
Chapter 5

Coaching Seven and Eight Year Olds: Are You My Teammate?

Maria Montessori, an Italian Physician and Educator, who lived from 1870-1952, developed the idea that structuring the play environment enhanced learning. We believe that by designing cooperative and competitive activities, young players better learn and understand how to begin to be part of a team.

Two Players - One Ball

This is the age where players can begin to understand the concept of working with a teammate. The notion, or willingness, to intentionally pass the ball to someone is just beginning to take hold. In the U-6 year old age group, efforts from coaches and parents to encourage the player to pass the ball usually

failed. Coaches and parents will have more success encouraging players to pass the ball in the seven to eight year old age group. In this age group, the player begins to think beyond their personal needs and actively looks to pass to a teammate. In many cases they will pass to their best friend and not necessarily the player in the best position to receive the ball.

Some players will be more developmentally mature and seem more advanced than others. To help offset this, encourage continued practice without creating an elitist attitude. Some players will go back and forth between egocentric play and cooperative play while others will appear to lag behind due to a slower developmental path.

The “two players-one ball” concept that applied to this age group should encourage a coach to design activities in which players are sharing a ball. However, this does not mean that players should no longer do activities that require individual ball work. Even professional players work individually with a ball! An NBA player will go to the gym and work on their dribbling skills and jump shot. Do not ignore exercises used in earlier developmental stages.

Player Characteristics

It is important to have a basic understanding of how a player thinks, feels, acts and moves. Below is a brief description of the domains of learning in seven and eight year olds.

Psychomotor

- Skeletal system is still growing; growth plates are near the joints. Be aware of possible injuries to those areas.
- Cardiovascular system is less efficient than an adult’s; 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.
- Improvement in pace and coordination from U-6; the immaturity of a U-8’s physical abilities are still obvious.

Cognitive

- Concrete Operational Stage (see Piaget text box, Chapter 2). Language vastly expands and ability to recall previous events is enhanced.

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- Show a limited ability to tend to more than one task at a time; the simple task of controlling the ball demands most of the attention capacity, thereby leaving little or no capacity for tactical decision making.
 - Understanding of the relationship between time and space is beginning to develop and will be limited by the individual player's capacity to attend to multiple tasks.
 - Show limited experience with understanding personal evaluation; effort is synonymous with performance; they feel if they tried hard, they performed well, regardless of performance.

Psychosocial

- Self-concept and body image are beginning to develop, but are very fragile.
- 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. Play for their own enjoyment.
- Their universe has expanded beyond their home environment to the neighborhood.
- True playmates emerge with the inclination toward small group activities.
- 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.
- The influential person is most likely their father or significant parent.

General Characteristics of U-8 Players

- Attention span is a bit longer than the U-6 player, but still not at the "team at all costs" intensity.
- Inclined more toward group activities.

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- Still in motion-twitching, jerking, scratching and blinking are all second nature physical movements.
 - Still very sensitive (dislike personal failure in front of peers); ridicule from the coach in front of the group is very destructive.
 - Santa Claus is no longer a peer topic of discussion.
 - Boys and girls are still similar in physical and psychological development.
 - Beginning to develop some physical confidence (most can ride a two-wheeler).
 - Still into running, jumping, climbing and rolling.
 - More into imitation of the big guys (identifying with sports heroes is becoming important).
 - Still lack a sense of pace; will run very hard most of the time and chase the ball until they drop.

Typical Training Session Format

- Should not exceed 1 hour.
- Warm-up, each player with a ball, stretching and soccerastics (individual and paired activities with the ball). Allow 10 minutes for this.
- A mixture of individual and partner activities. Add more maze-type games and introduce target games. (30 min.)
- Conclude with small-sided game 4v4 to two goals with no goalkeepers. (20 min).

Sample Game/Activities

Game 1: Math Dribble

Every player has a ball and works within a confined area. Players dribble to keep control while avoiding others. While they dribble, coach or leader calls out a math problem. The players immediately solve the problem by forming the appropriately sized group. This activity organizes groups without asking players to choose a partner or counting off. For example, if your next activity requires partners, call out 1+1 or 3-1. The activity encourages dribbling in a

confined area, changing direction and changing speed. Quick reaction to cues, awareness of other players, problem solving and listening skills are stressed.

Game 2: Ball Retrieve in Pairs (Target Game)

Work with one ball between two players. Using general field space, start from the middle of the field. One pair of players hands the coach a ball who tosses it away and calls out a number from 2-10. Whatever number the coach calls, each pair of players must return the ball to the coach by passing the ball with their feet in exactly the asked for number of touches. The players decide how to solve this problem. The coach should rapidly toss balls away to keep the activity flowing. The coach can also move to a different space after the ball has been tossed so that players must be aware of where they are going. The activity encourages working in pairs, pacing of passes, playing to a target, and keeping the heads up to scan the environment.

Game 3: Gates in Pairs (Maze Game)

Using pairs of cones, the coach constructs 8 to 12 randomly spaced goals that are placed approximately three yards apart. Each pair of players should have one ball. After a signal from the coach, pairs of players attempt to play as many passes to each other as possible through the gates in 60 seconds. Players cannot play a ball through the same gate on consecutive passes. At the end of 60 seconds, challenge players to improve on their first score. This activity encourages problem-solving, speed of passing, changing direction, receiving and passing to feet, communication and cooperation.

Game 4: Pac Man (Maze game)

Each player has a ball in a confined area of approximately 20 x 20 yards. Adjust the space to accommodate the number of players. All but two players must place their ball outside the area. The two players with the ball are the Pac Men. Pac Men dribble their balls and attempt to hit other players below the knee with a pass. Players try to avoid being hit by running, dodging and jumping. Once a player is hit, he/she gets their ball and becomes a Pac Man. The game continues until all players have been hit and have their ball. The activity encourages dribbling and passing to a moving target, decision making, changing direction, cardio-respiratory endurance, and allows all ability levels to play equally. If players are hit early, they will have more opportunity to dribble. If they manage to avoid getting hit until near the end of the game, their challenge increases greatly.

Game 5: Boss of the Balls

This is a small-sided game of 4 v 4 to two small goals and is played in an area of approximately 20 x 30 yards. The coach is standing at the midline with all of the balls. Ball one is put into play and the game begins. As soon as a goal is scored or a ball goes out of bounds, the coach tosses or kicks in another ball. When the coach runs out of balls, players run to collect and return all the balls and the game begins again. Note to Coaches and Parents: don't retrieve balls! The game must have a natural ending point. When a coach runs out of balls, players must gather them up if they want to keep playing.

