

# How to Prepare for your First Game (U4/U6)

Before your first game you should have at least three practices. Three practices are enough to prepare U6 kids for their first match. I have seen teams go into their first match without practicing at all; this is a huge disservice to the players. During these first three practices, you should focus on:

- Use of the feet only.
- Dribbling the ball into a goal.
- Listening to “turn around”, if they are going the wrong direction.
- Stealing the ball from the other team. (defense)
- Shoelace kicks and [monster kicks](#).

Keep in mind that they do not need to be good at any of the above, but they should at least be introduced to all the above. See my sample practice plans for an idea of the activities you can do to work on these five things during your first three practices.

## **Understand the matches for what they are.**

Remember that matches are completely different than practice. Kids generally do not learn soccer skills at matches; they learn soccer skills at practice. Practice is vastly more important than matches. Matches are for fun, it's exciting. Matches are for team cheers, snacks and running through tunnels. Matches build team spirit and camaraderie. Wearing uniforms is cool. Make it a huge fun atmosphere, don't worry too much about the specific soccer skills they are learning or not learning. If you run a good soccer help style practice, your players will be getting 500 – 800 touches on the ball per practice. At matches, some of your kids will touch the ball a lot, but others may touch it very little, you can't do all that much to change that, the older and faster kids will touch the ball more.

Matches are very exciting and be prepared that all kids react very differently to these circumstances. Some thrive on all the parents cheering, some are terrified by it.

Be ready for anything and take it all in stride!!

It's all good as long as you are having fun!

## **Before the game**

Take a small sheet of paper and make a list of all your players. This is used to attempt to provide equal playing time for all your players. I stuff this sheet in my pocket with a pen and keep track myself on the field to try to make sure all my players play the same number of minutes. If this is too much for you to do on the field, ask a parent to do it.

Your goal is to provide equal playing time to all. You won't always be perfect with this, but you need to try your best to play every kid at least 50% of the total playing time and to balance playing time amongst your kids, regardless of skill.

### **What to do with scared kids**

You may have kids that will not get on the field. Very likely you will have some of these. There are kids that will play full bore at practice and freeze at games, cry, throw themselves on the ground or in a parent's lap, too afraid to get on the field. It's common.

1. Do not force kids onto the field that do not want to play.
2. Try to start them on the field at the very beginning of the game.
3. Talk to their parents directly and tell them that the moment the kid mentions that he or she wants to play, the parent should wave at you, and you should immediately substitute and put them on the field that very instant. Seize the chance while you have it to put them on the field.
4. Hold their hand to get them on the field if needed.

### **Warming Up**

No stretching, no calisthenics. Believe me, I have seen it, you will too! I saw one coach doing an American Football style of warm-up with 3-year olds!

Stretching does nothing for small children, in fact, it is counterproductive. Warming up by running around, dribbling, passing and shooting is much better, more fun too!

I like to use my [World Cup](#) practice game as my warm up game, but if your team is new, this may be too hard. Dump out your bag of balls just inside one half of the field, and play [World Cup](#), or just have them all dribble to score. It's the [Big Pile](#) practice game. I also like to pass the ball back and forth with players in an informal way.

Make sure everyone wears shin pads; do not allow them to play without them!

### **Optimum player line-ups**

1. Introduce yourself to the other coach as soon as you figure out who is he or she is. This is an important courtesy and sets a good tone.
2. I view the other coach as a partner in creating a good experience for everyone. Do not view the other coach as a rival or a competitor. Most of the time, they feel the same way, sometimes not, which I will address in a bit.
3. Suggest to the other coach that both of you start all your youngest and weakest players on the field to start the first half or quarter.

The reason I do this is because older and more experienced players can join a game in progress, they will substitute in on the fly. I can be running down the field and call out to

one of my experienced 4-year olds, and they will leap off their feet and be in the game. This is NOT the case with younger, weaker and more timid players.

Your best chance of getting a younger/weaker/timid player to play at all is to start them on the field at the very beginning of the game!

If the other coach agrees, this is best, and you have entered the game with the other coach in “cooperative mode”. Most games are broken down into quarters at this age level; so then, I would organize my players like this:

1st Quarter Weaker, younger, timid players (both teams)

2nd Quarter Older, faster, stronger players (both teams)

3rd Quarter Weaker, younger, timid players (both teams)

4th Quarter Older, faster, stronger players (both teams)

This matches both teams better and gives a vastly better experience, and fairer, for everyone.

Now if the other coach does not agree, and he/she is trying to “win” the game, then you must run a completely different lineup. In this case, I have my kids divided mentally into three groups:

**Self** These are kids that know what to do without help.

**Voice** These are kids that will respond to your voice on what to do.

**Hand** These are kids that literally need to have their hands held to even be in the game.

Try to have a mix of kid types:

- If you play 3 vs. 3, then try to have one of each.
- If you play 4 vs. 4, then try to have 1 “self”, 1 “voice”, and two others.

Now you also must watch and see what the other coach puts on the field. If he puts all his good kids on the field, then you must counter that to a certain degree. If you have a bunch of younger “hand holder” kind of kids and he has self actuated kids on the field, then your kids will never touch the ball, and that is not FUN for your kids! So then, you use your biggest, fastest, oldest kid to “keep your team in the game”. This is especially true if the other team has a “ringer”, a really good kid that knows what he is doing, he has to be countered.

Yes, I have played against other teams that put their “ringer” on the field all the time, and sat their weaker players trying to “win”. This is shameful, in my opinion, but it does happen. In this case, you must match that with a strong fast kid to keep your team in the game.

Now this is not done to compete to win the game in terms of goals scored. This is done for the FUN of your kids.

The reason is that if you place all your weaker kids against their strong kids, your weaker kids get stomped, and then they can get discouraged and that's NOT fun. In fact, it can be harmful to your kids and make them scared or unwilling to play. If you at least put a strong kid to match their strong kids, then your weaker kids at least have a chance to be in the play of the game. It's a lot more fun to be "in the game", to have a chance to touch the ball and be included.

So then if the other coach is running his team competitively, then you match him to keep your kids in the game. You must still balance all your playing time so that all your kids get equal playing time.

If the other coach insists on playing all his best kids all the time, then you must go talk to him at halftime, or during a stop in play, and ask him to remove his best players to give your kids a chance to play. Please also bring this up to the coaching coordinator.

This, of course, applies to you as well. You must pull your best kids off the field as well part of the time to give everyone a fair chance to play the game.

### **Talk to your kids just before you start the game**

The very last thing you should do at your very last practice before your first match is to practice your pre-game "pep talk", so that they know the responses below.

By the way, when I do "talks" with my kids, I drop to one knee, and I ask my kids to "take a knee", and they gather around me informally. However, I do have some guidance for this:

- They can sit or kneel
- They are not allowed to sit on their balls
- They are not allowed to touch their balls with their hands
- They need to do their best to listen

You will increase your odds of success with "talks" by knowing somewhat in advance what you want to say and by keeping them very short and simple! These are little kids!

This is my basic pre-game talk. It is very simple, but it is very effective. There are only five things to tell them:

1. We never use our hands, we use our... [Kids shout out "Feet!"]
2. If you have the ball what do you do? [Kids say: "Go score!"]
3. If I tell you to "turn around", what do you do? [Kids: "turn around!" or "go the other way!"]
4. If the other team has the ball? [Kids: "steal it!" or "play defense!"]

5. And the most important thing is? [Kids: “FUN!”]

That’s my normal pre-game pep talk!

Then do a cool team cheer!

“1, 2, 3, go lions!!!!!!”

When you put your kids on the field make sure that you ask them: “Which way are we going?” Have them all point with their arms “this way” towards the goal that they are trying to score on, the other team should do the same thing.

In normal soccer, the direction of play is reversed at halftime. I highly suggest that you talk to the other coach and NOT reverse the direction of play at half time for very young kids to avoid confusion about which way they are going.

### **During the play of the match**

Be flexible and have fun, be light hearted about the whole thing. It’s a challenge to try to instruct, keep track of playing time, encourage, praise, and interact with the other team, the other coach and the referee if you have one. You’ll be busy trying to herd 3 or 4 little kids in the right direction.

Do not touch the ball with your hands before, during or after the match!!!!

Don’t be a “yeller”, but you do have to speak louder than normal to be heard. Speaking loudly to say something like “turn-around!” or “run back on defense!” isn’t being a “yeller”. There are plenty of normal things that you have to say in a louder voice to be heard, but they are positive, and directive sorts of things, never negative or berating types of things, NEVER.

### **If you are also acting as [referee](#)**

Only stop the play with your whistle for the following things.

1. A goal is scored.
2. A player has fallen, and you think they might be injured.
3. A player intentionally pushes or trips another player (an obvious foul).
4. A player intentionally touches the ball with his hands.
5. A significant behavior situation like hitting or a fight or something.

Minor, unintentional pushing, bumping and jostling is normal, don’t stop play.

Falling is normal, keep playing, help them up if they need it, but keep playing. They will learn to get up on their own without crying if you give out bravery patches!

You are not a professional referee, don't worry about all the technical things of what is or isn't a [foul](#), the kids don't know either. There will be lots of minor [fouls](#) all the time, you can't stop the play at every little thing, you'll remove the fun right out of the game very quickly if you call every little thing.

Now that being said, all your players should be taught that it is good and fair to always play the ball with your feet. Players should never push, pull, grab, hit, kick or trip other players. If you see this sort of behavior, correct it, if it is intentional, and especially if a certain player is doing it all the time. On the other hand, there will always be unintentional and minor pushing, bumping, accidentally tripping, and kids running into each other and falling. That's all normal, they are little kids.

### **What makes it a successful match?**

Your ONLY measure of success at a match is whether or not your players had fun. If they had fun, you won. Most leagues at this age do not keep score.

There is no need to be concerned specifically about how they played, or how skilled they were, or who scored, or what they could have done better. You can note these sorts of things mentally as things you can work on at future practices. Like if you notice a lot of "[own goals](#)" [goals scored into your own net], then make a note to play the "[turn-around](#)" games more at your next practice. If your kids weren't trying to play defense, then work on defense more. Definitely do NOT do a game post-mortem and criticize the team for things that they did not do well.

### **After the match**

Line your kids up and shake hands with the other team and the other coach. Each team should have a line and pass by each other so that all kids can shake hand all the other kids' hands and say "good game" to everyone

Run through a tunnel. Our parents set up a "tunnel" with pairs of parents with arched hands and the kids run through it. You need to supervise this to make sure all the kids start at the same end and all go in the same direction or you will have nasty collisions!

The tunnel is really, really fun and highly recommended! For some kids, the timid ones, the tunnel is the most fun of everything. I had one player that wouldn't get on the field for months, but he loved that tunnel!

Do a team cheer for the other team! "1, 2, 3, go [insert other team name here]"

Hand out Soccer Help incentive patches to your players. Gather in an informal circle and provide praise with your patches. Tie your patches to specific things that they did well in the match, do not just hand them out as a "treat", they are linked to soccer achievement. See my [article on patches](#) for a much more detailed description of the patch system.

Do a team cheer for your own team! “1, 2, 3, go [insert your team name here]”

Hand out snacks; relax a bit with the team and parents. You earned it!

## **How to adapt to various match situations**

### **Your team is much better and you are scoring a lot of goals**

Things you can do:

You can remove your best players; however, a player should not be punished by sitting out just because he or she is good! Everyone wants to play! A better strategy for this is to call your best players aside at half time, and tell them something like this:

“Cooper, you’ve already scored three or four goals, and it’s only half time! We all can see that you are a great goal scorer, but now I want you to help other kids score, so take the ball down the field and pass it front of the goal for our younger players to shoot in, okay?”

This keeps him on the field, you’ve stopped running up the score, and you’ve significantly raised the level of difficulty for your best players. And if they actually do it, gigantic praise after the game!! [I’d be careful with this as he changed his stance on passing and I had a similar experience with my son. Instead, I suggest you ask that player to focus on defending but if he breaks away and scores a goal then so be it]

After you play SoccerHelp games a lot at practice, you will find your team beginning to dominate at matches. Do not run up the score; do not gloat with excessive goal celebrations, be courteous and polite, try to help the other team when opportunities present themselves. Be sure to always cheer the other team when they do something well. Be a good sport. If the other coach comes and talks to you afterwards, tell them that you practice with a system, the Soccer Help system, and that’s why your kids are good. But don’t volunteer coaching advice to the other coach unless asked. Pounding another team and then offering unsolicited coaching advice never goes over very well!

### **The other team is better and is scoring a lot of goals**

Make sure you always have an older faster kid on the field to keep your team in the game. Tell this player that he is the “stopper”, and that his main job is defense!

By the way, if you play [SoccerHelp games](#) at practice, after a while, you will no longer see this situation.

### **The teams are evenly matched**

No action required!

[www.soccerhelp.com](http://www.soccerhelp.com)