

# **Basic Coaching Concepts for Players Under the Age of Nine Individual Technical and Tactical Issues for U-7's and U-8's**

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## **Contacting the Ball**

**How many ways can the player kick or dribble or control the ball?** There are six surfaces (inside, outside, instep, sole, toe and heel) used for kicking, dribbling or controlling a soccer ball. The ball can also be driven, chipped, volleyed, half-volleyed, side-volleyed, curled and lofted. The U-8 player should be challenged to expand their range of surfaces in an ongoing process of technical experimentation, with half-volleys and techniques for bending the ball least likely to appear at this age.

**Is the player two footed?** Juggling and dribbling practice should always involve the use of both feet and young players must be encouraged to experiment with all six contact surfaces. For the more motivated players, juggling, kicking and Coerver's\* are essential "homework" activities for developing a comfort level with the ball.

\*Coerver's are individual dribbling moves named after the Dutchman, Wiel Coerver, who created the training program.

## **Passing**

**Does the player purposely pass the ball towards teammates?** Players should be asked to control the ball and look for teammates rather than imply kicking the ball forward or to safety. It is often necessary to remind young players that the goalkeeper is always the most open player to pass to when they are under pressure and no obvious forward passing or dribbling options are available. At this age, the "thinking" behind a passing decision is often more telling than the outcome and young players must be encouraged to attempt to maintain possession by passing (or dribbling) even as their limited range of techniques fail them.

**How far can the player kick the ball accurately?** Players should be encouraged to pass within their technical range. Technique, physical strength, and the size and weight of the ball all impact kicking distance and accuracy. In the small-sided games environment, shorter passes should be expected and encouraged, with aimless "boots" to safety, or to the opposition regarded as wasted possessions.

**Does the player use disguise and deception when passing?** Encouraging more frequent passing (and dribbling) with the outside of the foot will help improve the level of subtlety in young players.

### **Shooting**

**Does the player shoot, when possible?** A player's first thought in possession should always be "Can I score a goal from here?" Goals in practice should be wide and high enough to encourage shots from various distances and angles, and coaches should reinforce to players through their practice activities that the objective of the game is to score more goals than the opponents in the time allowed. Soccer games and other activities with no stated "outcome" are less motivating than activities that provide a way to win.

### **Ball Control**

**How many touches does the player take to control the ball?** The earlier a player decides what to do with the ball, the faster they will play; however, virtually all U-8 players will not look up before they have secured possession because their skill level will not allow them to concentrate on two things (the ball and the next action) at once. Time, space and repetition are the most important elements for improving comfort level and reducing the number of touches necessary to control the ball.

### **Dribbling**

***Does the player have the skill to dribble out of pressure, or past an opponent?***

Dribbling practices should include activities that encourage children to use changes in pace and direction to maintain possession or beat an opponent. While presenting a variety of moves to young players certainly has long-term benefits, creating a positive attitude towards dribbling is a more important element to coaching U-5/6's. As the most artistic aspect of soccer, young children must not be discouraged from learning to dribble the ball through early and repeated failures.

***Does the player run into open space with the ball?*** Running forward with the ball is important for making defenders commit to the ball, for shortening passing distances, for changing the rhythm of play, and for creating shooting possibilities. Players must be encouraged to quickly dribble the ball into open space, with the outside of the foot recommended as the best technique for improving "speed dribbling."

***Does the player dribble with their head down and rarely look to pass or shoot?*** While it is important to encourage young players to quickly dribble the ball into open space, past an opponent, or away from an opponent, players must also be aware of their passing and shooting options. Given that the ball can travel faster when kicked, it is important to encourage dribbling players to look up during those moments when they are in open space and not touching the ball, and when they are momentarily clear of opponents.

***Does the player use disguise and deception when dribbling?*** The most difficult opponents are "wrigglers" who are unpredictable in their dribbling. Players should be encouraged to combine dribbling moves and become comfortable making multiple, abrupt changes in direction.

### **Heading**

***Does the player head the ball?*** Heading becomes more likely by ages nine and ten and, while casually practicing with lighter balls can help overcome some of the initial fears associated with performing this “fear” skill, heading should not be an important aspect of coaching U-7/8 players. It should also be stressed that there is NO credible medical evidence supporting the claim that heading a soccer ball is dangerous to the participants.

### **Support**

***Does the player move with the game or do they pass and stand still?*** Young players should not be restricted in their movements on the field, and moving should become a natural extension of passing. Passing to other players should be expected and encouraged at this age, although dribbling the ball is still the most likely method of advancing the ball.

***Does the player move into open spaces when not in possession?*** Instruction that limits young players to a particular area of the field does not allow for the natural emergence of supporting positions and angles that become so important for positional play in later years. For all players under the age of eight, positional coaching is irrelevant and detrimental to their fun and enjoyment. Rather than be told what position to play, young players should be encouraged to “find” new supporting positions away from teammates so that passes can be exchanged. Smaller teams eliminate the need for an organized midfield, meaning that one or two well-intentioned passes can often result in a teammate being played through to goal.

***Is the player aware of the position of teammates and opponents?*** Most young players have little or no visual awareness of their immediate surroundings, and, in particular, the proximity of teammates and opponents not directly in front of them. Receiving passes when facing away from the opponent’s goal is a difficult skill, even for accomplished players, and most children will not look up until they have received the ball, secured possession, and turned to face forward. Often, young players will simply let the ball run past them into what they hope will be open space.

### **Defending**

***Does the player try to recover the ball when possession is lost?*** “Defending” at this age should be no more complicated than encouraging the children to try and win the ball back when possession is lost. Any emphasis on “team” defending, or scolding individual players for not getting back when the ball is lost, is detrimental to the fun and enjoyment of the players. Because players should be encouraged to move forward when attacking, there will be many situations when no one is at the back of the team when the opponents gain possession. This should be anticipated as a natural aspect of play for young children and one reason why scores are usually higher in small-sided games.

***Does the player simply kick at the ball when an opponent is in possession?*** Tackling for the ball can and should include efforts to regain possession, but slide tackling to dispossess an opponent is dangerous to both the attacker and defender and should not be

allowed until U-10. Defenders should be encouraged to try to dispossess opponents rather than simply kicking the ball away, or to safety.

### **Transition**

*Does the player mentally transition after a change in possession?* When the ball turns over from the attacker to the defender or from the defender to the attacker, the game offers chances to demonstrate awareness of two very important concepts: immediate recovery of the ball and immediate counter-attack to goal. Players should be assessed on how well they understand these concepts and encouraged to react as quickly as possible to any change in possession.

### **Creativity**

*Does the player improvise when solving tactical problems?* Those players who use non-standard techniques to solve tactical problems are demonstrating signs of creativity. A “good” pass gets to its target at a pace that can be controlled, regardless of the technique used in the delivery; similarly, a goal is a goal, regardless of how it was propelled into the net. Young players who improvise should be encouraged, not scolded, and it must be remembered that for young players, the “thought” behind an action is generally more telling than the outcome, which is often limited by experience and technical range.

