

Key Concepts

Let's look at some key concepts for coaching this age group:

- **Forget about coaching these players.**
You need to play with them. Don't stand around shouting instructions. Put on your athletic shoes, and relive your childhood. I tell my counselors, "If you're having fun, the kids are having fun."
- **Change is good.**
In fact, change is mandatory. Players of this age can go from having a great time to being bored in a split second. Be prepared with a lot of different activities. While the older kids in my camp do stations for 15 – 20 minutes, the 4- and 5-year-olds will need to change activities 2 or 3 times during the same duration.
- **Be flexible.**
As an adult trying to relate to a group this age, everything will not go according to your plan. Watch the players, and react to their needs. Often you will just have to tweak your game a little bit to get the results you want. It is also good to have an "old standby" activity, one that they love. Throw that activity into the mix when your players lose interest or get bored. Use that activity to reel them back in and raise their enthusiasm.
- **Players this age do not like to share.**
Have them bring their own ball to practice. Provide activities in which each player can use his or her own ball.
- **Chaos is good.**
Think about the game that these kids play. Your league may play 3v3 at this age. Despite what the jersey colors indicate, the game is usually played as 1v5. One person has the ball, and the other five are trying to take it. Forget the structured "drills" where everyone stands in line and dribbles through cones, one at a time. Create activities where everyone goes at once, and it is complete mayhem! The kids will have more fun, and you will create a more realistic, game-related environment.
- **Passing is too advanced.**
I see coaches all the time trying to teach really young kids to pass. While passing is a fundamental part of soccer, there is really more to it than meets the eye. Players have to be able to play the ball accurately and with the appropriate pace. They have to be able to play with their head up so they can find their teammates. Receiving players need to be able to handle a pass. There are positional considerations as well. All that is too much! Focus your efforts on dribbling and kicking. You will prepare them well for passing in the future.

- **Don't worry about proper technique.**
Soccer books and videos will show you that the most common kicking technique uses the inside of the foot. Try getting a 4-year-old to do that! They may do it, but it will be at a robotic pace. I promote showing kids this age the technique but allowing them to play however they are most comfortable. If they see the proper technique enough, they will apply it when their coordination and confidence allows them.
- **Use practice time to develop skills.**
Use game time to teach the game. Most programs for kids this age allow the coaches on the field during the game. There is no better teacher of the game than the game itself. However, during the game there is only one ball, and kids have to take turns playing. Therefore games are not ideal for skill development. Use your practice time wisely.
- **Don't worry about positions.**
Teach your players to spread out and not steal the ball from one another. While you're not emphasizing passing, spreading the players out will, at the very least, allow more space for the person with the ball to dribble. As time goes on, players will start to figure out some passing for themselves. You likely won't see terrific displays of combination play, but you'll begin to see a pass here and there.
- **Learn your players' names very early and use them often.**
I am normally terrible with names, but when it comes to my players, I listen intently, and I know their names within minutes of starting the first practice. Learning names quickly shows your players they are important, and it quickly breaks the ice and creates a familiar environment for them.
- **Coach with Common Sense and Sportsmanship.**
One thing drives me crazy when I watch young teams play. That is when the ball goes out of bounds, and the coach of the defending team crowds the team with the ball. The next few minutes are spent with the ball going back out of bounds, and play is constantly restarted. Be a sporting coach, and back up your players to allow the opposing team to get the ball back in play. It demonstrates good sportsmanship and increases the quality of the game for both teams. Nobody has fun chasing the ball out of bounds.

Practice

Those concepts are fundamental elements of understanding how to coach in this age group. Now let's examine what to do.

Skill Drills

Below is a list of practice activities that will help you create an environment that is fun and promotes the development of your players' dribbling and kicking skills.

- **Kick the Coach**

This is an all-time favorite of the players and really has great value. The coach runs around the field. The players dribble their balls and try to hit the coach with them. When you get hit, yell "OUCH!", and watch them crack up laughing. This activity sounds silly, but it makes the players dribble their balls and shoot them at you while it is moving. Usually kids like to stop the ball and kick it when it is stationary. The nature of this game makes them kick it when it is moving. They also have to keep their heads up and react to your changes of direction. This game is a great "old standby" because it is fun and requires no setup time.

- **Cone Pickup**

In this game you will lay out cones in random fashion on opposite sides of the field. I prefer doing this across the width of the field. When you say "Go," the players have to dribble their balls and pick up as many cones as possible. The rule, however, is that they can only get one cone from a side at a time. Therefore, they have to dribble back and forth across the field to get their cones. All the while they will have to be watching out for other players and looking for available cones.

- **Red Rover**

You may have played this game when you were younger. The players line up on a sideline, each one with his own ball. You stand in the middle and call, "Red Rover, Red Rover, come on over." The players then try to dribble to the other side while you try to tag them. You can add to this game by having those caught players join you in the middle, and repeat the process until everyone is caught.

- **Freeze Tag**

The players dribble around while you try to tag them. If you do tag a player, he or she must sit on the ball until a teammate tags him/her and frees him/her.

- **Animal Calls**

Players dribble around in a defined area. When you call out an animal, they must stop their balls by placing a foot on top of the ball and then make the noise of the animal you named. When you say, "Go," they begin dribbling again and the process repeats.

- **Body Parts**

This game is very similar to “Animal Calls,” except that while the players are dribbling, you call out a body part and each player must stop his ball with that body part. You can start out by calling “foot,” and they stop the ball with their foot. You can then call, “left foot” or “right foot.” Progress to “knee,” “elbow,” “head,” “belly,” and everyone’s favorite, “bottom.” This is a great icebreaker at the beginning of a practice and is terrific for your first practice with a new team. It will get kids and parents alike laughing.

- **Gates**

This is a much better version of the old “dribble through the cones drill.” Scatter pairs of cones around the field, each set representing a gate. When you say “Go,” the players try to dribble through as many gates as they can before you say, “Stop.” I really like this activity because all players can go at once. I also like the fact that players aren’t following a prescribed pattern. After each gate there is a decision to be made, “Where do I go next?” They must look for other gates and also look out for other players.

- **Parent Keepers**

Use a similar layout as the “Gates” activity, except that the sets of cones should be wider. The cones now represent goals and you can recruit parents to stand in each one. The players then dribble around and try to score on the different parents. They can score from either side of the goal, so they can sneak up behind the parent goalies. This activity is one that you will have to observe and be flexible. If you see players only going to their own parent, make a rule that once they score on a goal, they have to go to another goal.

- **Relay races**

These can be as simple as dribbling around a cone and coming back. You can get more creative as well. Make sure the relay teams are small. I like to keep them to two or three players. Here are some other ideas:

1. Lay out cones for them to weave through.
2. Have them crawl to a point, pushing the ball with their head before getting up and dribbling the rest of the way.
3. Place a big target in the middle of the field, such as a trash barrel. Have the players dribble to it and hit the target with their ball before returning to give the ball to the next teammate.
4. When exchanging the ball with their teammate, have them dribble behind the person and play the ball through their legs.

- **Rapid Shooting**

Stand in the center circle with all the players. Each player hands you his or her ball. You then throw it toward the goal, and they chase it and kick it in the goal. They then retrieve their ball and return to the circle for another shot. The restriction you apply to this activity is that they must shoot with their first touch. Aside from getting a lot of kicking repetition, this will also help get them out of the habit of always dribbling the ball into the goal. You can also add to this activity by calling out which foot they must use to shoot.

Competitive Drills

Those are just some of the games you can play with your players. Use your own creativity to expand this list for yourself. As your players get more comfortable, you may want to introduce a little competition into your practice activities. Here are some ideas to add a little competition.

- **1v1**

Stand on the end line of the field with the players, beside the goal. Call out two players' names and throw out a ball. They must go after the ball and bring it back to shoot on the goal. Whoever scores wins, so the players are playing against one another.

- **Keep Away**

Players are paired up with one ball between them. When you say "Go" they must compete with their partner for the ball. After about 30 seconds say "Stop". Whichever player has the ball wins.

- **Team Keep Away**

Split the group into two teams, and have them line up on opposite sides of the field. Put an odd number of balls in the middle of the field. When you say "Go," the teams compete for possession of the balls. When you say "Stop," whichever team has the most balls wins.

Summary

Have a great time with this age group! Once you acclimate yourself to the players, you will enjoy the experience as much as they do. Keep in mind that your success is largely defined by the excitement you instill in your players.