

Part 6

A Parent's Guide to U7/U8

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Part 6: A Parent’s Guide to U7/U8

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 U7/U8 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	Fitness
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 U7/U8 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 U7/U8 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 on the Ground
Penetration	Cushion – Inside of Foot
Support	Wedge – Sole of Foot
Width	Shooting
Principles of Defense	Inside of Foot
Pressure	Toe
Support (Cover)	Passing on the Ground
Attacking Runs	Push Pass
Supporting Runs	Toe Poke Pass
Defending Runs	Chip Pass (Introduce)
Recovery Runs	Clearance
Closing Runs	Throw-Ins
1v1 Attack – Choosing to Dribble or Pass	Standing – Flat Feet
Comprehending Boundary Lines	Standing – One Foot Flat & On Toes of Other
When to Dribble and When to Pass	Moving – Plant Feet
Passing to a Teammate	Moving – Drag One Foot
Back & Forward Lines	Dribbling – While Changing Direction
Named Positions	Other
2v1, 1v2, & 2v2 Games with a Purpose	Ball Lifting
Promote Problem Solving	Juggling
Psychological/Mental Strength Skill List	Fitness, Ability & Health Skills List
Working in Pairs	Regular Warm Up
Creativity	Nutrition
How to Play	Hydration
Sportsmanship	Foundational Skills
Dynamic Activities	Agility
Parental Involvement	Bounding
Promote Problem Solving	Catching/Throwing

Emotional Management (Self-Discipline)	Eye-Foot & Eye-Hand Coordination
	Leaping
	Pull/Pushing
	Tumbling
	Balancing

Player Characteristics at This Stage

At the U7/U8 age group players will like to show off their newly learnt skills and will seek approval. Many players are beginning to develop some sort of self-confidence which can be aided by the approval of parents and coaches. Both genders of this age are psychologically and physically developing at a similar rate and role models become an important factor as they will begin to imitate sporting heroes or role models in their life. Like in the U5/U6 stage, children are still very sensitive and will dislike failure in front of peers and will take ridicule from coaches, parents and fellow players to heart. The attention capacity for this age group is still limited to one task at a time. They are quite rightly focused on the ball. In a 4v4 match the opposition for the player with the ball is generally 1v7 even though partner play is now emerging. So during a match, the players need to focus on the task at hand, trying to control the ball.

What Will Players Learn During U7/U8?

Carrying on from the U5/U6 stage the emphasis on movement education and body awareness continues with this age group and is expanded to involve even more activities with the ball. These activities should include eye-hand and eye-foot coordination games. This is essential to overall coordination and a well-rounded physical fitness approach. At this stage it is ideal to introduce skills with either foot as the muscle movement patterns are a clean slate. Ambidextrous skill is certainly a goal for a coach committed to player development. Players are shown that passing is another option to dribbling. This is not just a technical objective but a psychosocial one since the basis of all teamwork is cooperation between partners.

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. The foundation of movement education begins during the U5/U6 stage and becomes increasingly complex during the U7/U8 age groups. Players will begin to be regularly exposed to activities that require them to control both their bodies and the ball. Children in the same age group still play predominately as individuals and occasionally with a partner. You will see a number of activities where the players are together but are still involved in individual play. This age group prefers individual activities, but it is possible to successfully get them into activities where they can work in pairs.

How Do the Skills and Concepts Focused on at the U7/U8 Age Group Fit into Long Term Development?

Characteristics such as parallel play and learning to share with others are passed at the end of the U7/U8 age group. Players still need encouragement to share and appraisal for trying. Allow them to work with teammates to solve a challenge, starting with one and partner progressing to

multiple partners. It’s important for parents to realize that it is OK to play swarm ball at the U5/U6 and U7/U8 age groups. Swarming the ball is actually helping players to improve their dribbling skills and decision-making ability. Six, seven and eight year olds are starting to understand what it means to play a game. They are beginning to cooperate more with their teammates. In fact, they are just now beginning to recognize that they even have teammates. This development of this awareness manifests on the field as players begin to occasionally pass the ball to a teammate purposefully. Players at this age now have an idea of the game with regard to scoring or preventing goals, but the emphasis still needs to be placed upon the individual’s ability to control the ball. They are still there to have fun, and because some of the players may be new to soccer, it is imperative that activities are geared toward individual success and participation. Ideal activities for this age group are those where the players are together, but still involved in both individual and partner play.

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. Many U7/U8 activities will be done in pairs to promote communication, cooperation and the conceptualization of soccer principles. Using game-like activities, which allow for trial and error, exposes children to the components of the game. The key training activities are body awareness and maze games. Introduce a few target games too. They need to touch the ball frequently during fun activities that engage them. Small-sided games are still undoubtedly the best option for these players. Not only will they get more touches on the ball, but it is also an easier game to understand. Like U5/U6 the training session must be player-centered with the coach as a facilitator.

What are the Rules of the Game?

For the U7 age group, games continue to be unstructured, pick-up style. Teams will typically play with four players on the field, playing with four players from the other team, and rotating players and subs frequently. It should not resemble the exact format of soccer, as it is still only designed to begin to introduce players to the game and expose them to concepts such as boundaries.

At U8, for the first time matches begin to resemble soccer as we know it. Team sizes should be 5v5, rotating players in and out of the game frequently. Teams play on half of a 6v6 field with regular 6v6 nets. There should be no emphasis on the score at this age. The role of the goalkeeper is introduced and a referee will govern the game. The rules at this age are very straight forward to many adults, but are complex to the average U8 player. If the ball goes out of bounds across a side line (the long side of the field), the team that did not touch it last gets to throw the ball in. The thrower must keep both feet on the ground. If the ball goes out of bounds across the end line, it will either be a goal kick – if the attacking team is the team that kicked it out of bounds, or a corner kick, if the defending team is the team that kicked it out of bounds.

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

The key role of a parent at this age group continues to be that of a cheerleader. Building a passion for playing and learning soccer should still be the primary objective. Let the players enjoy the experience 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?

Moving from U7 to U8

The U8 league is a soccer program for second graders. Girls and boys play on separate teams and in separate programs. At this level, the kids get to experience and play a “real game of soccer” for the first time. The objective of the program is to provide an opportunity to play and learn the game of soccer in a relaxed atmosphere without having to travel to other towns. Teams consist of players with varying skill levels and are competitively balanced before the fall season based on input from the prior season’s U7 coaches. Scores are tracked by the U8 League Director during the fall season to create a competitive game schedule in the spring, however they are not posted and parents and coaches are still encouraged to minimize the importance of the score. The schedule consists of 10 games per season starting in early September (Fall Season) and early April (Spring Season). Teams typically practice once a week and play games on Sunday afternoons.

Moving from U8 to U9/U10

All Arlington Soccer Club U9/U10 teams are single gender and play 6v6, with five “field” players and one goal keeper. Players at U9 have the option to try out for a select “travel” team, which plays in the Boston Area Youth Soccer League (BAYS), or to participate in the In-Town league program. All players receive a full “kit” (uniform) at this age, consisting of a numbered game jersey and practice jersey, socks, and typically also shorts. The schedule consists of 10 games per season starting in early September for Fall and early April for Spring.

U9/U10 BAYS: Beginning at the U9 age group, players may participate on Select Teams – chosen through tryouts each spring for the following year. Players must tryout every year. Select teams are a two season (Fall & Spring) commitment. Players who make a select team participate in the BAYS program. Teams in this program are comprised of players of roughly equivalent skill and compete against teams of a similar level from other towns. ASC teams play five of their BAYS games in Arlington and five at the opposing teams’ fields. These teams have rosters of 10 players and practice twice a week. Teams also typically participate in multiple tournaments.

U9/U10 In-Town: All players who do not make a Select Team, or who do not try out, are assigned by gender and age to a U9 or U10 team that plays in our In-Town (non-travel) league. The objective of the program is to provide an opportunity to play soccer without having to travel to other towns. Teams are comprised of players with varying skill levels on each team. All games are in Arlington, or occasionally Lexington. Rosters typically vary between 9 and 13 players. U9 and U10 Girls teams have games on Saturday mornings. U9 and U10 Boys teams have games on Saturday afternoons. In-Town teams practice once or twice a week. Some In-Town teams also elect to participate in tournaments. The spring In-Town season ends with a large and exciting In-Town festival.

Conclusion

Players in this age group will seek praise and attention for their newly acquired skills. They will want to feel approval and most children will be strongly drawn to the success factor. Meaning, if they feel successful and receive encouragement for their successes, they will be driven to continue to engage in soccer, thereby continuing to develop. Players at U7/U8 will develop their coordination enabling them to better control their body movements. For this reason, technical development will become increasingly a focus of training sessions and players will begin to demonstrate their ability to manipulate the ball using their bodies.

Watching a U7/U8 training session may not look much like the actual game of soccer or traditional “drills,” this is fine and is exactly what you should expect. You should begin to see players passing the ball more at this age, though it will still be rare. The U7/U8 age group is where an understanding of what soccer is as a competitive game begins to develop. This isn’t to say the competition of it is what matters, but players will understand what it is to win, lose and play as part of a team. Movement education is still a high priority with some late developers lagging in some fundamental physical literacy. Remember, you play a key role of your child’s enjoyment; do not put pressure on your child to score/win/play to your expectation. Instead, encourage him or her to have fun with his or her friends and do his or her best.