

***PLAYER DEVELOPMENT MODEL***  
**TECHNICAL RECOMMENDATIONS FOR U-6 THROUGH U-12**  
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**INTRODUCTION**

Most youth coaches acknowledge that the playing ages between U-6 to U-12 represent a crucial period in players' development. Most agree that during this period, the focus should be on technical training and that a result-oriented competitive approach is not appropriate. But even though many share this popular philosophy, there are still countless variations and opinions on what exactly technical development means, how to structure practice sessions, and what is the optimum game play format. This report attempts to address these issues by offering a technical discussion with suggestions and recommendations for a progressive model. The report starts by describing the technical and tactical realities of each age group. It then addresses the role of coaches in instilling the right habits and playing instincts, and concludes with recommendations on the optimum playing format and training priorities for each age group, based on the realities. It is hoped that this report will generate a healthy discussion on this topic and help clubs become even more effective in dealing with these important age groups.

## STAGES OF DEVELOPMENT

Although the psycho-social and physiological developments of players are usually considered whenever player development is discussed, this report will deal strictly with the technical and tactical components.

### ***U-6/U-8: The Dawn of Technique (Player and His Ball)***

The first stage of development is mostly a technical stage, where the players learn how to control and manipulate the ball. Most players at this stage cannot pass or receive the ball and are just learning how to 'feel' the ball and stroke it without losing control of it. Since all their energies are focused on mastering the ball, they cannot solve any tactical problems nor are they capable of posing tactical problems for their opponents. There is very little tactical development here. There is no distinction yet between recreational and select play. Although some players are already athletically more advanced or possess better coordination, all the players are 'starting from scratch' technically speaking.

### ***U-9/U-10: The Dawn of Tactics (Player, His Ball, and His Partner)***

The variation in speed, strength and coordination start to play a part in separating players into recreational and select level. The observations made here apply to both recreational and select players, only to differing degrees.

Technically and in terms of leg power, most players at this stage can only execute short ground passes 10-20 yards long with the correct pace and accuracy. Most are not able to chip or deliver long air passes or crosses, unless they are hitting a ball that is rolling towards them. They cannot bend passes and are limited to simple push passes or outside-of-foot passes with a short passing range

Tactically, the select level players in this age group can control, dribble and pass short passes consistently, and are therefore ready to start solving tactical problems. For example, the player on the ball is beginning to make decisions on when to pass, when to dribble, and when to shoot. The player without the ball begins to think about his position and movement in relation to the ball and opponent. But the limited range of passing and the tactical naiveté of the players mean that only the players in the immediate vicinity of the ball are engaged in play at any one point. Put it simply, ***technically***, the players are at the 4v4 game range and ***tactically***, the players are learning to cope with the 2v2 game.

It might sound logical to presume that, since the players have been playing 3v3 and 4v4 at the U-6 and U-8 levels, they must now be ready for the 8v8 game. It's important to make a distinction here that U-8 players are not really playing 4v4 but are playing ***at*** 4v4. Each team might have 4 players on the field, but their poor technique does not allow them to learn the tactical lessons that a 4v4 game can offer.

By the same token, when our U-10 teams are playing 8-a-side, the players are not really playing 8v8. They are playing 3v3/4v4 within the 8v8 environment we have created for them. This is observed at the select level and, even more so, at the recreational level.

### ***U-11/U-12: The Dawn of Team Tactics (Player, the ball, and his Supporting Group)***

As players improve their technique and passing range, their tactical vision expands accordingly. Players at this age can make 10-30 yard passes comfortably, are beginning to chip the ball and can lift and cross the ball over short distances. They are still unable to handle the passing and crossing demands of the 11-a-side game and are still struggling to deal with the bounce, speed and height of trajectory of long passes.

Tactically, some of these players understand the concept of ball circulation and switching play, but their limited technique causes frequent turnovers when they attempt to play beyond their range of accuracy. This obviously happens often when they play 11-a-side. They still have problems bypassing, or 'skipping' a player when switching across the field. They also find it difficult to skip a line and pass from the backline to the front line or from the midfield into the spaces behind the opposing defense. Very little build up from the back is attempted, again, due to the limited passing range and the poor support options around the ball.

Teams are not yet able to keep possession for long periods. The ball changes possession often and goes out-of-bounds frequently due to poor technique. When the game is played on a big field (11-a-side) and teams cannot keep the ball for long, defenders don't have many opportunities to join the attack and midfielders and forwards are not able to interchange. This can lead to the development of one-dimensional players.

## **THE ROLE OF COACHES – CREATING THE RIGHT ENVIRONMENT**

Players will improve even without coaching, by virtue of playing. The more they play and the more they watch soccer, they better they will get. Also, players' performance is enhanced when they play instinctively. But this is only true if their instincts are correct. This is where good coaching comes into play. Although players will get better without coaches, good coaches can speed up the rate of improvement. They do that by helping the players develop good instincts and acquire good habits.

Successful development occurs when good instincts are *ingrained*. There is a world of difference between 'learned' and 'ingrained'. Players learn tactical concepts from coaches. But for the concepts to become ingrained, it takes *time, repetition* and *success*. This begs the questions: Which environment is more conducive to ingraining correct instincts with 8 to 11 year-olds? 6v6, 8v8 or 11v11? Would 2v2/3v3/4v4 practice activities be sufficient on their own to ingrain good instincts, or do we need to reduce the numbers in games? In the heat of battle, learned instincts often go out the window and bad instincts take over if the environment is too complex. Every field size places its own demands on the players. If our players are asked prematurely to solve the 11-a-side field problems, they might be forced into the wrong instincts. The result is a sometime helter-skelter sometimes 'track meet' game with a sprinkling of creativity by a few exceptional players.

It bears to remember that these observations are based on today's players. In a few years, our entry-level players might be technically and tactically more sophisticated and this report may no longer apply. But for now, this writer believes we are fast-tracking our players into the 11-a-side game and that it hurts their long-term development.

In conclusion, the level of our players has improved tremendously over the past 10 years. However, we must ask ourselves whether we are transitioning too fast from 4v4 at U-8 to 11v11 at U-12. Are our players conditioned to play a game that is often beyond their technical range? Is it tactically too advanced for many of them? Some of the preceding statements might seem over critical, but are made from a global frame of reference. One has to compare our young players to the select level from other countries to fully appreciate the intended message of this report.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The preceding sections provided a technical and tactical assessment of our 5 to 11 year-old players. This section contains recommendations on structuring the appropriate environment in each age category for optimum development.

### ***U-6/U-8: The Dawn of Technique (3v3 and 4v4 Game Format)***

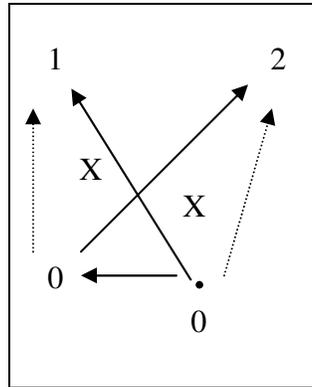
Programs along the lines of the KINS concept should be utilized here, where the emphasis is on the skill of dribbling and where parents and coaches are discouraged from coaching from the side lines. Practices should include a lot of free dribbling activities where players are required to dribble in different directions to satisfy a variety of commands or fun challenges, but not against an opponent since they are not ready for that. Aimless booting of the ball should be discouraged. The time wasting set plays such as throw-ins, goal kicks and corner kicks are not even necessary and can be dispensed with, in order to maintain a focus on maximum ball touches. The KINS Manual on our web site can be used as a guide for play structure and practice priorities.

The aim is to produce U-9 players who are comfortable with the ball, are not afraid to hold on to it, even under pressure, and whose instincts are to ‘absorb’ the ball rather than kick it forward as far as possible with every first touch.

Although soccer is a passing game, players who are good dribblers are more likely to develop their ball control to its full potential and expand their passing repertoire. As they become confident on the ball, they can make better decisions whenever they face an opponent.

### ***U-9/U-10: The Dawn of Tactics (6v6 Game Format)***

The technical priorities should be to continue to fine-tune dribbling and the ability to take players on, as well as introduce passing and finishing. Whereas in the U-6/U-8 stage practice activities do not involve as much live opponents, now it is time to increasingly introduce opponents at practice in order to learn technique-on-demand. But the majority of these opposed activities should be in the 1v1, 2v2 and 3v3 environment. The 2v2 grid should be the primary practice environment for this age group.

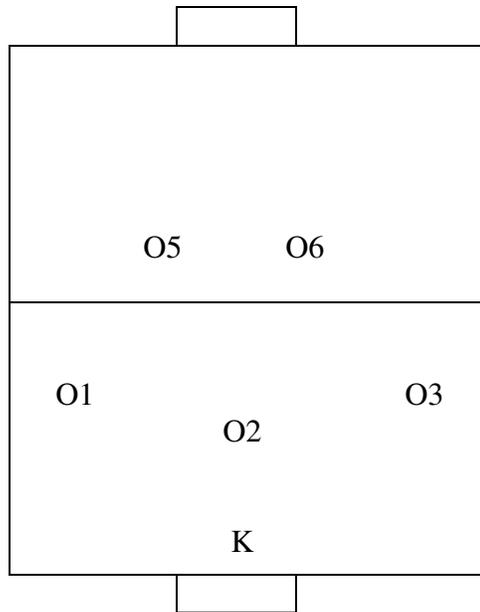


Observations of 8 and 9 year-olds play reveal that most would struggle to solve a simple problem such as the one shown in the diagram: When to play a split pass (option 1), when to play a wall pass (option 2) or when to dribble past opponent. These tactical shortcomings are disguised in large group play since players have more options and they can always kick the ball forward for a chase if they are pressured. It all goes back to the key question: Which instincts are we trying to ingrain here? A smaller game field size with fewer players will likely induce the more creative options out of players. The increased touches of 6v6 over 8v8 will provide players with more opportunities to cement these creative combinations into their repertoire.

Tactically, the 6-a-side game provides a great learning tool and an ideal springboard for 11-a-side play. Although teams can play 2-2-1 or 2-1-2, the recommended formation is 3-2, for a number of reasons.

Firstly, remember that U-8 play does not have positions or lines and does not provide any meaningful tactical lessons (for reasons previously mentioned). Hence, it is better for players entering the U-9/U-10 level to start their tactical education within a two-line system rather than the traditional three lines. Before our players are thrust into the complicated three line formation (defenders, midfielders and forwards), they should learn how to link two lines, how to pass from one line to the next, how to maintain a good shape, and how to step up and support or overlap into the next line. With 8v8, coaches are forced to use three lines, but with 6v6, it is possible to use only two lines, such as in a 3-2 formation.

Secondly, the 3-2 formation presents the functional demands and situations of all the 11-a-side positions. Positions O1 and O3 will train all the future wide defenders and wide midfielders. Position O2 will be relevant to all the future central defenders and defensive midfielders. And positions O5 and O6 will be the training ground for all the future forwards and attacking midfielders. Furthermore, all the passing patterns and movement of the 11-a-side game can be learned and duplicated within the 3-2 formation. The 2-2-1 or 2-1-2 formations are not as effective in replicating the 11-a-side patterns. For example, team width is difficult to attain and players scrambling wide tend to receive balls facing the wrong way (outwards instead of inwards).



The 3-2 formation allows the introduction of twin forwards and all its related tactical nuances. It also can be used to introduce players to zonal defending in a ‘numbers-up’ environment. Attacking wise, the 3-2 is ideal for teaching ‘playing out of the back’. The players in positions O1 and O3 have the freedom and the opportunities to overlap constantly and enter into the ‘attacking third’ scenarios a lot more often than within the 8v8 environment. In fact, observations of 8v8 play reveal a penchant for playing 3-3-1, which inhibits the overlapping of defenders into attack. With 3 midfielders in front of them, there is no room for wide defenders to overlap. In 3-3-1 play observed, the defenders did not cross the half line once and were always stuck behind the midfielders. Coaches recognize this limitation and solve it by rotating players. Players who played in the back line the first half were put in midfield the second half. But modern soccer demands the development of attacking defenders. We can only accomplish this by forcing defenders to overlap. The 3-2 formation is more conducive to attacking defenders than 3-3-1.

In short, the 3-2 is ideal for replicating just about all the 11v11 scenarios. The 3-2 prepares players to play 11-a-side, using the 6v6 environment that fits perfectly within the technical range of U-10’s and does it via a simpler, two line formation. Once the players graduate to U-11/U-12, they will be more ready for the introduction of a three line formation such as 3-2-2. This play format is recommended for both select and recreational players.

***U-11/U-12: The Dawn of Team Tactics (8v8 Game Format)***

After spending 2 years learning the nuances of team play within the 6v6 format, the players will be ready for 8v8. As presented previously, the 11-a-side game is still too advanced for most of them.

The technical focus is still in place, with emphasis on increasing passing range and type of passes, using a variety of passing surfaces, dribbling, crossing, and finishing. Heading can receive more attention now. The speed of play should also increase.

Tactically, the emphasis should be on building out of the back within the three line system. The 3-3-2 formation is ideal for teaching ‘playing out of the back’. It creates the 3-defenders-plus-keeper vs 2 forwards situation, which best replicates the 11-a-side game. In the 3-3-1 formation, it’s too easy to play out of the back against only one forward. Also, in 3-2-2, the defenders can play the ball to midfielders or into the forwards showing for the ball. In the 3-3-1, there is only one forward, making it harder to find the front player with a pass.

### **FINAL THOUGHTS**

This report includes many generalizations about players’ capabilities that some coaches might disagree with. It is difficult to provide anything but a general assessment. One must remember that not only is there a wide range within an age group, but that players improve from month to month. Observations of U-10 play in the spring season reveal improvement in team play compared to the fall season. Players adapt and improve, but we are still moving too fast for them and not giving them a chance to solidify the technical and tactical foundation before embarking on 11-a-side play.

The notion that the better players will be more challenged by playing 11-a-side is flawed. Players will be challenged by playing against better players, regardless of field size. The level of competition in practice and games determine the challenge, not the playing format. Having said that, the average and weaker players are usually less gifted athletically than the best players and would benefit from 6v6 over 8v8 and 8v8 over 11v11 because it is physically less demanding. The best players will still improve if they are matched against other good players.

There is a school of thought that if we are going to play 11v11 in the fall, we need to play 11v11 in the preceding spring to prepare the players for the upcoming 11v11 fall season. Most of what we do in the spring is irrelevant for the fall. Players will have been away on summer vacation and will start from scratch in the fall pre-season. The only relevant preparation for the fall is done in the pre-season August period. There might be some residual effect transferred from spring to fall but, for the most part, what we do in April prepares our players for April, not for September.

Logistically, the 6v6 game allows for better usage of space. In all the sites visited, the area used for an 8v8 field could easily be split into two 6v6 fields. This means that 24 players can play in the 6v6 format in the same area that currently holds 16 players playing 8v8. However, there will be a need to use more coaches with 6v6. For every 50 players, a club will have to add one more coach to the staff in a switch from 8v8 to 6v6.

The U-12 age group club teams travel extensively outside the state. This would necessitate the coordination with our neighboring states regarding play format. Many of the states in our region have voted to play 8v8 at U-12, starting in 2005, just as we did. If we play 11v11 and the rest play 8v8, we would be out of sync.

One argument often put forward against small-sided soccer is that players like to play the 11-a-side game. Youngsters like to emulate adults. They see the professionals play on TV. No doubt kids of any age would get excited if allowed to play the ‘adult version’ on a big field, where they can pretend to be Mia Hamm or Eddy Adu. But after a short while, the novelty of 11-a-side

would wear off and replaced by boredom when the ball is far away and frustration when the game's complexities overwhelm. Clubs can certainly organize 11-a-side games, just for fun, once in a while if they wish. But the bread and butter soccer environment for 5 to 12 year-olds should be small-sided soccer.