

Mass Youth Soccer U8 Specialty Clinic

Players in the U8 age group will display a wide range of both technical skills and emotional maturity. You will see great variations in children's motor control and social skill as well. It is the task of a coach at this level to set up practices in which each child of varied ability can challenge him or herself to a level that allows for repeated successes, yet is individually challenging. Players at this age still have good imaginations, though are not as involved in their imaginations as their U6 counterparts. They are more involved socially and do enjoy working with a partner however. In fact, social approval is primary to these children who want everyone to like them and will look for approval from the coach quite regularly. It is important for us to make attempts to give this feedback and make practices fun. If you ask players, they play soccer in order to have fun! We need to keep soccer fun for them. At the same time, we can begin to stress technical development. One of the main components of fun, according to young players, is seeing themselves do better at something. By setting up fun activities that beg the players to demonstrate technical skills, we are doing exactly what these players like and what is best for them developmentally.

A few main points to remember when working with U8 players:

- Cardiovascular system is less efficient than an adults; a child's heart rate peaks sooner and takes longer to recover
- Temperature regulation system is less efficient than adults; children elevate their core temperature more quickly and take longer to cool down than an adult
- Give water breaks frequently (every 10-15 minutes)
- Players still have two speeds for the most part---stopped and really fast
- In general they have better body control than U6 players, however, players are still somewhat clumsy
- Many players love to fall down, even if it is on purpose
- The limited ability to tend to more than one task at a time leaves little or no capacity for "tactical" decision making
- Limited experience with personal evaluation; effort is synonymous with performance
- Knowledge is compartmentalized; some relationships that 'do' exist are not recognized and some relationships that 'do not' exist are assumed
- Great need for approval from adults such as parents, teachers, and coaches; like to show individual skills
- Easily bruised psychologically by adults; negative comments carry great weight
- Like to play soccer because it is "fun"; intrinsically motivated
- Team identity is limited; "I play on Coach Tom's team" or "I play on the Tigers." Club and league concepts are nonexistent
- There is a desire for social acceptance; they want everyone to like them
- Tend to work much better with partners than U6 players
- They are very aware of not only what you say to them but how you say it. Make sure you are aware of your words and actions when communicating
- Practices should never last more than 1 hour
- No laps, no lines, no lectures!
- Have fun!!!!

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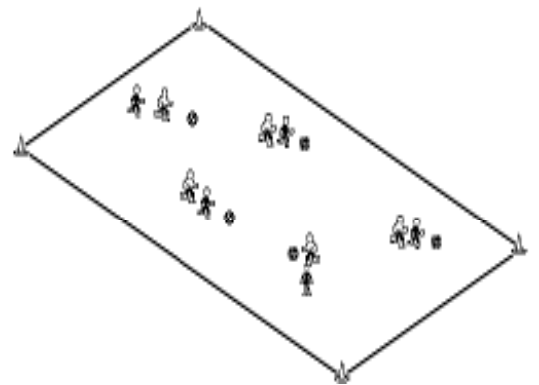
Activities:

- 1) Juggling---Everyone with a ball. Players practice keeping the ball in the air with feet, thighs, and head. Players count how many times they touch the ball before it drops to the ground.
- 2) Free Dribble---Everyone with a ball, use inside, outside, and sole of the foot. Have players dribble with speed (outside of foot), change direction, and perform moves. Coach calls out moves or changes in direction and sets the pace as the manipulator of the session, kids carry the ball towards someone and try a move. *Version 2:* As players get comfortable, coach can walk around and put pressure on players as they are performing dribbling tasks. This adds fun and interaction.

- 3) Knock Out---In same space as previous activity, have players dribble balls while trying to knock other player's balls outside of the grid. Players can never leave their own ball. If their ball gets knocked out have them retrieve it quickly and get back into the game. (You may wish to have them perform a skills task before re-entering such as 10 toe touches or juggling 5 times).



- 4) Shield-Steal---Half of players in the group have a ball and half do not. If you do not have a ball you need to steal one from someone who does. If ball goes out of bounds, person who touched it last does not get possession. You can teach players the technical points of shielding as a group at start of activity. Show technique with body sideways, arm providing protection, ball on outside foot, knees bent, turning as defender attacks, using feel to understand where defender is going. Fix technical shielding errors throughout this activity and make sure entire group knows how to properly shield.



- 5) Paired Tag---Pair players up, each pair has 2 balls. One player starts and is given a 2 second lead to get away from his/her partner. The chaser ("it") dribbles after the first player and tries to tag him/her with his/her hand. If tagged, the roles reverse and the player who was previously "it" has two seconds to get away before their partner tries to tag them. Players must always dribble their soccer ball during this activity.

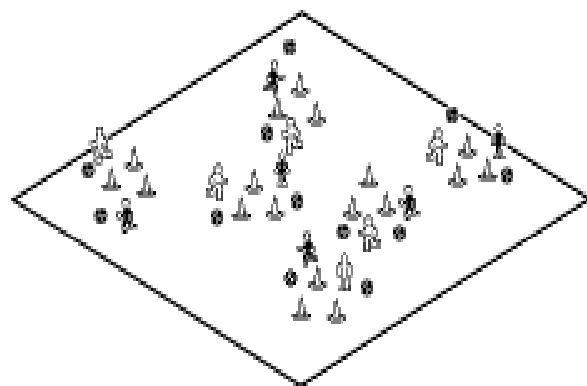
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- 6) Marbles---Players are in pairs, each with a ball. This time instead of chasing each other, one player plays out his ball and the partner passes his own ball in an attempt to strike the ball his partner played out. Players should keep track of how many times they hit their partner's ball. *Version 2:* Once players understand this game, make it fast paced by having the players take turns at trying to hit each other's ball without ever stopping. If player 2 misses player 1's ball, then player 1 immediately runs to his own ball and tries to hit player 2's ball (player 2 does not get to touch his ball after missing player 1's ball). After player 1 has a chance, then player 2 immediately tries to hit player 1's ball right back. etc. etc. This game is continuous and players should keep score. Hint: If 2 balls are very close to each other a player should kick their ball hard at the other ball so when they hit it, it is more difficult for the other to hit their ball back.
- 7) Gates---Randomly place many pairs of cones making small goals (1 yard) in a large space (30 x 20 yards) and have players dribble their balls through the goals for a point. Players try to accumulate as many points as possible. Have players count up their total points in the time you provide them. After doing once, ask them to improve their score by 2 and play the game again. Challenge each child individually. *Version 2:* Players can only dribble through goals with their right foot or their left foot. Note: You may need to make a rule disallowing players from dribbling back and forth in one goal or just two goals.

- 8) Gates Passing---Same set up as previous game. However players are now paired up and must successfully pass the ball through the cones to their teammate to earn a point. Again, players try to accumulate as many points as possible in the time allotted. Similar to previous game, have them pass only with their left foot or right foot, or the outside of their foot.



- 9) Triangle Tag---Set up cones in a triangle formation with each side of the triangle being roughly 1 yard long. Every triangle has a pair of players, each with a ball. Similar to the tag game, one player is being chased and one is "it". However this time the player who is "it" tags the player by kicking her ball and hitting the other player's ball or hitting the player below the knee. Players can dribble in either direction around the triangle and must stay close to their own triangle. Neither play can go through the triangle. *Version 2:* Allow the player being chased to go through the triangle. When in the triangle she is safe. However, after going through triangle, player must go completely around triangle before she can go through triangle again. She cannot stop inside the triangle. *Version 3:* Allow pairs to move from triangle to triangle (incorporates speed dribbling and traffic). If two pairs are at the same triangle at the same time that is fine, but players still only compete with their partner. Note: To increase difficulty, do not count hitting a player below the knee as a tag.



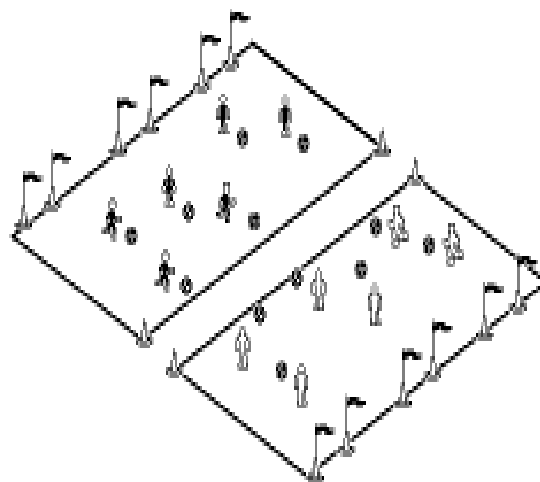
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10) Get Outta Here---Place two small (2 yard) goals at the end of a field 15 x 10 yards. Place half of team behind each goal and coach stands at halfway line with all balls. When coach plays out a ball the first two players run out and try to score on each other's goal. If the ball goes in the goal or out of bounds, the coach yells "get outta here" and plays in a new ball immediately for the next two players. *Version 2:* Coach can stop yelling "get outta here" after a while and see if players recognize when balls go out and are attentive. *Version 3:* Coach can vary service of ball. Sometimes play it to one player, sometimes toss the ball up in the air. *Version 4:* Have the first two players from each group come out each time a new ball is played they play 2 vs. 2.



11) Numbers---Same set up as Get Outta Here, but teams assign numbers (1-6) to each player and when coach calls out a number, the player from each team with that number comes out to play 1 vs. 1. Coach can set up particular match-ups and can call out more than one number at a time for 2 vs. 2 or 3 vs. 3 etc.

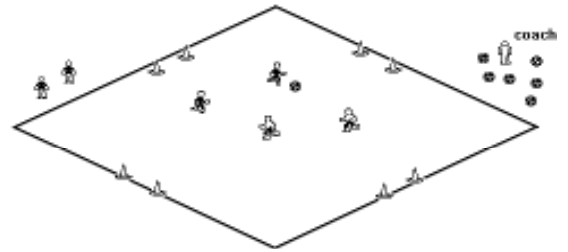
12) Clean Your Backyard--- Break group into two teams and have each team stay only on their half of the field. Place a 6 yard buffer zone between halves that no one can enter or cross. Each player needs a ball. Place three small (2-3yd) goals at the far end of each side of the field. Have both teams shoot balls at other team's goals in an attempt to score through anyone of the small goals (below knee height). Players cannot cross the buffer zone or go into the other half. Balls get recycled naturally in the game. This is a competition and teams need to keep score. Play 2 or 3 games and have teams re-strategize between each game. Teams can play defense though no hands. Only shots with laces count as goals.



13) 2 vs. 1 keepaway---In a grid 10x15 yds, three players play 2 vs. 1 continuous keepaway. Two attackers combine to keep the ball away from one defender. When the defender wins the ball, he or she immediately combines with the attacker he or she did not win the ball from and the attacker who lost the ball becomes the defender. Balls out of play are dribbled in or passed in.

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14) 2 vs. 2 to Four Goals---Teams defend one goal and have the opportunity to score on the other three, you must dribble through a goal to score a point. The goals are on the ends of a large cross in a square grid roughly 10yd X 10yd. Have one team of 2 on deck, they come on when a team gets scored on twice. Game is continuous, they must run on immediately.



15) 1 vs. 1 to Endlines---In a space that is wider than long (15 x 20 yds) each player defends one endline and attacks the other. Players score by dribbling the ball in control over the opposing player's endline. *Version 2:* You can make this 2 vs. 2, 3 vs. 3 or 4 vs. 4.

Coaching Notes:

- Focus on the technical points of the game
- Teaching positions and elevated tactical choices is not important
- Keep talking to a minimum (no longer than 20 seconds, preferably less) and let players play
- Dribbling is still a primary focus, though passing and shooting become secondary topics at this age
- Change the inflection of your voice, do not be monotonous
- Be animated
- Keep all players involved all the time, do not have players knocked out who then sit and watch
- Encourage players to try new things and take risks, encourage creativity
- Keep it fun!

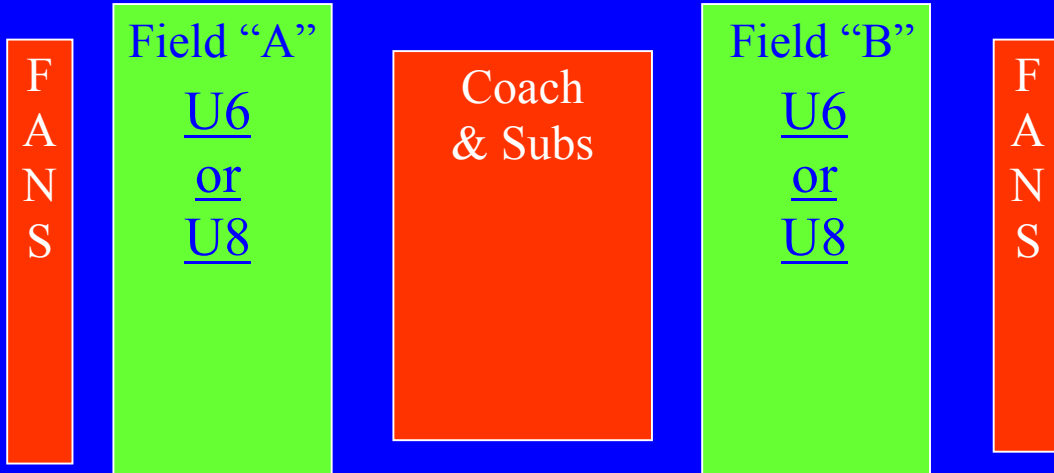
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US YOUTH SOCCER U8 GAME RECOMMENDATIONS

- Under 8's play 4v4 (*without a goalkeeper*)
- Field Size: 25 to 30 yards (length) x 20 to 30 yards (width)
- Ball: #3

Game Day Arrangement

- 3v3 & 4v4: Play "dual field" format



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SAMPLE LETTER TO PARENTS AT THE U6 & U-8 LEVELS

TO: Parents of U-6/U-8 players

FROM: Club Director of Coaching

RE: Welcome to our Club!

The purpose of this letter is to outline the club philosophy for the U-6 & U-8 players. By explaining to you the skill priorities and program objectives for your child, the program's format, and your role within the program, we hope we can clarify many of your questions and work together to make sure we provide a wonderful experience for everyone involved. Above all else, please remember that, as a Club, our primary objective is to make sure that every player has fun.

Skill Priorities

The primary objective of the U-6/U-8 program is to teach players to dribble. We want players to be comfortable with the ball at their feet and want to help build their confidence. By encouraging them to dribble, we hope to encourage creativity as well and will promote their adding their own personality to the game. Only a few players at the U-8 level will begin to develop passing skills. This will not be a stress in our program, though we will begin to introduce basic passing technique for the oldest and most mature players. Please recognize we do not list kicking as an objective. We do not want the children to aimlessly kick the ball as it is not helpful to their development as a player. They need to touch the ball as often as possible and to develop skills. We much prefer they learn how to dribble as opposed to just kicking the ball. Typically, young players find dribbling much more fun.

Field Layout

You will be asked to sit a few yards away from the sidelines during games in an area designated as the Parent's Area. The objective here is to give the players a sense of freedom, encourage the players to think for themselves and minimize the effect that we adults have on the children's play. We hope to encourage them to think for themselves when on the field and wean them out of their dependency on the adults.

We ask that you:

- 1) Refrain from coaching. Leave the coaching to the coach.
- 2) Do not tell the players to 'kick it' during the games or the practices.
- 3) Avoid encroaching beyond the parent's designated area until the game is terminated.
- 4) Feel free to cheer and applaud. This is not "silent" soccer, but it should be "positive" soccer. Please refrain from offering negative comments and please applaud good plays by both teams.
- 5) Exhibit good sportsmanship and make the other team feel welcome.

Please refer to the attached handout for a more detailed rationale of our program. Feel free to speak to me if you have any questions or concerns. I hope your child and you have a nice season and have fun!

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A. PROGRAM RATIONALE FOR U-6 AND U-8

Skill Priorities

The game of soccer has a number of basic skills, or *techniques*, that players have to learn, such as dribbling, receiving passes, making passes, shooting and heading. These skills make up the foundation of the game. However players always need to learn how to use these skills. This includes making decisions during the game, such as when to dribble, when to pass, and to whom to pass. These players' decisions are referred to as *tactical* decisions.

The first principle of soccer development is that players should master the basic techniques before they can learn the tactical side of the game. **Technique before tactics!** Think of techniques as vocabulary, and tactics as the grammar rules for forming sentences and paragraphs. Now, imagine a young immigrant who arrives in America without speaking a word of English. Before we can teach this immigrant about the rules for joining nouns, verbs, and adverbs to form a sentence, we have to give him a chance to learn a number of nouns and verbs in order to construct a sentence. If a child knows no words, than knowing the rules by which to organize the words is useless. If this child knows words we can typically understand the gist of what he is trying to say, despite his lack of grammatical knowledge. Of course, the more grammar this child learns, the more we will consider him fluent in the language. The same is true with soccer. Teaching players' tactics when they do not have the skills to complete them will prove fruitless. Teaching them technical skills will allow them to play and the games we watch will seem somewhat like soccer, but not like the soccer we see on television. Once they master the skills (grasp the words), then we can teach them how to use the tactics (construct sentences and paragraphs). Then their game will look like the game we see on television (or be fluent). This will not happen at the U-6 and U-8 ages.

In terms of soccer development, your child is just beginning his/her 'schooling'. We use the word 'schooling' here because there are many similarities between a regular school and a youth club, which can be considered as essentially a soccer school. Some techniques should be taught before others. The first technique that children should learn is **dribbling**. The ability to dribble is absolutely critical since dribbling is the foundation skill and preparation for all the other fundamental techniques of soccer, such as receiving, passing and shooting. When players are receiving the ball and making preparation touches prior to passing or shooting, they are essentially engaged in a mini-dribble. Young players need to learn to dribble within a variety of playing situations, such as dribbling forward unopposed, changing speed and direction with the ball, shielding the ball from opponents, dribbling past an opponent, and dribbling to get away from pressure. A limited ability to dribble leads to a limited range of passing or shooting. There are also times in the game, when the player with the ball has no passing options and the only way out of tight pressure is to dribble.

Aside from the fact that dribbling forms the foundation for all the other skills, there are many other reasons why we need to focus on dribbling at U-6/U-8. First of all, it takes years to become a comfortable and confident dribbler. Players have to learn to combine body control, agility, coordination and balance with the mechanics of dribbling and the sooner they start, the better. Just like any complex bio-mechanical skill such as skating or gymnastics, the later you

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start, the harder it is to achieve perfect form. Secondly, the process of learning to dribble involves trial and error. At first, the players' rudimentary attempts at dribbling will often result in failure as they discover the contrast between a soft touch and a hard touch on the ball. The players will slowly develop a 'feel' for the ball as they experiment at controlling and propelling it. Young players do not get discouraged easily if they do not succeed. They are not thinking in terms of peer assessment. They live for the moment, in the here and now, and the fact that they did not succeed the last time they dribbled will not even enter their minds. Of course, since we play 3 vs. 3 or 4 vs. 4, we guarantee that players will get another chance to show their skills very soon so they would not even have time to think about it if they were capable of doing so. If we wait for the players to mature before we emphasize dribbling, many of them will lose their confidence if they do not succeed and will become reluctant to dribble. Once they become aware of others' perception and peer review, they will not be so daring and creative. Thirdly, in 3 vs.3 and 4 vs. 4 play, the fields are so small that dribbling is always an option since the ball is almost always within reach and the goals and other players are also close. Once the game moves to the larger sized fields, dribbling becomes less effective on it's own and must be combined with passing to get the ball from point A to point B. Lastly, it is better to go through the process of trial and error when game results are not important and standings are not kept. At the older ages, game results assume more importance, making it hard for the parents, other players, and coaches to show patience and tolerance for mistakes, and putting added pressure on players to 'get rid of the ball' rather than risk losing it. Once games become competitive, the resultant environment is not ideal to start learning how to dribble.

To Cheer or Not To Cheer—That is the Question

Most coaches and parents of beginner players unknowingly emphasize the wrong skills. In a typical U-6/U-8 club play, the players are encouraged by both the parents on the sidelines and the coaches to 'boot' the ball up the field. Shouts of "get rid of it!" and "kick it!" are all too common. The further forward a player kicks, the louder the cheers. Players are so indoctrinated to 'kick it forward' that very few of them dare to get out of pressure by dribbling. Even when no one is around to pressure them, we see players just kicking the ball without any thought. Part of this might be because of the cheering they get from the sideline when they do this. However, kicking is not a skill. All of us, with no learning, can kick a ball. What we really want to emphasize is learning and skill development. So, please, do not cheer for kicking...cheer for dribbling and creativity. We do not want to 'coach' the players out of developing ball skills and showing creativity—do we?

On the surface it is easy to say that results at U-6 and U-8 do not matter and that there is no need to keep standings. In actuality, players at this age often do not know the score when the game ends. I am willing to bet they know the directions to the nearest ice cream store however. Even with this understanding it is hard for you to watch your child lose the ball in front of his own goal and for the other team to score. It is difficult to not place importance on the score as we are tallying it in our head. Despite this, we need to remember what is best for the players. Partner with your spouse or a friend and help stop each other from saying "kick it". It is especially hard when the ball is front of their goal and you want them to clear it, but please remember, every time they kick it, they lose another opportunity to learn to dribble.

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Many of you may be wondering about teaching passing as that is certainly part of soccer. However, just as in school, we are taking one step at a time. Before we do multiplication and division, we are doing addition and subtraction. There is a progression to learning and the players are most capable of learning dribbling at this age. You will not typically see any passing in a U-6 game, and very little in a U-8 game. Passing is simply beyond the ability of U-6 and most U-8 players. We will work on teaching passing very little (with U8 players only) as most players realize there is only one toy on the field and they want to play with the toy. They do not understand the logic in giving their toy to someone else. If they do that, they no longer get to play with the toy. Think of dribbling as 'passing to oneself'. If players cannot pass to themselves, how can they be expected to pass to a teammate 15 yards away? Despite our grandest hopes, let us be honest with ourselves as well. Some of those kicks that end up going to teammates are still just kicks. The fact that they randomly ended up with a teammate does not make the kick a pass. ☺

Weaning Young Players Out of Adult Dependency

In addition to technical development, we want to help players with mental development. Just as they practice technical skills to improve their play, they also need to practice decision making. This can very easily be done by placing them into situations repeatedly and allowing them to make decisions on their own. If natural consequences do not teach them what the best decision is, then the coach can help clarify that with the player. If we constantly tell these young players what to do and prevent them from making these decisions, they will never improve their decision making skills, a very important part of the game. Typically, children aged 4 to 8 are naturally dependent on their parents for many of their daily needs. In youth sports, this dependency is manifested as parental coaching from the sidelines. The players themselves will tend to look to their parents for help since they are conditioned to be dependent on them. Although it can be very hard, we need to allow these players to make their own decisions. The hardest part will be that some of the decisions will be faulty. However, we must allow them to learn from their successes and failures as both provide vital information and help in development. Therefore, another important objective of our U-6/U-8 program is to wean the players out of their dependency on adults during games. This is crucial for the development of soccer players. Since coaches do not have time outs and the game runs continuously, coaches have very little control over games once they start. Soccer players must learn to think for themselves, and the sooner they learn to stand on their own feet, the better. Since results do not matter at these age groups, no one should be overly concerned if players make mistakes that lead to goals. Parents and coaches must resist the urge to tell their players what to do for the good of the players. Not surprisingly children tell us that they actually have more fun when they are not being told what to do constantly....imagine.

Commonly, we see parents sitting and standing very close to the sidelines and even encroaching onto the field. We realize that we get excited and are enthusiastic and that is great! However, parents sitting so close to and on the field impacts the players' behavior, response and performance. If we want to give the players a sense of freedom and the ability to make their own decisions, we need to physically step back. This is why we ask you to sit some distance from the field, where you can still enjoy watching without your presence intimidating the players. What we lose in coziness, we gain in giving an invaluable sense of independence to the players.

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Individual Concept vs Team Concept

As parents, you are mainly and thankfully concerned with the welfare and development of your child. When your child goes to school, you become very interested in how he/she is progressing in school. Do you care how the class is doing as a whole? You are likely happy as long as your child is doing well, the teacher creates a supportive learning atmosphere, and the teacher is keeping pace with the required academic standards for his/her age. It seems laughable to imagine parents boasting that their child's class average was higher than the class next door. It does not seem to be a concern. The class concept in school is seen as a logistical convenience where children of like-age are grouped together to learn academics and social skills within the dynamics of a group. The same concept should be applied to youth sports. Just like a classroom, a youth team should be seen as a convenient way to group players of similar age and ability together, to learn how to play soccer, as well as develop social skills. Just as we do not brag about how strong our child's entire class is in academics, we should not brag about the strength of our child's team in soccer.

People want to be part of a team. They feel safe and comfortable. There are many positives in a team environment, such as building lifelong friendships, sharing common goals, learning to trust and depend on others. But when the team assumes too much importance or consumes your life, it can lead to tension and conflicts. Games become more stressful. The mood of the family unit for the rest of the day hinges on the game result. 'What's best for the team' overrides what's best for the individual players. The negative aspects of the team concept manifest themselves in many ways: the amount of playing time players get, rivalry between teams spilling over into arguments and even hostility, coaches fighting over players, referee abuse, etc.

Though we are ingrained in the American culture to place a high value on winning, we urge you not to place importance on winning, but rather on making sure your child is having fun and is being given the opportunity to play and learn the game. Your child's U-6 or U-8 team's record will have absolutely no impact on the future well being of your child. Mia Hamm is not playing for the National Team because her U-10 team won the state championship. She is on the national team because she has developed into a skillful and athletic player. Your child might develop into a high level player or he/she might not. Some of this depends on our genes and is pre-determined before your child was even born. As long as he/she is having fun and developing a lifetime habit of healthy participation in sport, we should all be happy. Remember that the team is there to serve your CHILD'S needs. Your child is not there to serve the team's needs. If the team's performance produces strong emotions in you, you need to step back and take a deep breath and suppress these emotions. If your child is having fun, that is the most important thing. The team is just a logistical way to engage a bunch of children in play. Tomorrow, your child will be part of another team.

Parents must beware of coaches who seem intent in building a 'dynasty' at these young ages. If a coach approaches you with the intent to recruit your child into his/her team because "He wants to build a strong team", you should question his agenda. The chances are he/she will emphasize the wrong type of development and training. The chances are that he/she will replace your child down the road when a better player pops up.