

# Chapter 1

## Teaching Soccer to Children

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### *In This Chapter*

- ▶ Preparing to coach
  - ▶ Planning for your practices and games
  - ▶ Coaching your own child
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**C**ongratulations on your decision to coach a youth soccer team this season. You're embarking on a wonderful journey that will be filled with many special moments that both you and your players — regardless of their age or skill level — will remember for the rest of your lives.

Before you step on the field, you need to be aware that you're taking on a very important role. How you manage the youngsters on your team, and the way you interact with them during practices and games, affects how they feel about the sport and even themselves for years to come. How you handle the lengthy list of responsibilities that comes with the job either helps them develop an unquenchable passion for the game or drains their interest in ever participating again.

All you need — besides a whistle and clipboard — is some good information to guide you through the season. In this chapter, you find useful, straightforward insight and tips to help you and your team have a safe, fun, and rewarding season.

### *Doing Your Homework*

Whether you volunteered to coach youth soccer this season because you want to spend more time with your child or because the league has a shortage of coaches and you're willing to step forward, you're accepting a responsibility that you can't take lightly. Before you roll out the soccer balls at your first practice, you have plenty of work to do behind the scenes to ensure that the season gets off to a smooth start.

## *Working with — and not against — parents*

The overwhelming majority of parents with children involved in organized youth soccer programs are a supportive and caring group who want only the best for their children. Of course, parents in the minority can turn out to be a source of season-long aggravation that you may be forced to deal with. You can head off many potential problems by gathering the parents together before you begin the season and laying the ground rules on what you expect in terms of behavior during games, as well as their roles and responsibilities.

Coaches and parents finding ways to work together — the adult form of teamwork — is a formula that produces tremendous benefits for the youngsters. Coaches and parents who clash over everything from playing time to why Junior isn't getting to play sweeper spoil the experience for that child, and quite possibly others as well, when the negativity seeps into the team's practice sessions and envelops game day.



With parents, keep the following in mind:

- ✓ **Be proactive with them.** Outlining your expectations and coaching methods before the season paints a clear picture to parents about how you plan to handle the season. When parents hear firsthand that you're committed to skill development over winning and that you adhere to the league's equal-playing-time rule, you leave no room for petty squabbles over how much playing time their children receive. If you don't clarify these issues for parents well in advance, you're asking for a heap of trouble — and you'll get it, too. In Chapter 2, we help you develop your coaching philosophy and become familiar with your league so that you can clearly communicate these points to the parents.
- ✓ **Involve them.** Parents invest a lot of time and money in their child's soccer experience, and being included (instead of simply watching practice from the car or dropping their youngster off and then running errands) makes it far more worthwhile to them and their child. Parents can do more than bring treats after the game, too. Find ways to involve them at your practices, and recruit the right ones to assist you on game day; doing so helps you turn the season into a rewarding one for everyone involved. Throughout the book, you can find tips on boosting parental involvement, from practice drills that have team parents sticking around (see Chapter 6) to working with parents when you take a step up the coaching ladder and graduate to travel teams (see Chapter 20).
- ✓ **Communicate with them.** Besides a preseason parents meeting (which you can read all about in Chapter 4), keep the communication lines open all season long. Talk to the parents about the kids' progress; share your thoughts on where they really make improvements; offer suggestions for things they can do to help their youngsters develop in other areas; and

check in from time to time to find out whether their children are having fun playing for you. Including parents in all facets of the season is the right thing to do and the smart thing to ensure that their children have positive experiences. In fact, we suggest that you meet 1-on-1 with each parent as part of your midseason progress review (see Chapter 8).

Despite your best efforts, problems may arise with parents. Our advice is to remain calm and in control of your emotions, and never allow situations to escalate. Check out Chapter 19, where we help you troubleshoot this issue and other problems coaches are most likely to face throughout the season.

## *Deciphering rules and mastering terminology*

You've taken the job of teaching kids the world's most popular sport, and if you're like many volunteer coaches today, chances are pretty good that you never played soccer growing up. Therefore, to fulfill your responsibilities, you have to get a good handle on the basics of the game and be able to explain rules, introduce terminology, and teach strategies to your young players. Sound complicated? It isn't; it just takes a little time and effort on your part to learn some of the quirky rules (like offside) and some of the terms (like corner kicks and indirect free kicks) that are at the heart of this great game. We open up the rulebook in Chapter 3 and cover all the terms that you need to know. And we concentrate on the skills, techniques, and strategies that you need to pass along to your kids throughout Parts II and III of this book. Whether you need to brush up on fundamental skills for a beginning team or work out a defensive formation when you play against that high-octane older squad, we have you covered.



One of the most important steps you can take is find out what special rules your league operates under. Quite often, the rules that leagues utilize vary depending on the age and experience level of the players. Everything from the size of the field to which rules are enforced changes from community to community. Knowing these rules — and sharing them with your players — makes a tremendous difference in your players' enjoyment of the sport.

## *Taking the Field*

Coaching youth soccer is all about the kids, their smiles, and their eagerness to get started learning from you and developing skills under you. What you say and do from day one through the course of the season has a major impact on whether these kids take a great interest in the sport and continue playing it for years to come or choose to turn their backs on it.

## *Practice planning*

The drills you choose to teach kids skills and the manner in which you go about designing your practices influence your team's enjoyment and progress during the season. Practices that kids look forward to with the same enthusiasm as the first day of summer vacation promote learning and skill development. On the other hand, practices that you put together in your car in the parking lot five minutes before the players begin arriving stifle learning and put a roadblock on fun. While working with your team, keep the following thoughts in mind to help squeeze the most out of your sessions:

- ✓ **Be more than a coach.** Although you're teaching your players the basics of the game, you also have the opportunity to impact their lives in other areas. While they warm up, talk to them about the importance of doing well in school, and ask them what their favorite subjects are. Take the time to speak to them about how important it is to listen to what their parents and teachers say and what it means to be a good kid. Your practices can be great times to teach more than how to kick a soccer ball, and the words you deliver may stick with the children for the rest of their lives.
- ✓ **Create a positive atmosphere.** Turn your practices into sessions in which youngsters can make mistakes without the fear of being yelled at in front of their teammates. Letting the kids know from the first practice of the season that making mistakes is part of the learning process allows them to relax and, in the process, helps them learn skills quicker and perform better.



Choose drills that keep kids moving at all times and are challenging enough to hold their interest. Drills that force kids to stand in line awaiting turns are not only boring, but also dramatically cut down on the number of touches of the ball each child receives, which minimizes learning. Check out Chapters 10, 14, and 17, where we provide all sorts of drills and ideas for beginning, intermediate, and advanced players.

## *Game day*

Coaching is about constantly adapting to ever-changing conditions, and that's most evident on game day, when you're challenged to make all sorts of decisions in a short period of time. With younger kids just starting out in the sport, you want to make sure you rotate them around to all the different positions so they can experience the sport from a variety of perspectives. With the older kids, you may find yourself making halftime adjustments and determining whether a more aggressive approach serves the team best in the second half or whether a more defense-oriented style of play is warranted. But don't worry; we help you handle it all in Chapter 7.



Game day provides many great teachable moments for the kids. It gives you a chance to reinforce some of the points you talk about all week during practice, such as the importance of working as a team, displaying good sportsmanship toward the opposing team and the officials, abiding by the rules, doing your best at all times, and having fun regardless of what the scoreboard reads.

## *Balancing Parenting and Coaching*

We certainly don't have to tell you that being a parent is a difficult job, but here's what we can share with you: Coaching your son or daughter's soccer team is equally tricky. After you step inside the white lines, and your child straps on the shin guards, you're likely to encounter an assortment of issues. We hope most of them are minor, but some may be problems that you never even dreamed of dealing with before. Don't panic! Although coaching your child can be complex and confusing, it can also be, if handled properly, an extremely rewarding experience for both of you. Sure, you'll probably experience occasional bumps along the way, but if the two of you work together, you'll enjoy some very special memories to savor for a lifetime.

And take comfort in the fact that you're not alone. Approximately 85 percent of all volunteer soccer coaches have their own sons or daughters on the team, so you're venturing into common parenting territory.

## *Kicking around the decision with your kid*

Before you decide to grab the whistle and clipboard and assume the role of soccer coach, sit down with your child and gauge how she feels about you overseeing the team this season. If you don't ask her how she feels, you'll never know. Many youngsters are thrilled to have their dad or mom as coach, and if you see that sparkle in your child's eyes when you bring the subject up, that makes all the time and effort you put into the season well worth it.

On the other hand, some children — for whatever reason — aren't going to feel comfortable with the idea and would prefer that their parents don't coach the teams. Take your child's wishes into account before making the decision to step forward.



Here are a few tips to help you reach the right decision on whether you and your child are ready for you to pick up the coaching whistle:

- ✓ **With your child's help, put together a list of all the positives and negatives about being the coach.** On the positive side, you may list that the two of you will be spending more time together than before and that, as the coach, you'll ensure that your child and the rest of the team have fun

as they learn new skills. Resolve the negatives by working with your child to develop solutions. For instance, your child may expect to play a certain position simply because you're his parent. Explain that you must be fair to everyone and can't show favoritism and that your child and his teammates will have an equal chance to play different positions.

- ✔ **Examine your motivations.** Don't take on the task of coaching your son or daughter if your goal is to make your child a star. You must be willing to do whatever is best for your child's overall development, and harboring thoughts of college scholarships and athletic stardom is simply a blueprint for trouble.
- ✔ **Explain to your child that being the coach is a great honor.** The fact that he's "sharing" you with the other kids during games and practice sessions doesn't mean you love him any less. Explain to him that your responsibility is to help all the players on the team. Taking the time to explain your role to your child helps promote better understanding and reduces the chance of problems arising after the season gets under way.

After the two of you talk things through, take your child's thoughts seriously. If he still isn't comfortable with the idea, push your coaching aspirations to the side for the time being. You can revisit the subject with him the following season to measure his feelings. Just because he isn't ready this season doesn't mean he won't want you guiding his team next season or at some point in the future. The last thing you want to do is turn your child off to the sport and make him uncomfortable.

## *Focusing on family-friendly field rules*

If you and your child agree that having you grab the coaching reins is a good move, keep these tips in mind as you navigate through the season:

- ✔ **Remember that you're still the parent.** Whether the team wins or loses, you have to step out of coaching mode and remember that first and foremost, you're a parent — and that means asking your child whether she had fun and praising her for doing her best and displaying good sportsmanship. Take your child out for that post-game ice cream or pizza whether she scored a goal or tripped over the ball on a breakaway.
- ✔ **Keep talking.** To effectively monitor how the season is going, you want your child to understand that she can come to you with a concern or problem at any time. Just because you're the coach doesn't mean that certain topics are now off limits.
- ✔ **Don't push practice at home.** If your child has a bad practice, you may be tempted to work with her on specific skills as soon as you get home. Never push your child in this direction. In casual conversation, ask her whether she wants to spend a few extra minutes practicing a certain skill that may be giving her a bit of trouble. If she does, that's great, but

if not, let it go. Pushing your child to perform extra repetitions can drain her interest in the sport.

- ✔ **Never compare siblings.** Let your child develop at her own rate. She should never feel burdened by your expectations to control or kick a soccer ball as well as her brother did at his age. This type of comparison can crush her self-esteem and smother her confidence.
- ✔ **Praise, praise, praise!** Be sure to praise your child's willingness, understanding, and cooperation in this special venture. Coaching your child can be one of the most rewarding experiences you ever have, but it isn't always easy.
- ✔ **Be careful with car conversations.** A lot of adults have the natural tendency to replay the game on the drive home, and that's perfectly okay if the youngster is an enthusiastic participant in the discussion. But if the game didn't go as well as you planned, refrain from dissecting every mistake, and don't spend the ride probing the youngster for reasons why the team lost or why she didn't perform up to the best of her ability.
- ✔ **Refrain from pushing too hard.** All parents naturally want their kids to excel, no matter what the activity. In a sport like soccer, sometimes parents go overboard and take their newfound coaching position to the extreme by viewing the position as a chance to control their child's destiny. When this happens, the youngster's experience is unfairly compromised because the parent typically pushes her harder than the other kids, demands more from her, and piles on criticism when she's unable to fulfill the unfair expectations. When parents lose sight of the big picture of what youth soccer is all about, problems materialize that impact the child's emotional well-being, as well as her interest in learning and playing soccer.



Coaching your kid can be a great experience for both of you, but the job can feel a bit like walking a tightrope at times as you try to avoid two common traps that many coaches (especially coaches who are unfamiliar with their roles) tend to fall into. Ideally, your behavior should fit somewhere between these two extremes:

- ✔ **Providing preferential treatment:** Parents naturally lean toward showing preferential treatment to their own children, whether they realize it or not. Typically, they give their children extra playing time; shower them with more attention during practices and games; and assign them special duties, such as team captain. Showing favoritism throws your child into a difficult spot with her teammates and weakens team camaraderie.
- ✔ **Overcompensating to avoid the preferential-treatment label:** Coaches can also go too far out of their way to ensure that no one thinks they're giving preferential treatment to their children. Quite often, the coach will reduce his child's playing time or give his child less 1-on-1 instruction during practices. Taking away playing time from your child to steer clear of the favoritism issue does, in effect, create a negative atmosphere for your child. She will question why you're punishing her unfairly.



## Game-day questions to ask your child

Ideally, your child is looking forward to game day. Keep in mind that the conversations you have with your child on game day — whether at the breakfast table or in the minivan on the drive to the game — have the power to either minimize nervousness and ensure a fun and relaxed demeanor or to fuel stress and hamper your child's ability to perform. Here are a few questions that result in positive game-day discussions:

✓ **What are you most looking forward to about the game?** Your child's response speaks volumes about his state of mind and often provides valuable insight on the mood of the entire team. If your youngster seems overly uptight, the rest of the team may be as well. Perhaps this apprehension stems from the extra emphasis you're unknowingly putting on this game or the way you've been interacting with the kids during practices recently. Listen to your

child's response, but also pay attention to the tone of his voice and his body language.

✓ **What have you enjoyed the most about the season?** The answer to this question provides some valuable information. If your child mentions a particular drill that you used way back in the second week of the season but haven't used since, it may be something worth using at one of your upcoming practices because several other kids likely feel the same way.

✓ **How about trying that new skill today, if you get a chance? I'm looking forward to seeing it.** Genuinely and enthusiastically letting your child know that you can't wait to see her put her new skill to use is a real confidence-booster. This comment shows your child that you're pleased with how she's picked up the skill, and it gives her that little extra impetus to want to use it during the game.