dribble, pass, or shoot.

Fitness is all about efficiency of movement. It does not merely include endurance and strengthening, but also the critical skills of balance, agility, quickness, and explosive power. Additionally, fitness includes injury prevention strategies, healthy responses to injury, hydration, and nutrition. Finally, psychological/mental strength skills focus on a player’s work ethic, source of motivation, sense of team, handling frustration, understanding of individual and group problem solving, and many other skills that play into a player’s character development. Players who are psychologically mentally strong are able to play against even the grittiest opponents without allowing the opponent’s play to get into their heads. Mentally strong players are also able to remain calm in difficult situations, such as penalty kicks in the final moments of a match. At each age group, players will be primed to learn different skills. During the U11/U12 age group, players are at the optimal stage of development to learn the following skills:

Tactical Skills & Concepts List	Technical Skills List
Principles of Attack	Receiving
Penetration	Receiving a Ball Off the Bounce – Cushion
Support	With the Thigh
Width	With the Chest
Depth	
Principles of Defense	Receiving a Ball Out of the Air – Cushion
Pressure	With the Thigh
Support (Cover)	With the Chest
Balance	Receiving a Ball Out of the Air – Wedge
Compactness	Wedge
Attacking Runs	Receiving – First Touch
Penetrating Runs	Receiving – with Both Feet
Unbalancing Runs	Shooting
Clearing Runs	Shooting the Ball on the Ground
Defending Runs	Bent with the Inside of the Foot
Sliding Over/Pinching In Runs	Bent with the Outside of the Foot
Stepping Up Runs	Shooting Off the Half Volley
Dropping Off Runs	Inside of Foot
Attacking Concepts	Instep
Combination Play on the Move	Shooting Off the Volley
2 nd Attacker Role	Forward Instep Drive
2v2 Attacking	Inside of the Foot

Attacking Third in Thirds	Side Volley
Passing into Space	Scissors Forward
Primary & Secondary Spaces into which to Cross the Ball	Scissors Side
Seams	
Thirds and Channels	Dribbling
Vital Area	Feints
Wall Pass at a Variety of Angles	Passing
Off the Ball Runs	Passing on the Ground
Defending Concepts	Flick Pass
Goal Side Positioning	Heel Pass Straight
Ball Side Positioning	Heel Pass Cross Over
Man-to-Man Defending	Crossing to Near Post and PK Mark
2 nd Defender Role	Half Volley Passing
Defending in Pairs	Inside of Foot
Distance & Angle of Support by 2 nd Defender	Instep
2v1 Defending	Volley Passing
2v2 Defending	Inside of Foot
Pinching In	Instep
Stepping Up	Passing – Short with Both Feet
Dropping Off	Passing – with the Outside of Foot
General Tactical Concepts	Tackling
Arc of Concentration	Slide Trap
Second Goal Area	Slide Tackle – Far Leg
Verbal & Visual Communication	Slide Tackle – Near Leg
Half-Time Analysis	
Playing on/Around the Ball with a Purpose	To Score – Standing or On the Run
Set Plays	Forward to Score Off the Half Volley
Responding to Restarts	Forward to Score Off the Volley
	To Redirect – Standing or On the Run
	Forward to Clear
	Airborne from a Stationary Jump or On the Run
	Jumping Double Leg
	Jumping Single Leg
Psychological/Mental Strength Skill List	Fitness, Ability & Health Skills List

Emotional Management (Self-Discipline)	Health Skills
Fair Play	Proper Warm Up
Parental Involvement	Proper Cool Down
Communication	Nutrition
Self-Motivation	Hydration
Teamwork	Injury Prevention – Sr. Program
Confidence	Fitness & Ability Skills
Desire	Deceleration
How to Learn from Each Match	Acceleration
Mental Composure Skills	Range of Motion
Handling Distress	Reaction Speed
Half-Time Analysis	Strengthening
	Agility at Speed (Sharp Turns)

Player Characteristics at This Stage

At this stage players are better able to judge the flight of a ball in space, allowing for the significant growth in a player’s ability to control a ball in the air with all parts of the body as well as increased tactical awareness. The U11/U12 phase is known as the dawn of tactical awareness as it represents a phase of cognitive development where most players are able to grasp high level tactical concepts and string together timing and anticipation, dramatically improving each player’s ability to see the field and respond to what is seen. Players are now able to sequence thoughts and actions to perform more complex tasks. Children of this age can use abstract thought to meet the demands of the game and should be able to execute simultaneous tasks such as thinking, running, and ball control.

At this stage significant physical differences begin to emerge. As players begin to increase in height, many will experience a temporary loss in proprioceptive awareness (the awareness of the body in space) resulting in a temporary loss of coordination. While this may be frustrating for players, as they temporarily are less able to execute skills they previously executed easily, it is usually quickly overcome as they adjust to their new height. Additionally, you will likely note significant variation among players in terms of size, physical strength and power, social and emotional maturity, and cognitive awareness. During this phase strength, power, stamina, and improved coordination become major factors in performance. Many players who physically mature on the earlier side, notice that along with these positive changes, they begin struggle with endurance. Conversely, players who have not yet begun to physically mature may see themselves outsized by their more mature opponents, but also that they are still able to play with child-like, seemingly unlimited, endurance. All players at this age should be encouraged to partake in agility exercises, strength training, and interval training to maximize their performance on the field

Self-esteem becomes an important attribute as children begin to focus on peer approval rather than parental approval. Hero worship, identification with successful teams and players and a hunger for imaginative skills typify the mentality of this age. This is a time of transition from self-centered to self-critical. Acceptance and belonging to a team can be especially powerful at

this age in helping players to develop their identity. Players of this age have a high arousal level in relation to the training of basic skills, and thus training is likely to be highly dynamic and involved. U11/U12 players are caught up between childhood and adolescence, which can present both problems and potential. Parents will often note that divisions within an individual team can create significant social challenges if not addressed proactively by the coach. Parents should ensure that they help their child to realize that this is an age where there will be variability among players in terms of focus, commitment, drive, and ability, and help their child learn the valuable lessons surrounding working to achieve a goal with others who may have different interests, skills, or motivations. Despite their increased understanding of the concepts of the game, and improved analytical abilities, their match performance will still be inconsistent.

What Will Players Learn During U11/U12?

At U11/U12, players will begin to learn more advanced principles of attack and defense. Between U10 and U11, the field size doubles and the goals increase in size. Additionally, beginning at U11, players will play 8v8, are no longer required to retreat to their defending half for goal kicks, and the offside rule is implemented. These changes increase the tactical complexity of the game. Players will continue to be exposed to all positions on the field, rotating regularly through the various field positions as well as the goal keeper position.

Players will continue to work on keeping possession of the ball as a team, making complex runs off the ball, and using possession as a means of penetrating the opponents’ goal. Anticipation of opponents and teammates movement off the ball becomes an essential component of development and players should be learning to effectively anticipate and respond to these movements. Players at this age are expected to be working to master their ability to effectively control a ball out of the air using their feet, thighs, chest. They will learn to consistently bring nearly any ball under control with only one touch. Additionally, players will be working to develop fluidity of movement while attacking, with combination plays, such as wall passes, take overs and overlaps becoming part of nearly every play on the field.

When attacking, all players will learn to be actively involved in the attacking effort, though each player’s role in the attack will differ based on their assigned position. Likewise, on defense all players should instinctively know to participate, even the players furthest up the field, identifying moments of transition and immediately getting goal-side of the opposing players. Players should have a firm grasp of the role of each position on the field in both attacking and defending by the end of this stage of development. Formations become much more apparent and influential for at this age group, with the addition of a third full line on the field (the midfield line). Players should understand team shape and a need for a balance between attacking and defending.

Players at this phase will also learn about commitment, how to support their teammates, the importance of team relationships, and the connection between hard work and improvement. Coaches should challenge players, increasing expectations while also assuring that the team remains socially united. This will help players to learn the core values and drive required to perform to their potential. Players will also be exposed to new physical demands, including injury prevention programming, interval training, agility training, and strength training.

Why Now?

The U11/U12 age group is a period of considerable cognitive development. This development gives rise to advancing spatial awareness and abstract reasoning. Additionally, significant

psychological and physical changes create new opportunities to motivate players and work with players to adapt to their changing physical abilities.

As a result of their advancing spatial awareness, players are now able to master more advanced technical skills. The ability to track a ball on the ground or off the bounce – where the ball is moving against a solid, immobile backdrop – is now second nature, and players are working to judge the ball in the multidimensional plane of space. This allows them to successfully work to control aerial balls with a variety of surfaces of the body.

Likewise, the advancing abstract thinking ability allows players to build on the concepts of anticipation that were a focus at the U9/U10 stage. For the first time, players at the U11/U12 age group are capable of making the correct decisions and efficiently execute advanced tactical concepts that combine an awareness of one’s self, teammates, opponents and the ability assess the likely speed, timing, and movements as part of the decision making process. The ability to take in and synthesize this information in sequence to make split second decisions is a critical hallmark of the U11/U12 age group.

Psychologically, U11 and particularly U12, raises new challenges as players’ attempt to synthesize social pressures, personal beliefs, and family values as they begin to form their identity. Socially, parents begin to become less influential than peers, while coaches have the opportunity to become an increasingly importance presence in players lives. U11/U12 players are particularly aware of criticism, but also desire to achieve competency in tasks, so it is important that coaches and parents work with players to achieve their goals and adopt a supportive and positive approach to feedback.

Physical changes in this age group are significant, and can dramatically change the dynamics of the game. Players often begin to see the impact of growth spurts on their coordination and a decline in child-like endurance which can temporarily negatively impact their performance on the field. As a result, training pertaining to fitness skills, including agility and acceleration/deceleration, combined with strengthening are key to assisting the player in coming through this phase with a solid physical foundation for the beginning of the next phase of play – the U14 years.

How Do the Skills and Concepts Focused on at the U11/U12 Age Group Fit into Long Term Development?

You as a parent should want to see the long term development. The implementation of developmentally appropriate activities to encourage decision making and increase training demands are evolving in the club environment for this age group. Since sports heroes are a factor in the lives of these children, encourage them to watch high level soccer. The club culture will stress the need for development of the individual player over team building. Baseline testing comes into play. Coaches should emphasize sports psychology concepts, fitness activities, and nutrition/hydration education. Injury prevention should be a part of every practice and pregame warm up.

What Types of Activities Should Be Done At This Stage?

Through the use of game-like activities which allow for trial and error, expose players to the four components of the game (technique, tactics, psychology and fitness). The training activities are maze games and target games, using body awareness games for warm-up and cool-down. Small sided conditioned games should be the focus of the training session. As a parent you should see the likes of repetition of a certain technique within a fun environment. For example,

if the team were working on a step over with the ball, the coach may set up a session where the players are in pairs. One with the ball one without and to start with the play without the ball is acting like the defender whilst the one with the ball is the attacker. Now once the attacker does a step over, he/she has to run to a cone before the defender tags he/she. You will notice that your son or daughter will stay focused because of the competitive element of the session.

Another key activity you should see is the team learning the offside rule and how to play using this as part of the soccer game. It will be something the coaches will work on and it will be something that may take the players a bit of getting used to.

What are the Rules of the Game?

At U11/U12 the game switches to a more formal setting with has a more tactical aspect to it, made even more so by the introduction of the offside rule. Team sizes at this phase are 8v8 and play on a reduced size field with reduced size goals. The offside rule, is when a player is caught nearer to the opponent's goal than both the ball and the second-last opponent (including the goalkeeper) when his/her team-mate plays the ball to him or her. In other words, a player can't receive the ball from a team-mate unless there are at least two players either level with him/her or between him/her and the goal or unless his teammate plays the ball backwards to him.

What is the Parent's Role in Player Development at This Age?

The role of a parent during this age group is one of support and acceptance. Ultimately players do best when parents are accepting of their needs, wants and desires and do not try to force their own aspirations on their child. Social pressure and peer's opinions will become more the predominate influence. Your child will now be looking to make decisions for themselves so don't let your thoughts and feelings dictate what they actually want to do as a player. At this age a lot of children will play soccer because they love the sport and are passionate about it, others will play because it's a social interaction with friends. Both are equally important but let your child do it for their own reasons. Parents are still actively involved as players at this age are not yet truly independent, however ideally players are encouraging to take on those tasks which they are capable of handling on their own.

What's Next?

For U11 players, the game will remain the same next year. They will continue to play in this format throughout the U12 (6th grade) year. There are generally no rule or field size changes at the U12 year, and teams for the most part remain the same from U11 through U12.

U12 players will move up to the U14 age group, a mixed age group made up of 7th and 8th graders. Teams are typically mixed with a portion of 7th and a portion of 8th graders playing on each team. For many players, this is their first experience on a mixed grade team, which – while sometimes initially overwhelming – sets the stage well for high school play. Nearly all games will be refereed by three-man crews, with two linesmen and one center referee. Players will also be moving to the full sized, 11v11 field which is roughly double the size of the 8v8 field. As a result, rosters will grow, and teams will change. As players enter into the U14 game, they will continue to enjoy a similar environment to what they experienced during the U11/U12 years. The focus is still fun, players still rotate through all positions, and teams continue to build comradery and skill as players grow and develop.

Conclusion

The end of the U11/U12 age group ends the childhood phase of player development. At this point players should have a solid technical skill set which will allow them to execute on the field at the higher levels of play. The majority of technical development from this point forward will be refinement of the skills already learnt. Tactically by the end of this age players have a solid foundation of basic tactical knowledge and the ability to utilize tactical skills within a game setting. As they move forward they will begin to understand more complex tactical concepts and further develop their awareness as they enter the 11v11 field. Physically, as U11/U12 concludes, players will become accustomed to their bodies leading to regaining the coordination lost during this awkward phase. Psychologically, the U11/U12 age is frequently a challenging one, but the relationships and social bonds formed within a team can be key to helping players feel a sense of belonging. As players move forward to U14, they will begin their journey into the more grown up team environment, however the fun, enjoyment, and the life skills that are at the core of player development will remain central in their experience with Arlington Soccer Club.