



Bring on the fun!

Age-appropriate development activities for U6-U8

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Drills might seem to be the direction to go with U6 and U8 players because it's easier to control their space, time and environment. The result, however, is that players repeat the same exercise over and over again, and not necessarily correctly. The activities may not fit their ability level, and they may not be very fun either.

For all these reasons, drills are often perceived as repetitive, boring, overly structured and overly controlled. This is not what youth players are looking for from the game of soccer! When you're that age you want to run, jump, fall down, laugh and have some possibility of making decisions while you play.

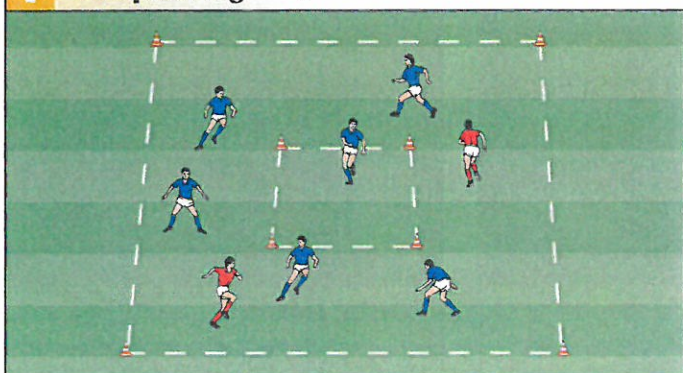
Training activities should be structured to bring out the game in the child from the U6 level to U12, on the basis of physical, cognitive, psychological and sociological research. Armed with this information, coaches can better prepare themselves to meet the needs of young players with appropriate activities. This is something that should be built into every practice session and worked on throughout the year. Plan your practice sessions in advance and in detail. Like any teacher, you must decide what skills will be introduced during the year and in what sequence. This requires you to do some seasonal planning. Young players see the ball as a toy to play with, which is part of the reason why they all

want to have the ball at the same time. A U6 game that is set up as a 3 v. 3 may actually look more like a 1 v. 5. If we can understand why our U6-U8 players are fascinated with the ball, we can better plan our practice sessions to meet the needs of this age group.

Our players may become more interested in the game if we can nurture them by encouraging freedom of expression and organizing their play in small groups. This will bring out the best game each child can play. Players can't hide in small-sided games. If practice sessions are organized to fit players' needs with age-appropriate activities, players' technical skills and decision-making will improve.

WARM-UP

1 Hospital tag



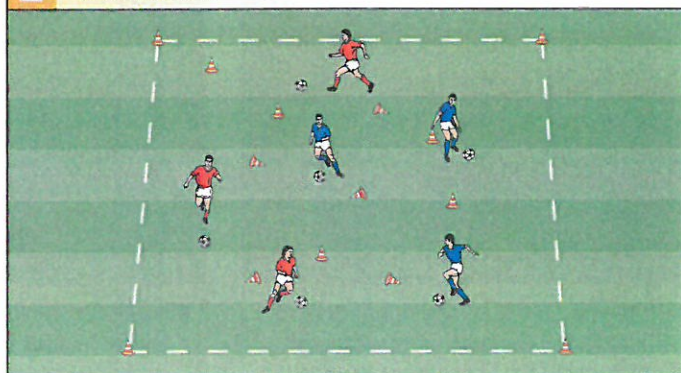
Setup and sequence

- Mark out an appropriately sized field with a small square in the middle (the "hospital").
- Two players are taggers and the rest are runners.
- If a runner is tagged on the shoulder, for instance, he has to hold his shoulder with one hand until he runs into the hospital to be "healed."

Variations

- Each runner has a ball, or each tagger has a ball.
- Each runner and tagger has a ball.

2 Minefield



Setup and sequence

- Place several cones as "mines" in an appropriately sized field.
- Divide players into two teams. Players dribble in the "minefield."
- One team scores by laying cones on their sides; the other scores by setting them up again.
- Which team can score more points in 30 seconds?

Variations

- Players have to dribble around cones before touching them.
- Players can also use their balls to knock their opponents' balls away.



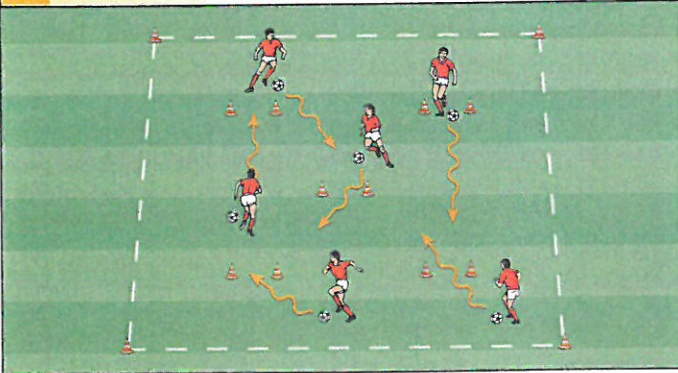
COACHING TIPS AND ACTIVITIES

- Pick two warm-up games (one without a ball and one with). For instance, you might choose "Sharks and minnows" or "Freeze tag" to get players enthused and having fun, and then "Red light, green light" as a simple exercise with the ball. (Because these are commonly known games, they are not shown in this article.)
- Get players comfortable with using both feet and make them look up to be aware of what is around them.
Activity: All players dribble inside a set area. When the coach calls out a certain body part, players stop the ball with that part. Later the coach simply points to the part on his own body.

- Teach players to play without bumping into each other.
Activity: Stop players when a few are close to each other. Have them extend their arms out to the sides and twist gently from the waist. If they can touch another player, they are too close!
- Introduce the concept of shielding and turning.
Activity: First use hands: Players form pairs with one ball per pair. One partner tries to keep the ball away from the other. The only rules are that the ball has to remain on the ground, and players can only maneuver it with one hand at a time. If the other partner touches the ball with his hand, possession changes!

DRIBBLING AND PASSING

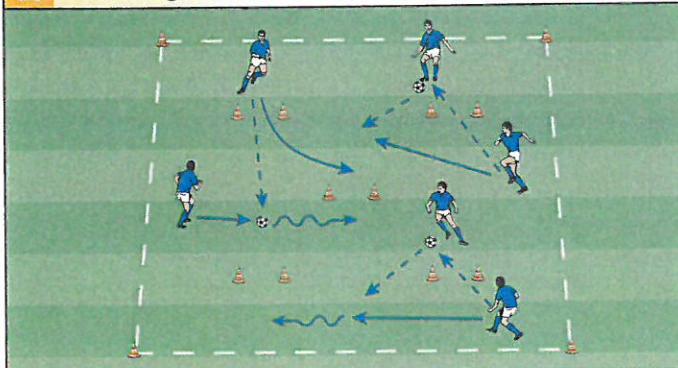
1 Dribbling windows



Setup and sequence

- Mark out an appropriately sized field.
- Using cones, create a number of "windows" inside the field.
- Players dribble inside the field.
- Players are not allowed to dribble through the same window twice in a row.
- To score, two different players have to dribble through the same window.
- How many points do all players score together?

2 Passing windows



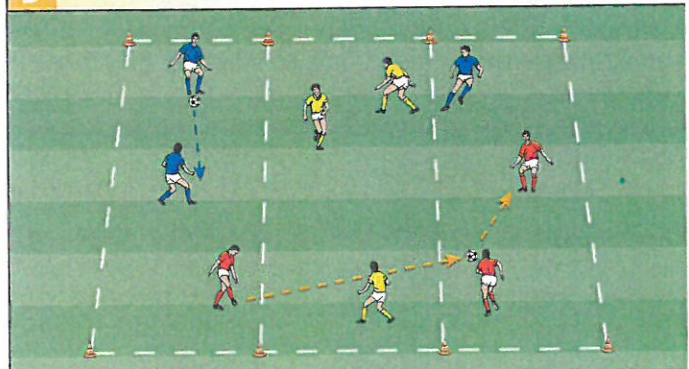
Setup and sequence

- Setup is the same as above. Each pair of players has a ball.
- Partners score by passing through the windows.
- They may not pass through the same window twice in a row.
- How many points do all players score together?

Variations

- Passes with the weak foot or the outside of the foot count double.
- Divide players into three teams. How many points can each team score in 30 seconds? Deduct points if balls collide.

3 Crocodiles on the Nile



Setup and sequence

- Mark out a 10 x 30-yard field.
- Divide players into three teams of three; each team has a ball.
- Two teams try to pass their balls back and forth across the "Nile River" (middle of the field).
- The third team's players ("crocodiles") stand in the river and try to intercept passes.
- Teams rotate every minute.
- Coach counts number of interceptions.



COACHING TIPS AND ACTIVITIES

- Introduce a simple body fake or trick.

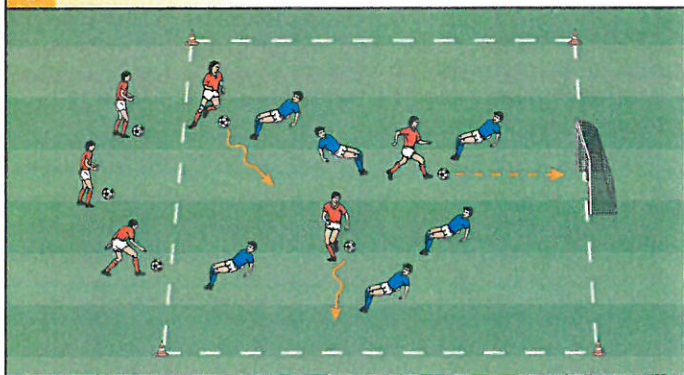
Activity: Get all participants to stand three steps back from the ball to learn the foot positioning first before complicating things with the ball!

- U6 players usually are not psychologically ready for passing to their teammates. They are still in the mindset of parallel play—each is playing a separate game in his head. Still, it's never too early to give them a concept, as some will get it, and it may then begin to rub off on others in their peer group. Most U8 players who have played before are ready for the concept of passing to a teammate.

- To introduce finishing, the coach stands between two flags (the goal). Players dribble in and try to kick the ball into the goal. Of course, the coach lets most balls in!
- Then progress to other finishing games.
- Players should spend about a third of each session scrimmaging in the format that they will play in season. For the younger kids, this will be 3 v. 3 or 4 v. 4. If you have an odd number, play 3 v. 4 or 4 v. 5.
- The coach is the “boss of the balls,” serving balls into play until they are all out of play.

FINISHING AND PLAYING THE GAME

1 Crab soccer



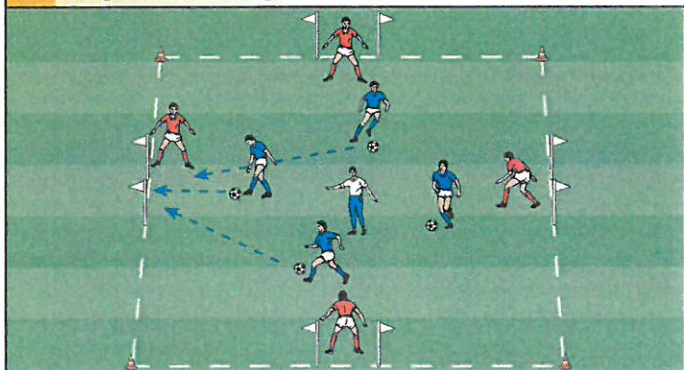
Setup and sequence

- Mark out an appropriately sized field with a goal at one end.
- Divide players into two teams.
- One team stands on the endline opposite the goal. Each player on this team has a ball. The other team crawls like crabs inside the field.
- Attacking players have to dribble around the “crabs” to score. If successful, they retrieve the ball, run back to the starting line and try again.
- Teams switch roles after one or two minutes.

Variation

- The team inside the field stands upright and acts as defenders.

2 Open/closed goals



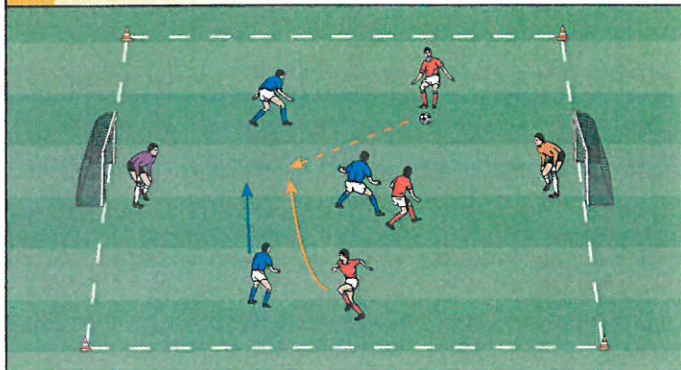
Setup and sequence

- Mark out a 10 x 15-yard field with flags marking a goal on each endline and sideline.
- Divide players into two teams of three or four.
- One team acts as gates, opening and closing goals at the coach's command. The other team's players have one ball each and try to score on the goals as they open.

Variation

- Players have only one ball and pass until a goal opens up.

3 3 v. 3 or 4 v. 4 to goals



Setup and sequence

- Mark out an appropriately sized field with one goal on each endline.
- Divide players into two teams of three or four.
- Teams play 3 v. 3 or 4 v. 4.

Variations

- Play smaller games (1 v. 1 or 2 v. 2).
- Play a small tournament with three teams.