



U-12: 5th - 6th graders

SOME THOUGHTS ABOUT THIS AGE

The U-12 age group seems to be the moment in youth soccer that causes the most discussion concerning player development. Are these players young adults or are they still children? As soccer players, they are still young. Although there are some areas of the game where the players are beginning to make progress, this is an age where ball skill and soccer instincts must be encouraged above the results.

Physically, eleven and twelve year olds' bodies are beginning to change. Often, this results in awkward growth spurts. Rapid bone growth often results in painful joint conditions such as Osgood-Schlotters syndrome in the knees. Players that, in the past, showed precise control over their bodies and the ball will sometimes now temporarily lose this coordination. As their bodies grow, especially the 11-year-olds, they will also need more rest. The coach may also find the 11-year-old to be somewhat contrary and oppositional. Typically by 12 years old, children are regaining some of the coordination and compliance that was temporary lost at 11. Generally at this age, there is more enthusiasm and ability to focus their energy toward both individual and team challenges. Coaches can use this enthusiasm and focus to their advantage by giving the players specific problems to solve within the games they play.

GAME APPLICATION

Game Form: 9 v 9

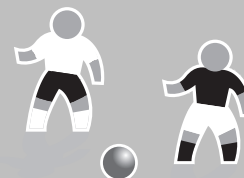
Game Duration: 2 X 30

Substitution: Free

GK Status: GK share time in order of priority

Field Size: 50-55x70 yards for 8v8 (U-11) and 55-60x80-85 yards for 9v9 (U-12)

Ball Size: 4





CONSIDER THIS:

The Football Association (FA), the governing body of English football, has made the following recommendations regarding the Football Academy program, which targets the top young players in England and is run as a mandatory developmental arm of the top professional league in England (the English Premier League –EPL):

- * Players aged 12 to 18 should play a maximum of 30 games per year with their club.
- * No 11-a-side soccer until age 12.

- * The level of competition should be compatible with the player's colleagues and opposition. (e.g., Not so difficult that success is not an option, and not so easy that the players become unmotivated.)

- * Clubs and coaches should take care that players: Play alongside, and against, boys of a comparable standard, enabling them to put into practice skills learned during the week in an environment where they will be stretched.

- * Play in a competitive environment where quality of performance is more important than results.

- * The facilities (field size, ball, etc.) and match officials should also be compatible with the player's ability.

- * The atmosphere surrounding this program should emphasize the role of matches as part of a development program in which the result is not of primary importance. The coaching staff should use the match program to reinforce the key aspects of the player's individual technical development.

- * The number of games per season must be limited to a maximum of 30 and as the number of games will be limited to 30, it is important that none of them are wasted.

(www.theFA.com)

THE ONSET OF PUBERTY

Between the ages of 12 to 14, children often experience a physical growth spurt that affects their balance and coordination. Oftentimes, they gain physical strength and power, but temporarily lose agility and suppleness. As soccer players, this means potentially losing some control over the ball. If the technical foundation is not strong, soccer is no longer fluid and fun for the players. It is at



this point that these players may move toward sports where it is easier for them to achieve some level of success – more traditionally American sports that demand “hand-eye” coordination such as baseball, basketball and lacrosse. It is critical, therefore, that we ensure that the players are getting the necessary technical foundation at the younger ages. This may prevent the loss of players during their middle school years who are capable and athletic, yet lack the foundation to pull them through their temporary physical awkwardness.

■ GOALS FOR PRACTICE, GAMES AND SEASON

Practices should consist of up to 75 minutes of structured, adult-guided soccer with an additional 15 to 30 minutes allotted for free play/self expression and self-improvement.

CONSIDER THIS: Great skill begins with the desire to master the ball and the key elements of the game.

■ GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF WHAT SHOULD BE HAPPENING DURING PRACTICE

The themes addressed in practice should be developed and expanded on from those that they dealt with at the U-10 level. Each practice should address individual ball skill as well as individual and small group decisions, in the attack and when defending. As they mature and are capable of keeping track of more things that are occurring on the field, we can increase the number of players that compete against each other.

The most dramatic change from the U-10 age group is the players 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. While his or her concentration is better than a ten-year-old, it is still in no way that of an adult. Make sure that the game problems that are created for him or her to solve are still relatively simple (up to 6 v 6 or 7 v 7). Continue to encourage risk taking and experimenting with the ball, but begin to get them thinking about themes such as working together with his or her teammates to solve problems, as well as getting him or her used to keeping track of the other players on the field.

As far as positions are concerned, players should learn the game based on principles of the game rather than positions on the field. Players’ decisions on the field should be based on what makes sense to them in the game. Let the players experience different positions and the different challenges that these positions create. If children are placed into the straightjacket of positional play too early it will only destroy their instincts to be involved in the game.

As they move to the full-sided game at the U-14 age and beyond, the eventual and ideal goal, at the senior level, is for all the players to be able to keep track of all the other players on the field and then to deal effectively with the situations that evolve out of these relationships. The coach can create or eliminate the conditions of time and space based on how effectively players are able to cope with the conditions of the game.



■ GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF WHAT SHOULD BE HAPPENING IN MATCHES

The game continues to be about individual ball control. At the same time, players should begin thinking of their decisions and movement as being related to their teammates and opponents in numbers up to 8 v 8 (not including GK). Matches should be played in numbers no larger than 9 v 9 (including GK).

Matches are a forum for players to test their ball skills and game awareness and should be considered an additional means of development, rather than the objective. Results play a role in development as it gives the players a competitive focus in the match. In this environment, there needs to be room for trial and error.

Coaches are encouraged to promote soccer that is free flowing, is coach-guided but not coach-directed, and demands that all players on the field, regardless of their specified position, participate in defending and attacking.

“As coaches, we need to constantly reassess the technical demands that the game places on our players and continue to teach them as the level of the game increases. Often times the essence of coaching is in identifying those technical areas that a player needs to improve, regardless of the age or level the player is playing at.”

John Hackworth
U-17 Youth National Team Head Coach

■ GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF INFORMATION THAT IS COMMUNICATED TO THE PLAYERS BY THE COACH

The coach of 11 and 12 year olds is responsible for encouraging and directing the enthusiasm of these ages towards attacking, technical and thoughtful soccer. All players should be encouraged to see their own role in the attack and the defense. Specifically, getting players to understand and recognize numbers up, even numbers and numbers down situations and the appropriate decisions based on each scenario. Keep in mind, where one player will view a 1 v 1 attacking situation as no advantage or a disadvantage, another may see this same scenario as a big advantage. Encourage each player based on his or her abilities, while at the same time, encourage all your players to work toward seeing 1 v 1, as both attacker and defender, as an advantage.



CONSIDER THIS: *“If your team is winning most or all of its games at this age, you as a coach are probably doing something wrong.” – Gerry McKeown, Technical Director of Player Development Academy (PDA) New Jersey*

Care must be taken at the younger levels to select players based on their soccer abilities and not on their ability to achieve an immediate result. At the U-12 level, it is easy to win games by just using physically big players who have matured earlier than their peers. As a result, the smaller, skillful players are at times not chosen, as they are not able to “win” the game. Special care and attention must be given to these “smaller” players. At the same time, special care must also be given to the physically more mature players in developing their technical skill, and their ability to maneuver with the ball in tight spaces. As coaches, we always need to keep an idea on the long-term development of all the players.

“What is good for a football manager is when a child who grows up in Japan likes to kick a ball as much as a child who grows up in France. And to find that pleasure as you travel all over the world is something that is still, for me, magical, that , how could it be that all over the world – you can go to China, you can go to Japan or France and give a kid the ball, and he is happy? And that explains the success of our game... (you must try in your) training sessions to give that joy to the people who practice, and you know you don’t necessarily need to speak the language. You give the players the possibility to express themselves – like when they were kids, and they become happy and they play.”

*Arsene Wenger
Arsenal FC Manager*

■ **BEST QUALITIES OF A COACH FOR THIS AGE PLAYER:**

Sensitive teacher, enthusiastic, possess soccer awareness, ability to demonstrate or utilize someone whom can paint a good picture (older player, assistant coach). Possess knowledge of the key factors of basic skills. Give encouragement. Have an appreciation for the relationship or connection between individual skill and small group insight, and the players’ eventual success at the older ages and the larger game model of 11 v 11.



■ NUMBER OF MATCHES PER CALENDAR YEAR

It is recommended that players play up to 30 matches per calendar year for their clubs. There should be a ratio of 2 or 3 practices per one match and players should be given two days rest per week.

■ BREAKS FROM ORGANIZED/MANDATORY SOCCER

Players should be given time off from organized soccer each year.

■ TRAVEL

Travel should be limited to day trips with two overnight events per calendar year. No standings or awards.

■ TOURNAMENTS, FESTIVALS, ETC

Tournament-like events should be limited to competitions that are organized into a round robin format.

■ STATE, REGIONAL AND NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIPS

A statewide 9 v 9 competition where each team plays a predetermined number of matches should be encouraged. Matches should be played on appropriately sized fields and with a size 4 ball.

No regional or national competitions.

CONSIDER THIS: Manchester United's Academy U-18 team, along with the rest of the English Premier League Academy teams, play a 27-30 game league schedule that begins in mid August and finishes in mid April. That's 27-30 games over the course of 9 months or 36 weeks, or less than one game per week, with 3 months of no matches.