

U-10 and Below Organization & Soccer Format Option

Some Advantages of Soccer School or Academy Format

- Two-year combined age groups allows for dealing with larger numbers and the ability to form more teams for play dates and outside competition i.e. 6/7 year olds playing together creates a larger pool of players for both training and competition
- When participation numbers may be an issue, small associations can / should be encouraged to work together and form cooperative academies. Locations for training and game play can be rotated / alternated to even the travel burdens
- Flexibility to secure special events rosters using any of your U-10 players registered to your association to participate in tournaments and help participants satisfy need for any outside competition
- View Academy Formats as “soccer schools” and players as “soccer students” where they all have the right to be exposed to the same lesson plan but they have the ability to participate at their own level of understanding and commitment just like in a math class
- Emphasize more fun and learning with peers and expand their network of friends while building a bond to the association or club

Soccer School or Academy Format Concept

An academy format is primarily an in-house developmental concept for players. The goal is to develop highly skilled and competent individual players that can experience the game emphasizing the “process of becoming a player” in an age appropriate environment. After graduating out of academy programs players have the option to move in two directions: 1) Move into recreational programs - and experience soccer in a casual training environment, or 2) Be better prepared to fill competitive “classic” teams at U-11 and above age level as the team concept becomes a more appropriate emphasis for skilled players.

Academy programs aid in player retention and individual player development as opposed to the “team forming” model that excludes players too early who are not considered talented enough to add to a team roster. Academy formats are appropriate for young soccer players’ development since the focus is on player improvement vs. team improvement or accomplishment. Academy formats do not have the short-term goal of winning a game at ages U-10 and below. In this format, the role of the soccer associations, clubs, and youth coaches is to develop players first. Then at U-11 and above start to incorporate the technically gifted and sound players into teams that can compete and win with increased skills and flair.

The premise of academy training is that “player development” is what is in the best interest of young players. It is at this young age that a player needs to learn the skill sets in order to ultimately play soccer at a higher level. The Academy format offers this special vehicle.

The Academy concept is a common global program and is practiced in Brazil, France, Holland, and England, among many other countries. In addition, in Africa and many Latin American and other similar countries "street futbol" and unsupervised soccer is a fundamental Academy format from which the best players are developed without a team construct.

Academies in Practice

- Every player should have an age-appropriate soccer ball at every session (either brought by participant or provided by association)
- The greatest benefit of an academy format is that at every training session and on every play date no player sits out of any portion of the activity. If the session last 60 minutes every player will experience 60 minutes of soccer
- Open to all players U-10 and below (U-12 would be encouraged also)
- At all times academy training and games can and should be mixed ages U-6 through U-10, as well as a mixing of genders, based on ability.
- Combined age groups could be set up to include 4/5 year olds, 6/7 year olds and 8/9/10 year olds
- Another unique feature is to encourage an adult or older player to play on the field with the youngest age players so 3 + 1 adult v 3 + 1 adult to model good play, passing, and spacing. Young players learn from playing with an experienced player not by being coached into good play (much like in pick-up neighborhood games, a younger player learned and was challenged and able to model an older more experienced player's skill set)
- Three to five training sessions per week is the ideal (no less than two)
- For new academy programs one or two trainings per week with a non-mandatory play date on the weekend might be the best start
- Training is conducted by qualified coaches who understand how to teach very young players in the development of individual skills through fun, competitive, age appropriate demanding skill building and small game activities. This is not a place for inexperienced parent or novice coaches; they could be helpers but they should not have main responsibility for these programs.
- Duration of training 45 minutes to never longer than 90 minutes
 - 20 - 30 minutes dedicated to skill or technique development i.e. dribbling moves, ball control issues, shooting, chipping, etc.
 - 10 - 12 minutes coordination, speed, agility, physiological development (running, jumping, turning, skipping, etc)
 - 30 - 45 minutes small-sided games: Free play and creativity being the emphasis over positional play and rigid structure or too many restrictions on play and movement.
 - Free play game format: Teams are formed as players arrive and stay together moving from field to field for four or five games on the day or teams are re-formed at the conclusion of each game and the process continues.
 - Using small goals or flags allows flexibility to play, 1 v 1, 2 v 2, 3 v 3, 4 v 4, 5 v 5, and probably no larger than 6 v 6, 7 v 7, on each field
 - 4 v 4 formats: teams are formed on the field each session by placing 4 players in red vest and 4 players in blue vest and then they play a 10 - 12 minute game.
 - Field sizes should be based on US Youth Soccer and US Soccer guidelines for field sizes that match age and playing format size recommendations
- In a typical three training session per-week model a different technical theme could be emphasized each night and a different playing format (i.e. Tuesday 3 v 3, Wednesday 1 v 1, Thursday 5 v 5) could be utilized each night for variety and maintaining player excitement and interest
- Ideally clubs and associations can begin with 15 - 25 academy players on their books and build to larger academies of possibly 70 - 100 players or more.

United States Soccer Federation's perspective of small-sided games

Why Young Players Should Play Kid-Sized Games...

Training and playing in soccer games with numbers that match the developmental abilities of the players derive the following benefits.

- Players repeatedly experience similar tactical situations
- Players are more likely to be actively engaged in the sport
- There is more freedom from stifling positional constraints and players have more opportunities to experience different positions
- Players are regularly involved in attack and defense
- Players have more frequent transitions between attack and defense
- Proportionally smaller fields are more suited to the technical limitations of young players
- There is more emphasis placed on skills and understanding than fitness



- More goals are scored and goal scoring is highly motivating
- More players have the chance to score a goal
- There is more emphasis placed on individual and group possession
- There are more opportunities to be technically and tactically successful
- The game is easier to coach at all levels
- Individual player personalities have a chance to emerge

Empirical Support for Small-Sided Games Study #1

The following data were collected in a 2002-2003 study conducted for Manchester United Football Club by Dr. Rick Fenoglio, a lecturer in Exercise Science at Manchester Metropolitan University. Fifteen 4v4 and 8v8 games were videotaped and analyzed for the study. The players observed were primarily U-9 boys.



Passes	+135% or 585 more passes in 4v4 games
Shots Taken	+260% or 481 more shots in 4v4 games
Goals Scored	+500% or 301 more goals in 4v4 games
1v1's	+225% or 525 more 1v1's in 4v4 games
Tricks, Turns, Moves	+280% or 436 more tricks, turns, and moves

United States Soccer Federation Age Group Playing Format Recommendations

Age Group	Number of Players	Field Size & Goal Size	Ball Size
U6	3V3 no goal-keepers	40 yard length 25 yards wide H: 4 ½ by W: 9 feet Hockey Goals	Size 3
U8	4V4 no goal-keepers	40 yard length 25 yards wide H: 4 ½ by 9 feet wide Hockey Goals	Size 3
U9/10	5V5 + goal-keeper	70 yard length 50 yards wide H: 6 ½ feet by 18 ½ feet wide	Size 4
U11/12	7V7 + goal-keeper	100 yard length 65 yards wide H: 7 feet by 21 feet wide	Size 4
U13 and older	10V10 + goal-keeper	110 yard length 70 yards wide H: 8 feet by 24 feet wide	Size 5

Occasional Outside Competition

- As age appropriate 4 v 4, 5 v 5, 6 v 6, or 7 v 7 through 11 v11 format as appropriate to skill level
- Once a month form teams from your academy to go participate in a tournament.
- Attend ASSA sponsored academy festival days where clubs and association form and send academy teams to participate in four to six games not for trophies but for game experience where method and style of play is as important as the outcome. Advertise as soccer family-fun events.
- Set-up games with other academy programs where each club brings two or three teams and everyone plays four or five games.



US Youth Soccer Total Player Development

Edited by Dr. Thomas W. Turner on behalf of the
Region II Coaching Committee Fall 2006

The Evolution of the Competitive Soccer Environment

The following information offers recommendations on the appropriate ages for competition in youth and adult soccer.

A word of caution

What are generally good and reasonable recommendations for young players are often tempered by the negative attitudes and behaviors of the adults surrounding the game. For players in the U9 through U-12 age groups, in particular, the naturally healthy response to competition is being questioned at the highest levels in light of the win-at-all costs attitude displayed by many coaches. This pressure is amplified at the pay-to-play levels, where results influence revenues. In addition, the subtle and not-so-subtle emotional pressure to perform exerted by parents has brought, and continues to bring, the wisdom of the following recommendations into question: all too often, it seems, adults are forgetting the true value and purpose of youth sport.

U-6 Local Soccer-Related Activities Including 3 v 3 Games

Rationale: Entry-level soccer programs should focus on broad motor skills, general sports skills, and informal soccer games.



U-8 Local 4 v 4 Matches in Play Day Format

Rationale: Second and third year players are too young for formal league play and structured teams. Group training and competition provides for motor skill development, soccer training, and non-threatening competition in small numbers.

*Children who have not reached Piaget's third stage of cognitive development (concrete operational-ages 7 to 8) are unable to think about more than one thing at a time.
Joy Butler and Barbara McCahan, Educators.*

U-9 Start of 6 v 6 Non-Competitive Play

Rationale: Eight year-olds, typically with three to four years of sports experience behind them, are approaching the cognitive age where formal team play becomes relevant and necessary. However, the introduction to competitive play is often marred by the attitude of parents and coaches who do not understand long-term athletic development and who are misguided in their demands and expectations. It is therefore strongly recommended that U-9 play be non-competitive and that no standings are kept or championship awards presented.



As children enter the age group of 9 - 11 years, they begin to see the difference between ability and effort. By the age of 11, a perceived failure has a more significant impact on sporting self-confidence, because these children are likely to attribute it to a lack of ability. Based on this outcome of perceived lack of ability and the high drop out rates that may result, it may be concluded that adult-structured competition and organized sport are not necessarily beneficial for children.

Lynn Kidman, Educator

U-9 is generally the age where communities and teams begin the dangerous process of try-outs. It is strongly recommended that no cuts are made at this time and that all players in an age band are trained together with the same coaches. Further, with the evolution of the club pass system, it is strongly recommended that players be freely moved between teams as ability, availability, and enthusiasm dictates. This Academy development approach is recommended for players between the ages of 8 and 12.

U-10 Start of Formal 6 v 6 Competitions, Including League Play and Tournaments

Rationale: The start of the period known as the First Golden Era for player development is an opportune time to begin formal competition. In general, players are starting to spread out and play within a team; in general, players are capable of training and playing with some degree of purpose; in general, players are psychologically capable of learning from formal competitive situations. While the parent and coach issues remain a concern, the overriding factor in promoting formal competition at this age is the need of the players.



During their spring season, U-10 players should be introduced to the 8 v 8 playing format in training games and friendly matches.

My father's coaching philosophy was, Learn to play first, learn to win later. Besides making sure that we were always having fun, his main emphasis was on passing. My dad didn't make a big deal about scoring. He wanted us to pass the ball as much as possible. To keep possession. If he saw us 9-and 10-year-olds exchange five passes without losing the ball to another team, he was pleased, even if it didn't result in a goal. Then as we progressed, he wanted to see us string 10 passes together.

Claudio Reyna, US World Cup Captain.

U-12 Start of 8 v 8 Competition and Formal ODP Opportunities.

Rationale: By age ten, the concept of playing in a midfield line becomes cognitively more plausible. While many coaches will continue to play direct soccer with little regard to positional play, those with the skills to develop three-line soccer will find willing minds. The key developmental focus should still address technical development and 8v8 games provide a reasonable balance between technical repetition and tactical complexity. During their spring season, U-12 players should be introduced to the 11 v 11 playing format in training games and friendly matches.

The most dramatic change from the U-10 age group is the player's increased ability to stay focused and to begin taking responsibility for their decisions on the field. At the same time, this is still an eleven- or twelve-year old. As far as positions are concerned, players should learn the game based on the principles of the game rather than positions on the field. Player's decisions on the field should be based on what makes sense to them. If children are placed into the straightjacket of positional play too early, it will only destroy their instincts to be involved in the game.

US Soccer: Best Practices for Coaching Soccer in the United States.