



PROGRAM RATIONALE FOR 4U/6U



Skill Priorities

The game of soccer has several basic skills, or *techniques*, that players must 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 technique 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 must give him/her a chance to learn several nouns and verbs in order to construct a sentence. If a child doesn't know any words, then 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/she is trying to say, despite his/her lack of grammatical knowledge. Of course, the more grammar this child learns, the more we will consider him/her 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 U4, U5, or even U-6 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 **ball mastery**. Ball mastery is vital in order to develop the confidence, feel, and coordination that is required to move onto the next **technique** that will be emphasized in our program, **dribbling**. The ability to dribble is 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 the U4-U-6 age groups.

- It takes years to become a comfortable and confident dribbler. Players must 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 start, the harder it is to achieve perfect form.
- 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 fail. 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 fail and will become reluctant to dribble. Once they become aware of others’ perception and peer review, they will not be so daring and creative.

- 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 its own and must be combined with passing to get the ball from point A to point B.
- It is better to go through the process of trial and error when game results are not important. At the older ages (U13-U19), 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 U4-U6 game, 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 this age do not matter. 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”. Instead replace the things that you shout from the sideline. Remember “what gets noticed, gets repeated”. Shout things like, “use a move” or “dribble” and cheer when the players make an attempt to do so, whether they are successful or not.

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 much passing at



this age. Proper passing is simply beyond the ability of most players at this age. 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 basic 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 through guided discovery. 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 U4 – U6 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 this age group, 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.

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 a convenient way to group players of similar age and ability together, to learn how to play soccer, as well as develop social and life skills.

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 life skills, and 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, learn, and improve within the game. Your child's team record will have absolutely no impact on the future well-being of your child.

Messi, Ronaldinho, Wambach did not play for their National Teams because his/her U6 team won the state championship. They are on their national teams because they developed into skillful and athletic players. 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, learning and developing a lifetime habit of healthy participation in sport, we should all be happy.

U4 - U6 Program—What is appropriate?

At this age, the main goal of our program is for the kids to have fun and learn basic soccer skills. Practices are made up of fun games not soccer drills including a warm-up period with dribbling games (animal soccer, follow the leader), several activities highlighting a certain theme (balance, dribbling, etc.). Every player should have a ball so they can have as many touches as possible. There should be lots of movement and no lines.