

GENERAL POINTS AND PRINCIPLES

Safety

Although soccer is generally a very safe sport and serious injuries are rare, there are at least several areas to consider, including lightning, lost players, and goalpost injuries.

The presence of any lightning during a practice or game is cause for immediate departure from the field. All players and other personnel must go immediately to a safe location (building, vehicle, etc) without stopping to pick up stray gear.

The coach must keep track of all players and be sure they do not wander from the field area without express permission and the company of a responsible adult or, in the case of short trips to the restroom or concession area, a player "buddy." At the end of the practice or game, the coach must make sure all players are accounted for and have transportation home. **DO NOT LEAVE PLAYERS UNATTENDED AFTER PRACTICES OR GAMES!**

Goalpost injuries are the most common serious injuries in youth soccer, either from players hanging on crossbars and tipping goals over, or collisions with goalposts. Instruct all your players to never climb on goalposts or nets, and remind them of the need for caution when running or diving in the goal area.

Learning and Fun

At this point in a young player's career, the most important things beyond safety are that the experience be fun and educational. Our goal is to instill a love of the sport and knowledge of its skills in as many players as possible, regardless of natural abilities. Individual player development must take precedence over winning games, and the coach should be a supportive teacher and mentor, not a dictatorial slave driver. Emphasize the positive. Give lots of praise and keep criticism to a minimum. Many of today's coaches learned the game through a series of monotonous drills plus scrimmages and games, but the modern approach to soccer coaching emphasizes keeping everyone moving and learning via a series of fun, progressive games that teach the player to think creatively, adapt and develop. The more young players stay active, touch the ball and experience varied situations, the better and happier players they will become, hence the advice "No lines, no laps, and no lectures."

Practice Days

Practices are a time to learn new technical skills and improve old ones, improve physical conditioning and increase the player's knowledge of the game and decision-making abilities. A good coach will recognize the areas where the players need to improve and design each practice around one or two basic themes, such as "Improving passing accuracy," "How to channel an opponent away from your goal," etc. A typical practice begins with a greeting, perhaps brief announcement of "Today we're going to work on..." followed by some individual skills or warm-up games, progressing with small-sided (2vs 2, 3vs 3, etc.) games that teach a certain skill or skills (how to move off the ball and get into position to receive a pass, how to take the shot quickly, etc) and ending with a more full-team game or scrimmage. Use practices

to gently correct errors and in particular praise and reward players when they succeed, and end the practice on a positive note, making sure players know when and where you will meet next.

The Day of the Game

Winning is fun and it is difficult sometimes to control our own drive to win, but we must. To begin with, during pre-game talks, avoid heaping expectations on players and avoid giving complicated tactical advice. It's fine to say "Have fun!" "Keep your head up!" or "Beat them to the ball!" but avoid lengthy, stressful directives like "Now, you know number 8 has a strong left foot, so you've got to double team and channel her to..." etc. Most players this age are very excited at game times and will do better with a soothing, calming approach that helps them relax and think clearly.

It is also very tempting to give extensive sideline advice during play, but research has shown over and over this rarely helps. The players are too focused on the game, often don't even hear what you say, or can easily become confused between their teammates calling for passes and their coach yelling "Go left! Drop back! Pull up!" etc. Better to limit your sideline comments to encouragement ("Great pass!" "Way to go!" etc.) and save the advice for practice times.

One of the most difficult parts of a game can be deciding on substitutions. It often helps to have a rough substitution plan sketched out beforehand, and even to dedicate a coach or assistant to keeping track of the time and how long the various players have been either in or out of the game. Although we do not insist that every player play exactly the same number of minutes per game, in general we feel every player should be in at least half of the time, that every player should sit out on occasion, and that no player should sit on the bench for long periods of time only to be put in the last few minutes of play.

No matter what happens during the game the coach must stay calm and professional. Both players and referees make mistakes. This is part of the game. You must avoid making disparaging remarks about any player or official's performance and encourage your players and parents to do likewise. At the end of the game pull your team together to first cheer your opponents and shake hands, then have a short debriefing in which you congratulate them on the things they did well, especially their teamwork and sportsmanship, and downplay the actual score.