

Part 6

A Parent's Guide to U5/U6

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Part 6: A Parent’s Guide to U5/U6

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 what the 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th priorities are for the U5/U6 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 | Fitness |
| 2 nd Priority | Technique |
| 3 rd Priority | Psychology |
| 4 th Priority | Tactics |

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 U5/U6 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. Physical 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 U5/U6 age group, players are at the optimal stage of development to learn the following skills:

| | |
|--|--|
| Fitness, Ability & Health Skills List | Technical Skills List |
| How to Warm Up | Shooting |
| Nutrition | Ground – Inside of Foot |
| Hydration | Dribbling |
| Foundational Skills | Start & Stop |
| Balance | Running with the Ball |
| Bending, Twisting & Reaching | Shielding |
| Running | Tackling |
| Hopping | Possession - Block & Hold |
| Jumping | Dispossession – Toe Poke |
| Skipping | |
| Starting & Stopping | |
| Changing Direction | |
| Rolling | |
| Psychological/Mental Strength Skills List | Tactical Skills & Concepts List |
| Fair Play | Principles of Attack – Penetration |
| How to Play | Principles of Defense – Pressure |
| Sharing | Which Goal to Shoot At |
| Parental Involvement | Playing the Ball, Wherever it May Go |
| Emotional Management | Comprehending Boundary Lines |

Player Characteristics at This Stage

Players in this age group are egocentric; me, my, mine mentality. Young children do not play together in the athletic context at this age; they play next to one another, meaning they do not necessarily interact as they play. This psychosocial reality is called parallel play. In soccer, this is most evident in the U5/U6 age group and still occurs to a lesser degree in the U7/U8 age group.

Players in these age groups swarm around and go after the ball because it is the only toy on the field. While they may understand the concept of sharing in other settings, they do not yet have the cognitive ability to think about others in the midst of the game. Sharing requires a degree of

empathy –awareness of what other people around them might be feeling –that has not developed yet. Figuring out where the ball is, where they are, and how to get the ball all while moving around, exhausts their cognitive capacity – they are not yet able to concern themselves with the more advanced concepts of determining where others are located on the field, whether those others might also want the ball, and then how to get the ball to the other person. This is a multistep thinking process that is beyond the cognitive capacity of U5/U6 players, and as a result passing (sharing) the ball is nearly exclusively the result of chance, not intentional action.

Likewise, any player who does not have the ball will likely be engaged in the defending effort, trying to get the ball, regardless of whether his “teammate” is the one with possession of the ball. The positive result of this is that players have the opportunity to begin develop dribbling skills – as when they have the ball, not only will players on the other team be working to get the ball, but their own teammates will be trying to steal it as well

What Will Players Learn During U5/U6?

At this stage the objective is to learn all fundamental movement skills by building overall motor skills. In terms of motor development, cognitive development, and social development, generally there are few differences in the capabilities of the players within this age group. Individual and small group play is essential for both touches on the ball and learning at their own pace. The emphasis should be on letting the children play. Prior to a player being expected to learn ball skills the child must first be in control of the body. This growth in athleticism is a long-term evolution. It is imperative for children to acquire a base of general balance, coordination and agility before they attempt to master soccer specific skills. The U5/U6 age group will be largely focused on helping players to develop this critical foundation for movement that will allow them to ultimately manipulate not only their bodies but also the ball effectively and efficiently.

Why Now?

“Why now?” may be a question on your mind as you consider your child’s development. By exposing players to skills and concepts at the developmental window where they are most physically and cognitively equipped to understand and absorb the concept, we can maximize a player’s long term potential. It is important as a parent that you fully understand ‘why now’ and how it will impact your child’s growth and learning. It is essential for youngsters to be exposed to movement education. The foundation of movement education must be laid during early childhood. This requirement is of primary importance to the youngest players, with soccer specific skills taking a secondary role. Soccer should always be a fun and enjoyable environment for your child to foster a desire to play. This intrinsic motivation will grow a passion for the game that could last a lifetime.

How Do the Skills and Concepts Focused on at the U5/U6 Age Group Fit into Long Term Development?

The fascination for the ball, the desire to master it and the thrill of scoring goals provides the launching pad into a lifetime of soccer participation. The joy and skills of the game are best nurtured by encouraging freedom of expression and organizing children’s play in small groups. This is the fun phase where a passion for the game must be sown.

What Types of Activities Should Be Done At This Stage?

As a parent you will notice as your child develops through the soccer world, he or she will be involved in many different types of activities. Each of these activities is aimed at helping your child develop his or her skills and abilities. Game-like activities and trial and error situations allow children to be exposed to the components of the game and the principles of play. The primary training activities at the U5/U6 level are body awareness activities and maze games. The sessions will be player-centric with the coach acting as the facilitator. You will see your children participate in games that are not always tailored to have a ball. Some games will be without a ball, giving the children more time to concentrate on what is around them or understanding open space or different types of movements with their body. You will also see sessions where the children will have a ball but are using bodies parts beyond just their feet to manipulate the ball. The sessions that you will see at this age group are created to let your child have freedom and focus on their innate interest in self-discovery within a fun and positive environment.

What are the Rules of the Game?

Games at this stage should be unstructured, pick-up style, team sizes at this stage should be 3v3, rotating players frequently. It should not resemble the exact format of soccer as this is the first stages of your child’s development playing as part of a team. To force players to play “soccer” as we understand it at this age would be a disservice to their development. Our objective at this age is to provide children with an environment designed to allow them to develop their foundational movement skills, social skills, and instil in them a passion for the game that will last for many years to come.

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

The key roles as a parent at this age group is to let them just enjoy it without any direct opinions about how they played, what was good/bad. You as a parent should support your child by encouragement and have enthusiastic attitude to support and encourage your child, no matter where your child is developmentally. A player’s ability on the field at this age is not indicative of his or her long term success. Players develop physically, socially, and cognitively at different rates. Pressing your child to view soccer as anything other than a fun opportunity to enjoy running around outside is unlikely to have the results you are hoping for and is very likely to have a negative impact on his or her long term development. We cannot control the rate of development for players, particularly at this young age, however as a parent your positive, enthusiastic, and encouraging approach to your child’s participation can have a substantial impact on whether he or she develops a love for the game that will encourage participation for years to come.

You as a parent can support the team coach by getting your child to practice on time not only that you can also offer any help towards sessions or just being an extra body to help with things like tying laces. Lastly you can not only support your child on the field but also off the field. You can provide them with a healthy balanced diet as well as talking about the game at home or even watching soccer as a family. Your role is equally as important off the field as a coach’s role is on the field in instilling a love for the game in your child.

What’s Next?

Players in U5 will progress to U6, which follows this same model for player development. After U6, players will graduate to the U7 program which, like the U5/U6 program is a clinic format that emphasizes skill development through age appropriate games and activities. Players will learn the basics of dribbling, shooting and team play in a fun and engaging way. At the U7 level, enthusiastic professional coaches lead sessions alongside ASC coaches that focus on introducing players to age appropriate skills and concepts through activities that energize and engage the players.

The emphasis of the U7 Clinic is on building skills and a love of the game rather than winning and losing. We do not keep score during the games nor do we keep standings. In a relaxed environment, we celebrate developmental successes, cheer for both teams, and create a foundation for good sportsmanship and a desire to participate and grow. The U7 Clinic is held on Sunday afternoons 1:00pm – 2:30pm.

Conclusion

The U5/U6 age group is one that should be full of fun and smiles. It is a two year period during which players will have their first experiences on a “team” playing a game together with others. Players at this age are in the infancy of their development as soccer players. It’s imperative that we avoid the “too much too soon” attitude that so often leads us to put competition and a desire to “get ahead” in front of the long term interests of a player. It takes the full attention capacity of an U5/U6 player to control their bodies, never mind the ball, because they are still developing basic balance, coordination and agility. Prior to a player being expected to learn basic ball skills the child must first be in control of the body.

Attempting to push a player to develop skills beyond those that are appropriate for his or her age group is highly likely to create long term skill deficits that cannot easily be resolved in the later years. The drive that it takes to participate in athletics, whether at 5 years old, 10 years old, 15 years old, 20 years old, 30 years old or older, comes first and foremost from enjoyment of the game. Players will not develop a love for the game because they are pushed to focus on which of their skills need improvement; they develop a love for the game because they receive some type of joy from participation. Preserving this joy will help to ensure that the player develops not only the skills, but the intrinsic motivation to continue his or her development as a player for many years to come.