



**GUIDED DISCOVERY  
PRACTICES  
FOR COACHING  
SOCCER**

# **PLAYER DEVELOPMENT GUIDELINES**



# INTRODUCTION

## CONTENTS

Pg.	
2	Introduction
3	Basic Ideas to Consider When Coaching Schoolboy Soccer
4	Age Appropriate Recommendation for the U-6 to U-18 Age Groups
4	Encourage Creativity and Ball Skills Before Tactics

### Ball Control and Creativity: 6-12 years old

6	U6 Fundamentals
8	U8 Fundamentals

### Ball Skill, Creativity & Gradual Insight Into the Game: 10-14 years old

10	U10 Learning to Train
13	U12 Learning to Train

### How to Function in a Group: 14-16 years old

16	U14 Training to Train
20	U16 Training to Compete

### Competition and Outcome: 18 years and older

22	Senior Level: U18+ Training to Win
24	Development of Goalkeepers
25	Ability to play at an older Age Group

## GUIDED DISCOVERY PRACTICES FOR COACHING SOCCER

The scope of coaching players in the Republic of Ireland is evolving at a rapid pace. As our society is woven with the threads of many cultures, so is our soccer the product of the styles and experiences of the many diverse communities across the country. While this presents us with a set of challenges that are unique to this Country, this diversity also helps to continually breathe life into our soccer community. It is against this backdrop that Pure Soccer approaches its responsibility for helping to prepare coaches to bring the game of soccer to our young players.

There is not just “one way” to teach soccer to players, nor is there just one style of coaching. There is a broad spectrum of styles and methods for how each of us experiences the game. Some of this comes from our backgrounds, while some of this also is the product of our own personalities. At the underage and schoolboy levels, however, there is a set of fundamental principles that must be considered by anyone involved with soccer. In general, young soccer players require a certain amount of uninterrupted play. This allows them to experience soccer first hand. They should be allowed the opportunity to experiment, and with that, succeed and fail. The coach’s long-term goal is to prepare the player to successfully recognise and solve the challenges of the game on his or her own. It is vital that the coach approaches soccer with this in mind.

This document is designed to give Underage, Schoolboy and Youth level coaches a basic set of ideas that can help open up the game of soccer to children in ways that celebrate the spontaneous qualities of soccer. It is not designed to give the coach the “secrets” of the game. There are no secrets. This is part of soccer’s beauty. This document represents a series of recommendations that have been compiled and reviewed by UCD AFC Soccer Staff and UEFA Pro Licence Coaches. It presents a compilation of what Pure Soccer considers to be an appropriate, comprehensive and responsible approach to developing gifted Irish soccer players.



SEE  
PURESOCCKER.IE  
FOR MORE  
DETAILS

# BASIC IDEAS TO CONSIDER WHEN COACHING GRASSROOTS SOCCER

The most fundamental skill in soccer is individual mastery of the ball and the creativity that comes with it. This should be a priority in training and games, especially in the early years. As this skill is mastered, the rest of the game becomes easier - both to teach and to learn. Practices should be built around facilitating the development of the skills necessary to move and control the ball well. As these individual skills and the creativity to make them come alive in the game are developed to a level of competence, the finer points, first of passing skill and later of team organisation can be taught.

The club coaches who work with our schoolboy/girl and junior players on a daily basis play a fundamental role in the development of soccer players in this country. PureSoccer will strive to place experienced coaches who have a clear understanding of the value of teaching technique at the schoolboy and junior levels. This coaching philosophy will be based on Guided Discovery principles. Equally important is the coach's personality and character. Working with 6- to 14-year-old children requires patience, kindness and respect.

Coaching soccer can be confusing at times because the game changes dramatically as the players improve in both skill and physical ability. When coaching young, developing players, as well as the adolescent players, Pure Soccer feels it is helpful to keep the following ideas at the forefront of your mind:

1. Set up situations where the players can learn by playing the game. The game is the best teacher for young players.
2. Coaches can often be more helpful to a young player's development by organising less, saying less and allowing the players to do more. Set

up a game and let the kids play. Keep most of your comments for before and after practice and during water breaks. Comments should be kept short and simple. Be comfortable organising a session that looks like street soccer.

3. Teaching and learning the game of soccer is a process: make your goals seasonal, as well as daily and weekly. Often, at the younger ages, the developmental efforts of one season are not noticeable in children until sometime in the next season.
4. Set age-appropriate goals i.e., know what the child is able to do at that age.
5. From a developmental standpoint, the young ages are the best ones for learning skills. Spend the time now encouraging this growth. By the age of 17 the capacity to pick up new motor skills begins to wane, while the ability to conceptualise team organisation, tactics and strategy increases. As a coach, work with these strengths, not against them.
6. Do not expect games and practices to look like professional soccer. If you want to use high-level soccer as a teaching tool, focus on the individual skill level of professional players, not their organisation.
7. Recognise and understand how the skills learned at each age are connected to preparing the player to move into the next phase of his or her development. Know what the next level of play is, and the general tools that your players should carry with them as they move on. Help them to be prepared.



8. Allow your players to develop these requisite skills in an environment where the main goal is to have fun with the ball.

9. The value of matches is that they provide youngsters with an opportunity to showcase their newly acquired skill and creativity. It is always nice to win; however that should not be your focus at the younger age groups.

10. Have a clear idea of what it is you want to accomplish at practice. Create exercises/games that replicate and repeat the movements and situations that are found in soccer and that allow the player to grow comfortable and confident with the ball at his or her feet. Encourage players to move with the ball at his or her feet and deal with boundaries, opponents, teammates and goals. Keep in mind that soccer is a pretty simple game. If you are involved
- in soccer for long enough, you begin to realise that all the many little games that work are really just variations on the same basic concepts. As long as the parameters that you have established in your exercises/small-sided games are true to soccer (goals for scoring and defending), creates the problems that you want the kids to solve (protecting the ball while dribbling, etc.), and allows your players to be challenged and find some success, you're on the right track.

11. Don't be afraid to experiment to find what works best.

12. Remember that the game is the best teacher for the players. Coaches and parents should think of themselves more as facilitators, monitors, guides or even participants, to provide a rich environment for the kids to learn from and enjoy.

## AGE APPROPRIATE RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE U6 TO U18 AGE GROUPS

The following pages represent Pure Soccer's recommendations on best practices in soccer according to the player's chronological age, from Under-6 through to Under-18. It is just as important, however, to consider the players' "soccer age" (i.e., his or her level of soccer competence), when determining themes to address in practice and matches. Remember that these recommendations are based on the assumption that the players have the ball skill necessary to move onto the next level of challenges. It is the responsibility of the coaches to continually evaluate and assess the needs of their players so that they can play soccer at the appropriate level. Parents and coaches alike should also take care to give their players a variety of playing experiences so that they are able to find some games where they are more challenged and some games where it is a little bit easier. In this

case, it is the responsibility of the adults to evaluate this on a team and individual basis.

### Encourage Creativity and Ball Skills Before Tactics!

The grassroots coach has an important role in encouraging the development of these fundamental tools. One of the goals of this coaching guide is to introduce parents/grassroots coaches to an approach to coaching young players that 1) embraces the lessons that are found in the game itself, and 2) is player-centered rather than coach-centered.

What does this mean? Consider the following comments on the growth of soccer around the world in the last 30 years, and how adults/coaches have approached player development:

Organized soccer "boomed" in the seventies. Not only did the number of people around the world who play in leagues drastically increase, also the age at which the youngest kids could start to play official games went down to 5 years and even younger. Parallel to this, many well organised coaching clinics and soccer schools, based on different educational theories were created, all hoping that a new Pele or (Johan) Cruyff would emerge from them and the brilliant collective play of the Brazilian team in the sixties and the Dutch ("total soccer") team of the early seventies could be reproduced. In the last decade many soccer



associations from different countries have asked themselves how (even if!) soccer can be taught.

By default, the well-intentioned and seemingly reasonable approach of many grassroots coaches is to look to adult soccer as their guide to teaching the game. What most grassroots coaches find helpful in the adult game is the organisation and positional responsibilities (tactics) that the adult players exhibit so well. They are concepts that adults can understand well and so, as coaches, many tend to bring an organisational or tactical approach to coaching young players. Coaches often focus on keeping the players under control and teaching what appears to be the basics of the game: organisation, positions, tactics, how to prepare to win games. We choose order over apparent chaos. It is tempting to strive to have the grassroots games look like adult games, with kids holding their own in set positions, organised and disciplined. The magic of the Dutch players of the early seventies, or Brazil's great players of the sixties, however, was not created from an organised practice routine.

It began when they were children, in street games where the player and the game were the dominant factors. There were neither adults nor a set schedule of mandatory practices and games. That said we live in a different world today. Adult supervision is often necessary to ensure proper safety. The presence of adults, however, does not have to inhibit the opportunity for children to be creative and experimental in their approach to learning soccer.

A primary focus for the coach at the underage level, through the U-12 age group, is to provide an environment that comes close to simulating the "street" games of our youth. In this setting much of the creativity and personality of kids developed naturally, without the involvement of adults. Kids need to be allowed to play freely, develop their skills and use them in a creative manner. Coaches should organise only so far as it helps to create this environment.

Beside the games, what do our training sessions look like? Are they mobile or static? Are the players free to experiment and learn from the game or are they constantly instructed? Is there room for trial and error, or are they simply told what to do and where to go? (Breathing life into soccer) ... is more about converting our training sessions into some form of street soccer in which players, with the help of the coach, experiment with the basic elements of the game in a competitive way... Learning (in this case, soccer) is about experimenting with new things and relating to them. (Guided Discovery Concept) Mastery means

coming to grips with things we have experimented with, often with repetition. It is all about developing an understanding and feel for the game. The lessons for all of us will come from the game and so will the answers.

With this in mind, try to encourage comfort with the ball and the confidence to use this skill creatively. Encourage the dribbler at the younger ages; your team of 8 to 10 year olds should be full of them. Dribbling, at the younger ages, is the child's attempt to gain control over the ball. Controlling the ball is the primary skill that every other skill in soccer depends upon. Although controlling the ball may seem to be a simple task, it actually takes an enormous amount of the child's energy. Do not expect him or her to look to pass or to pass with any level of competence or awareness, until he or she has first mastered this skill. Consider these two points. Children from about age 6 to 12 have an almost limitless capacity to learn body movement and coordination (i.e. motor skills). At the same time, their intellectual capacity to understand spatial concepts like positions and group play is limited. Work to their strengths.

Many kids who have been involved in organised soccer will often look to pass the ball or kick the ball down field as their first option. They have been taught to "share" the ball or they have learned that the best way to keep from making a "mistake" with the ball at their feet is to kick it away as fast as possible. For this reason, it helps if the coach continually encourages the players to make dribbling their first option. It may also help to make the players take at least two touches on the ball before they can look to pass. Remember that making mistakes at these early ages is a very important part of the player's learning and development. Encourage risk taking and applaud effort.

### **PURESOCCEER SAYS CONSIDER THIS:**

At the younger ages (6 to about 10), soccer is not naturally a team sport. On the contrary, it is a time for children to develop their individual relationship with the ball. The fact that younger children are placed into team environments is not their fault. Do not demand that the more confident players share the ball. Encourage them to be creative and go to goal. Do the same with the rest of your players. Work to bring all your players up to that level of confidence and comfort with the ball. Coaches should avoid the impulse to "coach" their players from "play to play"-in order to help them win the match. Coaches should not be telling but asking questions from their players.

# BALL CONTROL AND CREATIVITY: 6 -12 YEARS OLD

## U6 FUNDAMENTALS

Soccer at these ages should be discouraged in any form other than as a fun activity for kids that happen to include a soccer ball. There should be groups of players rather than teams. Attendance should be optional. Creating a joyful environment is mandatory.

### GAME APPLICATION

**Game Form:** 3 v 3 is best option for these ages  
**GK Status:** Goalkeepers should not be used  
**Field Size:** 4 v 4 (40 yards x 25 yards)—3 v 3 (30 yards x 20 yards)  
**Ball Size:** 3  
When ball goes out of bounds, the game is restarted with a kick-in or dribble-in. No throw-ins.

				FIELD SIZES		
Game Format	Squad size	Game Duration	Ball Size	Min/ Max Width	Min/ Max Length	Goal Sizes
3 v 3	Max 6	2 x 15 mins	3 or 4	18 to 22m	25 to 30m	5 f/1.52 m X 8 f/2.44 m
4 v 4	Max 8	2 x 15 mins	3 or 4	20 to 25m	30 to 36m	5 f/1.52 m X 8 f/2.44 m
5 v 5	Max 10	2 x 15 mins	3 or 4	25 to 30m	30 to 36m	5 f/1.52 m X 8 f/2.44 m

TECHNICAL	PHYSICAL	PSYCHOLOGICAL	SOCIAL
Basic techniques	Agility, balance, co-ordination, speed (ABCs)	Enthusiasm	Fun
Game as the teacher	Catching, passing, kick (CPK)	Imagination and exploration	Inclusion and participation
Improving basic skills	Movement skills	Progressive group activities	Safe Environment
Co-operative activities	Motor control activities	Problem solving	Form relationships
Basic problem solving		Understanding games	Simple rule and ethics

### THOUGHTS ABOUT THIS AGE GROUP:

Five- and six-year olds are too young to be involved in any structured, organised soccer program. At most, they should be involved in fun activities that encourage the children to explore their physical abilities, while also including a ball with which to play. Make sure these are activity-based games that emphasise exploration and experimentation with the rolling, spinning, and bouncing qualities of the ball. The soccer ball should be considered a toy. There should be no activities where players wait in lines to perform a pre-determined movement or required action. Five- and six- year olds, although still young, are beginning to gain more control over their bodies. At the same time, it is still new to them and they will require a lot of time and energy figuring out what their bodies can do, and how to use this developing coordination. Children at this age also love to use their imagination when they play.

Keep this in mind when designing games. They enjoy playing on their

terms, and as a by-product of their play, they will gain some limited comfort with the ball. Although they love to play, their ability to stay focused on any one thing is very limited. Keep your activities short and simple. Finally, even as they are steadily developing physical and mental abilities, they are still very young. Always treat children with care, patience and give plenty of encouragement. It can be helpful to include parents in the practice/play time so they can take ideas home with them to their backyards or parks. If children must be involved in these organised practice times, they should be having so much fun that when they go home, the soccer ball becomes one of their favorite toys.

### DURATION OF PRACTICE; RATIO OF BALL TO CHILD AT PRACTICE

30 to 45 minutes is the best option for these ages. Most of the practice should be spent in ratios of one ball per child or one ball per two children.



**GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF WHAT SHOULD BE HAPPENING DURING PRACTICE**

The children should be having fun with the ball. There should be periods of active playing where everyone is involved, and there should be ample opportunities for short breaks for water and for catching their breath. If there is more than one adult/coach, the children should be divided into smaller groups, with at least one adult per group. At these young ages, children work hard and tire quickly. Allow them to have “active rests,” where they are not running but are trying to do something specific with the ball, often sitting or standing. Everyone should be occupied with something, even when resting. Keep the numbers from 1 v 1 to 3 v 3 and keep as many children actively involved with a ball as possible. Let them go to small goals with no goalkeepers. When possible, a size 3 soccer ball should be used.

**GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF WHAT SHOULD BE HAPPENING IN MATCHES**

PureSoccer recommends that there be no organised matches at this age. Consistently set up mini games at practice for your kids to compete with and against each other, according to their age.

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

At these ages, the coach/parent should be positive and encouraging of each child. Specific soccer related information should be limited to basic ideas of how to best keep the ball from running out of bounds too often. There should not be any discussions about positions or any other team concepts.

**PURESOCCER SAYS CONSIDER THIS:**

At these young ages, the primary goal is to make the player’s experience with soccer so enjoyable that when he or she has a choice of activities, he or she choose to play soccer on his or her own.

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

- Patience, good humor, and a willingness to see the world through a child’s eyes. Also, the ability to speak their language and accept that the children’s play will not look at all like soccer.

**NUMBER OF MATCHES PER CALENDAR YEAR**

- Children at these ages should not be playing any organised games. Playing with and against their teammates during practice times is sufficient and is to be encouraged.

**BREAKS FROM ORGANISED/MANDATORY SOCCER**

- Children at this age should be able to play when they want to play, and walk away when they are through.

**RECOMMENDED LICENSE:  
UEFA KICK START 1 OR HIGHER.**

**NOTES:**



# U8 FUNDAMENTALS

Soccer is still all about having fun with the ball and encouraging the children to want to have the ball at their feet. The numbers should still be one and two players to a ball.

## GAME APPLICATION

- Game Form:** 3 v 3 and 4 v 4 are the best options for these ages
- GK Status:** Optional. Players should not be limited to playing one “position”
- Field Size:** 4 v 4 (40 yards x 25 yards)—3 v 3 (30 yards x 20 yards)
- Ball Size:** 3  
When ball goes out of bounds, the game is restarted with a kick-in or dribble-in. No throw-ins.

				FIELD SIZES		
Game Format	Squad size	Game Duration	Ball Size	Min/ Max Width	Min/ Max Length	Goal Sizes
3 v 3	Max 6	2 x 15 mins	3 or 4	18 to 22m	25 to 30m	5 f/1.52 m X 8 f/2.44 m
4 v 4	Max 8	2 x 15 mins	3 or 4	20 to 25m	30 to 36m	5 f/1.52 m X 8 f/2.44 m
5 v 5	Max 10	2 x 15 mins	3 or 4	25 to 30m	30 to 36m	5 f/1.52 m X 8 f/2.44 m

TECHNICAL	PHYSICAL	PSYCHOLOGICAL	SOCIAL
Basic techniques	Agility, balance, co-ordination, speed (ABCs)	Enthusiasm	Fun
Game as the teacher	Catching, passing, kick (CPK)	Imagination and exploration	Inclusion and participation
Improving basic skills	Movement skills	Progressive group activities	Safe Environment
Co-operative activities	Motor control activities	Problem solving	Form relationships
Basic problem solving		Understanding games	Simple rule and ethics

## THOUGHTS ABOUT THIS AGE GROUP:

These children are still young. By the end of this phase, (around eight- years-old) children are beginning to be able to apply past experience to the present situation. For example, at a simple level, they can remember what they were shown or what they tried with the ball from last practice. At the same time, this ability is not present on a consistent basis. They are still not able to imagine consequences (i.e., if you do this, what will happen?). Let them learn through experience. Do not attempt to replicate organisational schemes that you have seen older teams doing. Seven year olds and some eight year are not capable of playing anything that resembles organised soccer. For example, team concepts such as combination play or positions should not be introduced at this age. Do use older players as mentors and role models. Often the younger players will learn simply by watching how the older players move or by what they can do with the ball.

## PRACTICE

There should be a lot of playing with the ball in small numbers for relatively short periods of time. A key focus for this age is to encourage players not to fear the ball. Give each player plenty of opportunities to experience the ball at his or her own pace. For

example, organising games where there are multiple goals and balls for the players to work with. Also, games where they are changing direction and changing how fast they run, and dealing with balls on the ground and with bouncing balls.

## DURATION, RATIO OF BALL: CHILD

Practices should last 45 to 60 minutes. For most of the practice, each player should be actively involved with a ball. Games of 1 v 1 or games up to 4 v 4 with multiple balls involved (2:1 ratio of player to ball) and games to goals are also enjoyable and effective for this age.

## GENERAL DESCRIPTION OFWHAT SHOULD BE HAPPENING DURING PRACTICE

No Lines. No laps. No Lectures. Attendance is still optional. Provided there is adequate supervision, children at this age should be allowed to come in and out of practice as they please. At this point, if you have not already done so, you may want to introduce some boundaries. However, don’t allow the boundaries of the environment to hinder the training time by producing frequent stoppages of play because the ball goes ‘out of bounds.’ Try to keep the flow of the game going. Encourage informal play without pressure to “perform.” Encourage the basic skills and give the

players a lot of time with the ball. This will ultimately build their confidence. Make sure to always include games to goals.

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

Similar to the U-6 age group, the coach/parent should be positive and encouraging of each child. Specific soccer-related information should be limited to basic ideas of how to best keep the ball from running out of bounds too often, as well as some simple ideas for maneuvering in tight spaces and past opponents. Coaches should exclude discussions about positions or other team concepts. When addressing technique, consider that kids learn much by watching and copying. A good picture of proper technique can be a very powerful learning tool. Coaches should say things such as, "See if you can make it look like this." Limit time spent breaking down the mechanics. Instead, try to do most of your teaching of technique by offering a picture and then set up fun games where the objective of the game is for players to practice certain ways to control the ball. This approach allows the player a certain amount of freedom to develop their ball control and accept that there is more than one way of doing it. This is applicable at least through U-12.

### **GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF WHAT SHOULD BE HAPPENING IN MATCHES**

PureSoccer recommends that there be no organised matches at this age. Consistently set up mini games at practice for your kids to compete with and against each other, according to their age. There will be no need to keep score or even be very involved, except to enjoy the players and their effort and joy. Every player should look forward to opportunities to have the ball at his or her feet and to score. It is the coach's responsibility to encourage this fear-free culture. For the 7- and 8- year-old groups, these games should only be seen as another fun activity that happens to include a soccer ball. They are not ready for specific soccer type information and there should be no emphasis on team concepts or positions. They will have plenty of opportunities to play in "real soccer games," as they get older. Most of the information from coaches during these times will pertain to each player's individual relationship with the soccer ball — to want it, how to find it, deal with it, feel more comfortable with it, keep it close, etc.  
positions or any other team concepts.

### **PURESOCCEK SAYS CONSIDER THIS:**

How can the coach help all his or her players to develop to their potential? First, help your weaker players to develop their confidence with the ball. At the same time, continue to challenge your stronger players to expand their creativity and confidence.

Confidence is the key. The more time they spend during practice and games with the ball at their feet, the more comfortable they will become, the more confident they will become, the more they will look to get involved, and the more fun they will have with soccer.

Remember that the level of skill and competence that a 9-year-old exhibits is no indication of the skill and competence that he or she will exhibit at 16 or 18 years of age. You cannot predict which 9-year-old will develop into a real player. Therefore, work to encourage all your players to be competent and comfortable with the ball. This will give all your players the same opportunity to reach their potential. Work during practice to move all your players forward at their own pace. Do not be concerned with match results. Be concerned that all your players want the ball at their feet and they want to score. If you can accomplish this, you have successfully allowed your group to grow as soccer players. Unlike practice, you cannot add more balls/goals during games to give kids more chances with the ball. But you can emphasise certain themes for the players to focus on, such as getting involved, attacking the goal, taking chances, and then spend the length of the game reinforcing these points. This approach will give your players the green light to experiment and be creative - qualities that, unfortunately at the younger ages, are often discouraged on game day, in the name of being safe and winning.

### **BEST QUALITIES OF A COACH FOR THIS AGE PLAYER**

This coach must clearly understand the capabilities and limitations of this age and appreciate the power of learning by watching. He or she must have the ability to demonstrate or to use older players to demonstrate.

### **NUMBER OF MATCHES PER CALENDAR YEAR**

If you must play organised matches where the score is recorded do not focus on the result.

### **BREAKS FROM ORGANISED/MANDATORY SOCCER**

Children at this age should not be participating in a mandatory soccer program and should be free to participate at their own pace. There should not be a penalty or consequence for missing practice and no discussion about "commitment." An effort should be made to include any child that wishes to play soccer. It is healthy and appropriate to group players according to ability level, but movement between groups should be open and fluid in order to reflect changes in ability and individual development from year to year or every six months.

**RECOMMENDED LICENSE:**  
**UEFA KICK START 1 OR HIGHER.**

# BALL SKILL CREATIVITY & GRADUAL INSIGHT INTO THE GAME: 10 - 14 YEARS

## U10 through U12 Age Groups LEARNING TO TRAIN

### PURESOCCKER SAYS CONSIDER THIS:

At the grassroots level, games 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 are important as it gives the players a competitive focus in the match. Coaches are encouraged to promote soccer that:

- Is free flowing,
- Is coach-guided, not coach-directed,
- Demands that all players on the field, regardless of their specified position, participate in defending and attacking.

## U10 LEARNING TO TRAIN

### GAME APPLICATION

Game Form:	A maximum of 6 v 6 including a goalkeeper
Game Duration:	2 X 25 minutes
Substitution:	Free
GK Status:	Players rotate as goalkeeper in game. All players should experience playing all the different spots on the field during the season.
Field Size:	60 yards x 40 yards
Ball Size:	4

				FIELD SIZES		
Game Format	Squad size	Game Duration	Ball Size	Min/ Max Width	Min/ Max Length	Goal Sizes
6 v 6	Ideal 8/ Max 10	2 x 25 mins	3 or 4	30 to 36 m	40 to 55 m	6 f/1.83 m X 14 f/4.27 m
7 v 7	Ideal 9/ Max 12	2 x 25 mins	4	30 to 36 m	40 to 55 m	6 f/1.83 m X 16 f/4.88 m
8 v 8	Ideal 11/Max 14	2 x 30 mins	4	42 to 55 m	60 to 75 m	6 f/1.83 m X 18 f/5.49 m

TECHNICAL	PHYSICAL	PSYCHOLOGICAL	SOCIAL
Improve soccer specific techniques	Agility, balance, co-ordination, speed (ABCs)	Enthusiasm	Fun
Game as the teacher	Catching, passing, kick (CPK)	Imagination and exploration	Inclusion and participation
Intro to principles of play	Movement skills	Challenging activities	Safe Environment
Co operation and problem solving in small groups	Motor control activities	Problem solving	Form relationships
		Understanding games	More complex rules and discipline

### PURESOCCKER THOUGHTS ABOUT THIS AGE GROUP:

At this age, there are some children that are becoming more physically mature. Among your group, there are now some bigger and faster players whose eye-hand

and eye-foot coordination is a little ahead of the majority of your players. Some of your players may also demonstrate a greater capacity to stay focused for longer periods of time .At the same time; they are still people of action rather than thought. Explanations must still be brief, concise and purposeful.



What seemed to make sense to them last practice may have to be almost relearned at the next practice. Care should be taken with players, regardless of athletic ability, to address ball skill, especially in tight spaces. The faster, stronger players should not be encouraged to use their athleticism to solve all their problems. Building comfort with the ball at ages nine and ten will provide them with a variety of crucial tools they will need, as they get older, and the level of ball skill and athleticism rises. Begin to introduce the players to the idea of thinking about their decisions and movement as being related to themselves and one or at most two of their teammates and one or two of their opponents.

### GOALS FOR PRACTICE, GAMES AND SEASON

Building the player's skill base continues to be the most important goal of the season. At this age, this can be done through the introduction of a few more players in the games the coach sets up. Depending on the skill level of the group, anywhere from 3 v 3 to 5 v 5 plus goalkeepers should be the range during practice. Keep in mind that even the more competent players will not be working effectively as a group once the numbers get beyond 5 v 5. In the smaller numbers, emphasis must still be on creating 1 v 1 or 2 v 1 duels on the field. These are key situations that will continue to confront players throughout their career. Gaining competence and mastery over these numbers is the key to preparing players for the future.

- *What I hear I forget,*
- *What I hear and see I remember a little;*
- *What I hear, see and ask questions about or discuss with someone else, I begin to understand;*
- *What I hear, see, discuss and do, I acquire knowledge and skill;*
- *What I teach to another, I master.*

**(Adapted from the Chinese Philosopher Confucius)**

### PRACTICE

Keep the sessions simple and player centered. Give the players simple problem solving opportunities and plenty of opportunities to score goals. It is also important to be positive and to continue to create repeated opportunities for the players to express themselves through their ability with the ball, regardless of the outcome of their effort. Play, as both fun and as competition, is paramount. The more opportunities for each player to have experience with the ball, in fun games that allow them to go to goal, the better it will be for that player.

### DURATION, RATIO OF BALL: CHILD

Practices should consist of no more than 60 minutes of structured, adult-directed soccer with an additional 30 minutes allotted for free play/self expression and self-improvement.

### GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF WHAT SHOULD BE HAPPENING DURING PRACTICE

As much as possible let players experience soccer through 3 v 3 to 5 v 5 games that last for no more than 10 or 15 minutes at a time. The small numbers allow the players to gain critical practice at 1 v 1 and 2 v 1 situations, while still allowing for the fun and feel of soccer game. The time limit gives the players a predetermined amount of uninterrupted play, while also allowing an opportunity after 10 minutes for the players to refocus. At this age, players are typically ready for games or activities that help them learn when to play the ball sideways and backward. They also can begin to appreciate and enjoy playing the game skillfully.

### GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF WHAT SHOULD BE HAPPENING IN MATCHES

Players at this age should be limited to a few organised matches per season, and they should require little or no travel. Remember, these are young children who have several more years to go before they will have all the tools needed to attempt soccer in the adult form. The best path to truly preparing them for the adult game is not have them practice at playing the adult game; rather it is by giving them repeated opportunities to experience soccer in a more manageable form for their age. A team of 9 year olds who hold their positions and maintain a steady group of defenders who rarely, if ever venture into the attack, looks like a well disciplined and well organised team.

However, PureSoccer does not recommend this as a proper approach to developing players at this age. It does not develop good soccer players. This approach hinders the player's ability to experience and enjoy the natural spontaneity of the game. It does not allow the players to have an equal opportunity to go and "find" the game based on what they see from the game or to handle the ball and develop instincts for the game. These are skills that they will need at the older ages and that are often lacking in the older players. This approach, while "successful" in the short term fails the players in the long run because the environment does not allow the players to develop the tools they will need to be truly "competitive" i.e., prepared to deal with the game, at the older ages.

## A DISCUSSION ON SUBSTITUTION PATTERNS AT THIS AGE GROUP

Players should be given the opportunity to play soccer for extended, uninterrupted periods of time. This allows them to get a better feel for the flow of a soccer game. For example, it is more beneficial for a player to play for 12 straight minutes, than for him or her to play in two 6-minute periods. Substitution should be used to address injury, fatigue and lack of effort. It should not be used to punish a player for a soccer-related decision. At a minimum, players at this age should be playing 50% of the game. Ideally, the rosters are small enough to allow for close to 100% playing time for everyone.

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

The coach should make comments that help players to stay involved and keep track of things without giving them all of the answers: "Join the game," "Find the ball," "Go get the ball," "Don't hide." The coach for this age group does not focus on positions, yet encourages everyone to take part in attacking and defending. Try to manage the amount of information or feedback your players are receiving immediately after practices or matches. In today's grassroots soccer landscape, kids at these ages are being overloaded with adult feedback and evaluation. Too much or inaccurate information can be counterproductive to your goals.

## PURESOCCER SAYS CONSIDER THIS FOR AGES 8 -14

How do you set up a practice that allows players to "do"? How can a coach pull together the various games into an organised practice? First, keep things simple. Include no more than three or four exercises. For example, begin with a warm up that incorporates players moving with the ball. Then move to a game, but introduce a particular challenge or set of challenges for the players to solve (4 v 4 game with four goals; 4 v 4 game with no goalkeepers, where the players must hit the net on the fly to score a goal; 4 v 4 dribbling game; 4 v 4 with neutral players; etc.). Each of these games differs slightly in the challenges that are highlighted. However, the games still retain the essential qualities of soccer: attacking, defending, dribbling, passing, transition, dealing with teammates and opponents, and scoring goals. Finally, let them play a game, 3 v 3, 4 v 4, 5 v 5, or 6 v 6 etc., (depending on their age and ability to deal with these numbers), where there are no particular twists to the game, but where you can verbally emphasize and encourage players to experiment and take risks confronting some of these challenges your practice has been addressing.

## CONSIDER THIS

Do you notice an uneven skill level within your team? Often times on younger teams (8-10 years) you will notice a small number of relatively competent players per team who always seem to be around the ball. They have some quality(s), speed, strength, tenaciousness, and ball skill that separate them from their teammates. The rest of the kids are more like on-field spectators, never actively seeking to participate. If the ball does land at their feet, they look to get it as far away from themselves as possible, as quickly as possible. A consistent problem for the grassroots coach and players is that the ability level on a team is very uneven. This is a normal situation for younger teams across the country, especially, but not limited to the recreation level. There are several reasons for this imbalance: 1) Children start playing at different ages. There could be first-timers playing alongside kids who have been playing for several seasons. 2) Children in this age bracket develop at different rates, both physically and emotionally. 3) For many kids who lack the basic soccer tools, a full-out match can be intimidating. To address this challenge, try playing games with 3 balls going at one time. Another option is to be creative when choosing your groups for 'mini-games,' putting the more confident players together playing against each other and the more developing players playing in a different area. Occasionally using these methods will allow for all of the players to be challenged at a level that is appropriate to their own developmental level.

## BEST QUALITIES OF A COACH FOR THIS AGE PLAYER

- Energetic. Facilitating practice. Stimulates ideas.

## NUMBER OF MATCHES PER CALENDAR YEAR

- It is recommended that players play up to 20 matches per calendar year for their clubs. There should be a ratio of 2 or 3 practices per one match. Players should be given two days rest per week. In league games, there should be no more than the equivalent of 1 game per weekend. There should be no standings or post-season playoffs and a limited number of small-sided round robins. Tournament play should not be encouraged.

## BREAKS FROM ORGANISED/MANDATORY SOCCER

- At these ages, it is recommended that parents discourage their children from specialising in or playing only soccer and encourage participation in a number of different sports and activities.

## RECOMMENDED LICENSE

UEFA KICK START 2 OR HIGHER.

# U12 LEARNING TO TRAIN

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

				FIELD SIZES		
Game Format	Squad size	Game Duration	Ball Size	Min/ Max Width	Min/ Max Length	Goal Sizes
6 v 6	Ideal 8/ Max 10	2 x 25 mins	3 or 4	30 to 36 m	40 to 55 m	6 f/1.83 m X 14 f/4.27 m
7 v 7	Ideal 9/ Max 12	2 x 25 mins	4	30 to 36 m	40 to 55 m	6 f/1.83 m X 16 f/4.88 m
8 v 8	Ideal 11/Max 14	2 x 30 mins	4	42 to 55 m	60 to 75 m	6 f/1.83 m X 18 f/5.49 m

TECHNICAL	PHYSICAL	PSYCHOLOGICAL	SOCIAL
Improve soccer specific techniques	Agility, balance, co-ordination, speed (ABCs)	Enthusiasm	Fun
Game as the teacher	Catching, passing, kick (CPK)	Imagination and exploration	Inclusion and participation
Intro to principles of play	Movement skills	Challenging activities	Safe Environment
Co operation and problem solving in small groups	Motor control activities	Problem solving	Form relationships
		Understanding games	More complex rules and discipline

## PURESOCCKER THOUGHTS ABOUT THIS AGE GROUP:

The U-12 age group seems to be the moment in 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.

## 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 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, guided soccer with an additional 15 to 30 minutes allotted for free play/self expression and self-improvement.

## 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.

## 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 recognise 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.

*"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**

**PURESOCCER SAYS CONSIDER THIS**

The Football Association (FA), the governing body of English football, has made the following recommendations regarding their 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):

- Player’s 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 emphasise 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.

**NOTES:**

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

- Sensitive teacher, enthusiastic, possess soccer awareness, ability to demonstrate or utilise 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 ORGANISED/MANDATORY SOCCER**

- Players should be given time off from organised soccer each year.

**RECOMMENDED LICENSE**

UEFA KICK START 2 OR HIGHER.



# HOW TO FUNCTION IN A GROUP: 14 - 16 YEARS OLD

## U14 TRAINING TO TRAIN

### GAME APPLICATION

Game Form:	11 v 11
Game Duration:	2 X 35
Substitution:	No re-entry in half
GK Status:	GK chosen based on ability
Field Size:	100 yards x 60 yards
Ball Size:	5

				FIELD SIZES		
Game Format	Squad size	Game Duration	Ball Size	Min/ Max Width	Min/ Max Length	Goal Sizes
8 v 8	Ideal 11/ Max 14	2 x 30 mins	4	42 to 55 m	60 to 75 m	6 f/1.83 m X 18 f/5.49 m
9 v 9	Ideal 12/ Max 16	2 x 35 mins	4 or 5	42 to 55 m	60 to 75 m	6 f/1.83 m X 18 f/5.49 m
11 v 11	Ideal 16/Max 18	2 x 35 mins	5	FIFA Reg.	FIFA Reg.	8 f/2.44 m X 24 f/7.32 m

TECHNICAL	PHYSICAL	PSYCHOLOGICAL	SOCIAL
Skill execution under pressure	Adolescent growth spurt	Self concept	Fun
Attacking and defending principles	Aerobic development	Awareness	Accept responsibility
Intro to tactics and different positions	Changing shape	Responsibility	Appropriate behaviour
Game intelligence	Early v late maturation	Problem solving	Fair play
	Athleticism changes	Confidence	Personal and group responsibility
		Goal setting	
		Mental toughness	

### PURESOCCEER THOUGHTS ABOUT THIS AGE GROUP

This becomes the transitional age into the adult game. The match form should be 11 v 11 and there begins to be a greater focus on how ball skill and decisions influence success on the field. At this point, there is a clear difference between the emotional and physical maturity of a 13-year-old and an 18-year-old. While there is not a big difference between the ways a 13-year-old or an 18-year-old processes information (thinking and problem solving), keep in mind that the 13-year old are just beginning to think at this level. In contrast, an 18-year old will have more experience and confidence in his or her ability to think and problem solve in this manner. 13-year-old children are now less certain about themselves, less communicative, and somewhat more vulnerable. They are now more focused on their friends and begin to view themselves as being somewhat separate from their parents.

They are also stronger physically and are more aware of what their bodies can do (speed, strength, appearance). The 14-year-old is typically becoming more outgoing and confident and loves competition. He or she is also increasingly more able to plan, think ahead, and to imagine options. Coaches can have more discussion about the "what if..."

From now on the matches are full-sided 11 v 11 games. It is at the U-14 age group that coaches should begin to focus somewhat on team issues, such as how the backs work together in different parts of the field, or the relationship between the different lines of the team (defenders and midfielders, mid-fielders and forwards, etc.). As the players graduate to the junior level, they should possess a comfort with the ball and an insight into the game that will allow them to deal with the increased pace of the game, both in athletic speed and speed of decisions. The goal at this point

in a player's development is to begin expanding his or her understanding of the game as their technical and game maturity allows. Again, this is accomplished through the small-sided game model for practice (up through 9 v 9 games) and the full-sided game for matches. The graduation to the full-sided game model should be a logical and subtle step. The ideas and principles that apply to the smaller game models continue to apply to the bigger game. The outcome of the game at this age is still largely determined by ball skill and game insight.

"Skill is executing great ideas. The rest is just technique."

### **GOALS FOR PRACTICE, GAMES AND SEASON**

At these ages, ball skills, enjoyment and insight into the game, with a gradual introduction to fitness, mental toughness, and results are the keys. Success in winning matches should begin to be the product of a consistent and systematic approach to the game that focuses more on player development than on team building. The players should be developing an understanding and familiarity with each other on the field, but the desire to get a result on Saturday should not hamper their instincts for the game, or their desire to experiment and explore the game. These players are a long way from being "complete." Encourage them to play in different positions. Don't pigeonhole players based only on what is best for getting the result. Balance your players match experiences so that some games will allow you to experiment without necessarily sacrificing the result.

### **DURATION, RATIO OF BALL: CHILD**

Practice should be 75 to 90 minutes long

### **GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF WHAT SHOULD BE HAPPENING DURING PRACTICE**

At this point, most of the exercises and games that the players play in practice should be competitive, with a winning and losing team(s). Their focus should be on how their decisions and their ball skill help or hinder their team's ability to win at whatever game or exercise that they play. Two critical and interrelated themes in every practice should be recognising when and how to get the ball out of pressure with the goal of getting forward and recognising when and how to win the ball back, both as an individual and as a group. Games and exercises should be set up that encourage players to make decisions based on the cues and clues that exist in the game. Players should experience a variety of games, from 4 v 4 to 8 v 8:

some with and some without goalkeepers, some to small goals, some to large goals, some with 2 goals and some with 4 to 6 small goals. Each set up will encourage different challenges for the players to address – all within the basic framework of keeping the ball and winning the ball back – and going to goal, and winning the game.

The coach needs to consider the players' technical development because without sound technique, good ideas on the field are useless. Putting players in small-sided games where they have to solve a problem by application of their technique is a critical part of training this age. At times, success or failure in these games and this environment are the direct result of the players' ability with the ball. An important theme for this age, therefore, is to address the player's accountability for his or her decisions and ball skill as he or she and their team look to find ways to win their game. Figuring out how and when to keep the ball or when to go forward, as well as how and when to win the ball back are basic themes where this accountability can be addressed.

Within each game that the coach sets up for the players, this can be accomplished by focusing on speed of play and the ability to solve problems in competitive situations. When the demands of the game and the speed of play increase, many have a hard time mastering the ball, staying tuned in, seeing enough, and making sense of their plays. By placing players in competitive situations i.e., faster games, these aspects improve dramatically over time. If the players are not held accountable for their decisions or if the environment is not challenging or competitive enough to punish players for their mistakes, then the players run the risk of developing bad habits that may hinder their long-term development.

In training sessions play small-sided games with different demands and challenges. The games should be fast. To keep up with the speed of play, good technical ability and habits on and off the ball are necessary. The players need to stay tuned in mentally, to read the game, deal with the demands of the game, and to make decisions that help their team win. The goal is to help their personalities to grow and for them to begin to solve problems as a group. Therefore, give the players some freedom to make decisions, to solve problems, and to experiment with the game. Be more concerned with them developing into better players who can figure out how to win than with telling them exactly what to do.

**Soccer age and Chronological age of your players**

A child’s biological age is an important factor determining age-appropriate tasks. However, the reality of grassroots soccer is that, with its emphasis on team play, match results and competition, the Irish player is often graduating to the next level of soccer without having the proper tools. They are moving to this next phase of the game based on their biological age (their age in years), without regard for their “soccer age” (their level of soccer development). Coaches at the U-12 level for example, may voice frustration at their players’ inability to “figure out” tasks and concepts such as team possession and team defending.

The age-appropriate phases outlined in this are not set in stone. Each individual player develops at his or own pace, often irrespective of their age in years. The soccer ability of some of your players will match the age-appropriate phases that are outlined in this document. Some will lag behind and some will be ahead. When evaluating your players, it is important that you don’t confuse your players’ biological age, with their “soccer age.” Each player’s “soccer age” is unique to the individual. Your player’s “soccer age” depends on several factors: 1) The rate of each individual’s emotional and physical growth. 2) The frequency that they are playing soccer. 3) The soccer environment they are in (encouraging or discouraging individual creativity and comfort with the ball).

As a coach, therefore, it is critical that you are constantly evaluating and re-evaluating your players’ soccer ability. If your players’ skills do not match the demands of the corresponding age appropriate phase outlined in this document, it is your responsibility to adjust their soccer “diet,” based on their “soccer age.” In some cases, for example, this may mean that a 16-year-old player spends time addressing skills, or playing in numbers that seem more appropriate for a 12 year old. One thing is certain; the more comfortable your players become with the ball, the quicker and easier that they and you can expand their game to include new skills and tactical concepts.

**General description of what should be happening in matches**

Although the 13 and 14 year old begin to resemble adults, they are still far from a complete player.

Players must continue to focus on individual and small group ideas. This can be accomplished by

focusing on “the game within the game.” Find themes on which to focus that – when taken together and accomplished with skill – add up to successful soccer. There should be some attention to organisation, but the focus should be more on the smaller group relationships on the field, i.e., how the defenders work together or how the defenders work with the mid fielders, or how players can pressure the ball in 3’s and 4’s. The match continues to be the place for these players to develop their instincts for the game. Mistakes on the field should be errors of commission rather than errors of omission. It should not be the place for them to “play scared” or “safe.”

Coaches should encourage big picture themes such as staying connected with the rest of the team, as well as more focused idea like encouraging players to find ways to get past opponents – either individually or in groups. For example, on a given match day, the coach can encourage counting passes, or counting how often a dangerous ball is served into the box. The coach can even reward the team after the game based on how many of these plays they pulled off. At some point, as the players get better at these smaller pieces of the game, winning becomes the more consistent by-product.

**Consider this**

Matches are important as a means to player development (enjoyment, ball skill, insight, and fitness), not as the aim. In this respect, the usefulness of the game can occur in many different forms, from the 4 v 4 to the full-sided match model. Even at the senior level, the game still offers opportunities for growth, however the weight of balance between factors such as enjoyment, ball skill, insight, fitness and results shift more toward the latter.

**A discussion about the team meeting**

The team meeting, especially at the U-14 level and older, can be a very effective tool for helping players take more responsibility and ownership for the process and their own development. Often, the team meeting at this level takes the form of a lecture. Coaches should be careful not to turn these learning opportunities into one-way discussions. Players will only remain engaged and focused as long as they are interested in the topic. A great way to keep them listening and learning is to get them involved in the conversation. With this approach, the meetings become open discussions where the coaches throw out questions about the day, the game or the training session, and see what ideas or thoughts the players have. Sometimes the coach’s questions address principles of defending, principles of attacking, how goals are scored, or what competing means.



Some questions to start the discussion could include: What makes a good player? What we would do differently if we had the game all over again? The coach could ask the players to talk about who played well, for both teams. Why or how well did we execute our game plan? How well were we able to play “our game”? What influenced our ability to get our game going? And so on.

The point of these meetings is to encourage players to think and reflect, not to just show up and be told what to do or how to play. Rather it is an opportunity to start to see the game in a different light by talking about it, expressing how you feel on the field at different times and so on. The goal for the coaches, in all aspects of our interactions with our players, is to prepare them to be competent soccer players. One important aspect of this objective is to help the players become independent thinkers on the field. Allowing them and helping them to think critically about the game is a vital step in the process. The team meeting, when it actually involves the team, can help to move this process along.

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

- The U-14 coach should have a firm grasp of both the grassroots game and the junior game. He or she should have an appreciation for creativity and independent thinking. At the same time, he or she should be able to communicate group and team themes to the players in a clear and simple manner.

**NUMBER OF MATCHES PER CALENDAR YEAR**

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

**BREAKS FROM ORGANISED/MANDATORY SOCCER**

- Players should be given breaks from organised soccer that includes at least one extended break each year.

**RECOMMENDED LICENSE**

UEFA YOUTH CERT OR HIGHER.

**NOTES:**

# U16 TRAINING TO COMPETE

## GAME APPLICATION

Game Form:	11 v 11
Game Duration:	2 X 40 / 2 X 45
Substitution:	No re-entry
GK Status:	GK chosen based on ability
Field Size:	115 yards x 70 yards / 120 yards x 70 yards (minimum)
Ball Size:	5

				FIELD SIZES		
Game Format	Squad size	Game Duration	Ball Size	Min/ Max Width	Min/ Max Length	Goal Sizes
11 v 11	Ideal 16/Max 18	2 x 40 mins	5	FIFA Reg.	FIFA Reg.	8 f/2.44 m X 24 f/7.32 m
11 v 11	Ideal 16/Max 18	2 x 45 mins	5	FIFA Reg.	FIFA Reg.	8 f/2.44 m X 24 f/7.32 m

TECHNICAL	PHYSICAL	PSYCHOLOGICAL	SOCIAL
Become technically proficient	Muscle mass gains	Lifestyle skills	Fun
Executing the correct technique on demand	Strength improves	Communication	Develop emotional stability
Contributing to team play involving space and time	Power increases	Understanding competition and team play	Being socially responsible
Game intelligence	Improving recovery	Develop a stable temperament	Dealing with conflict
	Full potential is progressively achieved	Advanced coping strategies	Appreciating others

## GENERAL THOUGHTS ABOUT THIS AGE GROUP

By 15 and 16 years old, players should be comfortable dealing with the ball in a variety of situations. With this in mind, the coach should look to address several issues over the course of the two-year cycle that address how basic tactical issues can influence the game:

1. Small group ideas on both sides of the ball (Moving forward together on the attack, realistic pressure, and how to help your team win the ball back).
2. How the small group ideas tie into larger team concepts. Such as the similarities and differences between high and low pressure, keeping your back line connected with your attacking players during possession in your attacking half of the field, or rhythm of play issues (when to speed up and when to slow down).
3. Some basic positional responsibilities and how, as a team, these responsibilities are interconnected.

For example, how the defenders share defensive responsibilities, how decisions that the defending line makes are related to the decisions of the players in front of them, or the role of the holding midfielder in your team's possession.

4. Accountability for their execution and decisions with the ball. Players at this age must aspire to have technical precision. Players need to be made aware of how their ability to collect and pass the ball has a direct impact on all aspects of the game.

### Note

These concepts and goals are all based on the assumption that the players are good enough with the ball to be able to begin dealing this next level of soccer. If they do not possess the requisite skills to begin taking on these new challenges, it is the responsibility of the coach to make sure they continue to work on the tools that they lack.

**GOALS FOR PRACTICE, GAMES AND SEASON**

At the U-16 age coaches should continue to address principles, sub principles and themes of the game in generic situations i.e., not position-based, as well as in functional (positional) scenarios. Coaches can set up small-sided games to multiple goals where players and teams (of 6's or 7's) are dealing with pretty tight spaces, but with several goals. Defensively the players and teams are focusing on getting pressure to the ball so that they limit the number of goals that they need to actively defend. As these principles are being addressed, it should begin to make some sense to the players how to translate these concepts into team issues, such as how the defenders work together in different parts of the field or the relationship between the different lines of the team (defenders and midfielders, midfielders and forwards, etc.). Creating games where these larger team issues are introduced, experienced and discussed is also important at this age.

**GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF WHAT SHOULD BE HAPPENING DURING PRACTICE**

Players at these ages still need to learn by experiencing the game. The majority of the game should still be taught by putting the players in realistic soccer environments and allowing them to feel their way through the challenges that the game presents to them. As much as possible, these concepts and themes should be taught in competitions where the games or exercises end with a winning and a losing team.

**GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF WHAT SHOULD BE HAPPENING IN MATCHES**

The matches should be an extension of the themes that are being addressed on a daily and weekly basis. There should be awareness by the players and a discussion prompted by the coach about performance based on the players' ability to recognise themes during the game, and the players' technical ability to act on what they see.

**QUALITIES OF COACH AT THIS AGE GROUP**

- Charismatic. Experienced. Knowledgeable. Articulate. Managerial know how. Thoughtful persuader. An understanding of the 3 lines of the team and how each works as a separate unit as well as part of the team as a whole.

**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. Players should be given two days rest per week.

**BREAKS FROM ORGANISED/MANDATORY SOCCER**

- Breaks from organised soccer should be encouraged throughout year to avoid burnout.

**RECOMMENDED LICENSE**

UEFA YOUTH CERT OR HIGHER.

# COMPETITION AND OUTCOME

## 18 YEARS AND OLDER

### SENIOR LEVEL: U18+ TRAINING TO WIN

#### GAME APPLICATION

Game Form:	11 v 11
Game Duration:	2 X 40 / 2 X 45
Substitution:	No re-entry
GK Status:	GK chosen based on ability
Field Size:	115 yards x 70 yards / 120 yards x 70 yards (minimum)
Ball Size:	5

				FIELD SIZES		
Game Format	Squad size	Game Duration	Ball Size	Min/ Max Width	Min/ Max Length	Goal Sizes
11 v 11	Ideal 16/Max 18	2 x 40 mins	5	FIFA Reg.	FIFA Reg.	8 f/2.44 m X 24 f/7.32 m
11 v 11	Ideal 16/Max 18	2 x 45 mins	5	FIFA Reg.	FIFA Reg.	8 f/2.44 m X 24 f/7.32 m

TECHNICAL	PHYSICAL	PSYCHOLOGICAL	SOCIAL
Develop tactical understanding	Muscle mass gains Strength improves Power increases	Lifestyle skills	Fun
Executing the correct technique on demand	Improving recovery	Communication	Emotional stability to manage results
Game management skills	Full potential is progressively achieved	Understanding competition and team play	Being socially responsible
Game intelligence		Develop a stable temperament	Dealing with conflict
		Advanced coping strategies	Appreciating others

#### PURESOCCKER THOUGHTS ABOUT THIS AGE GROUP

At this age, the technical blueprint of who the player will be as an adult soccer player is almost complete. From here on, any growth is largely determined by how well the player has developed up to this point. Most of the growth is fine-tuning the qualities that already exist. Areas that can still be influenced greatly are game insight, physical conditioning and attitude. Their technical abilities and their “soccer sense” have placed them in a position to begin making a living as a player.

In this environment, however, they need to work everyday to improve their game in order to keep their place on the team and to continue to advance up the line to the senior team. Unfortunately, in Ireland players are not consistently exposed to this type of environment. As a result, Irish players, even at the regional and national level, generally do not have the technical proficiency, game insight or disciplined

approach that is expected at this age.

With that said, coaches should continue to place consistent focus on these three areas of the player’s game: technical proficiency and precision, game insight and the individual’s responsibility for improving his or her game. There are also several match related tactical issues on which the coach can now begin to place more focus. For example, playing different systems, preparing for matches and employing tactics based on the strength of your opponent. Within each of these match related tactical issues, comes a focus on general positional responsibilities as well as specific positional roles, and how and when to pressure as a team, all of which are determined by your system of play or the tactics used for your matches. Additionally, game management issues, such as how to keep a lead in the final 15 minutes of a match or how to push for a draw or a win in the 2nd half or in the final 15 minutes of a match become important themes to address.

## GAME MANAGEMENT

At these ages, players should be able to recognise the needs of a particular game and how to make the appropriate adjustments. There are several recurring themes during the course of a game that the coach can use to help the players focus their energies.

For example, within each 45-minute half, there are three often-distinct 15-minute segments. The first 15 minutes is often a “feeling out” period for both teams that is played at a fast pace, with neither team looking to take any chances with the ball in their own end. In the second 15 minutes, the pace often lessens and the “style” of the teams begins to take shape. In the final 15 minutes, fatigue is often a factor. With this in mind, it is helpful for the players to have some specific themes to look for during the game. These themes include, but are not limited to 1) the level of pressure by both teams, 2) the effect that pressure is having on both teams, 3) our style and how well we are able to play “our” game, 4) the style of the opponent, 5) which team is able to dominate the game, and in what manner is either team finding success, 6) adjustments our team might need to make based on events in the game, and 7) the effect that fatigue has on both teams in the final 15 minutes of both halves. Regardless of the issues that the coach chooses to emphasise, it is important that they are consistently addressed during practices and then reinforced during the games. In the end, it is all about getting the players to think critically on the field so that they will be able to recognise for themselves when they are at an advantage and when they are at a disadvantage, and then make decisions based on what’s happening in the game.”

## GOALS FOR PRACTICE, GAMES AND SEASON

Practices should always contain the following elements: competition, critical thinking and technical repetition. At this age, the physical (fitness) side of the game begins to play a larger role than before. Practices and matches should continue to focus on improving the players’ understanding of the tactical issues, such as how to control the rhythm of the game, as well as getting the group working not only functionally within the group but also as 11 players moving together on both sides of the ball. Some time should also be spent addressing how players and the team manage the game. Not only in terms of executing the game plan, but how to address different scenarios such as playing in the final 15 or 20 minutes of a game with a lead, when the game is tied, or when your team is losing. Players must be

challenged everyday to solve soccer problems. They must be held accountable for their decisions and their performance. These players are ready for an increased level of problem solving that focuses on using their soccer mind and not just their physical attributes. 17- and 18- year-old players playing against more skillful teams or older teams on a regular basis will help their development. Keep in mind that these older players should be better soccer players and not just better athletes. There should be a continued emphasis on professional attitude including game preparation, on and off field behavior, work ethic, individual fitness, dealing with health and preventative issues of health, and spending time on technical issues to keep sharp.

## GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF WHAT SHOULD BE HAPPENING DURING PRACTICE

All aspects of practice should involve player accountability. As mentioned earlier, U. 18 players will benefit from: 1) generic, non-functional exercises that emphasise principles of the game. 2) More specific, functional exercises that address working together within a “line” of the team or between “lines” of the team toward some soccer objective. Non-functional, principle-based games address themes of the game through a variety of small-sided games that challenge the players to recognise these themes in less “structured” environments. An example of a generic, “principle-based” exercise is the 6 v 6 game with bumper players on the side and end lines of the field which can be used to address group defending, possession, speed of play, etc. The emphasis of the exercise can be manipulated by the conditions and the rules. This one game can be played with no goals as a keep away game, with end line targets to address rhythm of play as well as group and team defending and with big goals to focus on attacking and defending issues that are created with big goals and goal keepers. All the while, the bumper players offer outlet options while allowing the field space to remain relatively tight. In this example, most of the coach’s teaching can be done as the ball is rolling or when the ball has gone out of bounds. Another way for the coach to influence these exercises is to play several games with a certain time limit for each game and discuss and make adjustments between games or play a longer game with a 5-minute half time. This model is beneficial because it is closer to how we coach in matches and it allows the players an uninterrupted amount of time to sort out the game for themselves.

The most common example of a functional exercise at this level is some type of half field or three quarter sized field game that has one full sized goal and two “counter” goals. These exercises are beneficial because the coach can address specific scenarios, as they would occur in specific parts of the field during a match. They also provide the coach and players with repeated opportunities to practice a particular issue. Finally, these exercises are a good way to address team issues when the size of your roster doesn’t allow you to play 11 v 11. For example, attacking and defending themes can be addressed beginning with 6 v 5 (4 defenders and a goalkeeper) and continuing to the full game. There are several points to consider that may impact the effectiveness of these exercises. 1) Even though there are typically uneven numbers and a partial field with one full goal, try to make the soccer as realistic and competitive as possible. Make sure that the amount of information that you give is balanced by uninterrupted opportunities for the players to play. This means that, occasionally, you need to allow the game to play for a certain amount of time, allowing for some change of possession as well as restarts, etc. 2) Try to work with both groups somewhat equally. If you are designing this exercise to work with your attacking group going to a big goal, have your assistant coach address issues with the defending group such as establishing a point in their defending half to “recover” to when they are able to get the ball out of their end. Likewise, they can work on when to step and pressure and when to drop off and how to keep their back line active, and within the back line – what is the position of their bodies and how can this influence their ability to defend? These can all be addressed while the attacking team is also focusing on their own issues.

**GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF WHAT SHOULD BE HAPPENING IN MATCHES**

The matches are the time for the players to apply the lessons from their week of practices, from their most recent match and as well as from the season thus far. Most of the coach’s role in the match occurred during the prior week. By game time, the coach’s role is to give the players some organisational focus during the pre game period and then make the appropriate adjustments during the match through substitutions and during the halftime break.

**QUALITIES OF COACH AT THIS AGE GROUP**

- Charismatic; well informed; up to date; experienced; knowledgeable; articulate; disciplinarian; no doubts about his/her authority and managerial know-how.

**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. Players should be given two days rest per week.

**BREAKS FROM ORGANISED/MANDATORY SOCCER**

- Breaks from organised soccer should be encouraged throughout the year to avoid burnout.

**RECOMMENDED LICENSE**

UEFA ‘B’ CERT OR HIGHER

**DEVELOPMENT OF GOALKEEPERS**

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

- |       |   |
|-------|---|
| U-6:  | No GK required for 3 v 3 games. No GK required for 4 v 4 games.   |
| U-8:  | No GK required for 4 v 4 games.   |
| U-10: | GK is included within team - rotate players as GK.  |
| U-12: | GKs identified within team - GKs share time but in order of priority, which is determined by the coach. |
| U-14: | GK chosen on ability and contribution to the team.  |

- The implementation of goalkeepers within grassroots soccer is an issue that creates considerable discussion among coaches. Restricting a player to the position of goalkeeper at too early of an age may have a negative effect and eliminate them from future participation in soccer
- Children grow at different rates and times. It is impossible to predict who will develop into the best goalkeeper when they are ten. Early selection as a goalkeeper may not be in the player’s best long-term interest.



- Development of a goalkeeper must be carefully monitored and conducted. The progressive teaching of technical skills is important given the concerns for safety within the position.

### MAXIMUM COMPETITION PER DAY

- Multiple games being played on one day or one weekend and its effect on the quality of the experience and development of the individual player.
- Playing schedules that include so many tournaments and games that there is never an “off season” for players.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

For tournament managers and schedulers:

- Players should not be asked to play more than the equivalent of one full-length game plus overtime per day.

- Where multiple games are a necessity:
- Schedule full-length games with a day of rest between games
- Play shortened halves for games played on back-to-back days
- U-14 players should not be asked to play more than 140 minutes of soccer in any 72-hour period.
- U-16 and older players should not be asked to play more than 160 minutes of soccer in any 72-hour period

## ABILITY TO PLAY UP AT AN OLDER AGE GROUP

- The majority of clubs and leagues allow talented, younger players to compete on teams with and against older players. This occurs as a natural part of the development process and is consistent throughout the world. Currently, there are isolated instances where rules or policies have been imposed that restrict the exceptional player from “playing up.” These rules regarding this issue vary. Some absolutely will not allow it. Others establish team or age group quotas while the most lenient review the issue on a case-by-case basis.
- Clubs that create rules restricting an individual player’s option to play at the appropriate competitive level are in effect impeding that player’s opportunity for growth. For development to occur, all players must be exposed to levels of competition commensurate with their skills and must be challenged constantly in training and games in order to aspire to higher levels of play and thus maintain their interest and passion for the game.

### RECOMMENDATION

- When it is appropriate for soccer development, the opportunity for the exceptional player to play with older players must be available. If there is a concern regarding the individual situation, the decision must be carefully evaluated by coaches and administrators familiar with the particular player. When faced with making the decision whether the player ought to play up, adult leadership must be prepared with sound rationale to support their decision. Under no circumstance should coaches exploit the situation by holding players back in their quest for winning team championships, nor should parents push their child in an attempt to accelerate their ascension to the top of the soccer pyramid. In addition, playing up under the appropriate circumstances should not preclude a player from playing in his or her own age group when it is evaluated to be in the best interest of the player’s development.

**PURESOCCEER WOULD LIKE TO THANK US SOCCER FOR ALL PLAYER DEVELOPMENT GUIDELINES IN THIS DOCUMENT.**





**PURESOCCKER LIMITED**  
**UNIT 8 NAAS TOWN CENTRE**  
**NAAS**  
**CO KILDARE**  
**W: [www.puresoccer.ie](http://www.puresoccer.ie)**  
**E: [info@puresoccer.ie](mailto:info@puresoccer.ie)**