

## Chapter 1

# Teaching Football to Children

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### *In This Chapter*

- ▶ Pre-season preparation
  - ▶ Planning for practices and games
  - ▶ Finding a parent-coach balance
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**F**ew experiences are more rewarding than coaching a youth football team, so congratulations for taking on such a special role. Your journey through the season will be packed with moments that make you smile and that you and your players — regardless of their age, skill level, or experience playing the game — will remember for the rest of your lives.

Before you step on the field, please be aware that you're taking on a position that can have far-reaching implications on your players for years to come. How you approach the season and how you interact with your players during practices and games impact how they feel about themselves, the sport of football, and you. The methods you employ for handling all the responsibilities that come with the job can either help them develop an unquenchable passion for the game or bury their interest in ever putting on a helmet again.

But don't worry. All you need — besides a whistle and clipboard — is some quality information on all the different aspects of the game. In these pages, we give you everything you need to navigate your players through a safe, fun, and rewarding season.

## *Gearing Up*

You may have volunteered to coach this season because you want to spend a little more time with your child and help introduce him to the exciting world of youth football. Maybe the league has a shortage of coaches and you're willing to step forward to help out. Or perhaps you love working with kids and want to give coaching football a shot. Whatever your reasons, you're accepting an enormous responsibility. Before any youngster puts on the shoulder pads and buckles his chin strap, you have lots of work to do behind the scenes to ensure that the season gets off to a smooth start.

## *Getting parents on your side*

The overwhelming majority of parents with children in organized youth football programs are wonderful, supportive, and caring, and they only want the best for their kids. Of course, some of the parents in the minority can end up being a source of season-long aggravation that has you reaching for the aspirin.

Be prepared to deal with these situations quickly and efficiently so they don't become a distraction and detract from the kids' enjoyment of the season. You can sidestep a lot of potential problems by gathering the parents together before you start to work with their kids, laying the ground rules on what you expect in terms of behavior during games, and outlining the parents' roles and responsibilities.

As you work with your players, you'll stress the importance of teamwork all season long; your interaction with parents is really no different. When coaches and parents find ways to work together — the adult form of teamwork — you have a really special formula that produces tremendous benefits for the youngsters. On the other hand, coaches and parents who clash over playing time issues, bicker about who gets to play specific positions, and even argue over whether the team should use more passing plays spoil the experience for everyone involved. These types of disagreements cast a shadow over the entire team and can turn practices and games into activities the children no longer look forward to.



Parents play big roles in youth football programs. Keep the following advice in mind to help make your dealings with parents go smoothly:

- ✓ **Be proactive with parents.** Outline your expectations for them and their kids. Explain your coaching methods. Detail what you want everyone to take away from the experience before the first practice. Painting a clear picture leaves little room for those dreaded misunderstandings to occur, and parents who've never had a child involved in organized football before will especially appreciate the information.

Telling parents firsthand that you're committed to skill development over winning or that you adhere to the league's equal playing time rule can prevent petty squabbles. If you don't clarify these issues for parents well in advance, you'll invite more problems than you can imagine — and you'll get them, too. Chapter 2 helps you develop that all-important coaching philosophy and become knowledgeable about all your league's policies and rules so you can clearly communicate this information to the parents.

- ✔ **Involve them.** Parents invest a lot of time and money in their child's football experience. That experience can be much more enjoyable for them and their youngsters if you find ways to include Mom and Dad on your season-long journey — and that's a wonderful gesture. Parents can do so much more than bring snacks and drinks to games, too. Find ways to involve them at your practices, and recruit the right ones to assist on game day. You can make the season memorable and rewarding for everyone involved. In Chapter 4, you can find a variety of tips on boosting parental involvement.
- ✔ **Communicate with parents.** Besides conducting a preseason parents meeting (covered in Chapter 4), you have to keep those communication lines open all season long. Talk to parents about their children's progress; share your thoughts on areas of the game where the kids are really making improvements; offer suggestions for things parents can do to help their youngsters develop in other areas; and check in from time to time to make sure the kids are having fun when they play for you. Including parents in all facets of the season is the right thing to do, the smart thing to do, and the only way to ensure that the children have a positive experience.

Despite everything you do to include the parents and make them feel a valuable part of the season, problems may still arise. You should remain calm and in control of your emotions and never allow situations to escalate. In Chapter 19, we run down some of the more common problems that coaches have to address, and we offer the best approaches for solving them before they can impact the season.

## *Figuring out the rules and lingo*

To be an effective coach, you need a really good handle on the basics of the game. Most importantly, you have to be able to explain rules, introduce terminology, and teach strategies to your young players. That's not as complicated as it may seem, but becoming comfortable with some of the quirkiest rules that you're not completely familiar with — such as what types of blocks are allowed on kickoffs and punts — and new terms, such as *illegal motion* and *false start*, takes some time and effort.

We present the rule book and help you get a handle on everything from terminology to penalties in Chapter 3. Throughout Parts II, III, and IV of this book, we give you a detailed rundown of the skills, techniques, and strategies that you need to pass along to your players. And we've got you covered if you need a refresher on some of the fundamental skills to teach a beginning team or if you need more-detailed information for an older, more football-savvy squad.



Knowing any special rules that are in place in your league is important. 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 change from community to community. Knowing these rules — and being able to share them with your players — make a tremendous difference in their enjoyment of the sport.

## *Taking the Field*

The kids' smiles, the excitement in their eyes, and their enthusiasm to play and learn from you is what coaching youth football is all about. What you say — and how you say it — from day one and throughout the season make a significant difference. The kids may become passionate about the game and play it for years to come. Or they may walk away disappointed in their experience and will look to other sports in the future. Plan ahead, and you can keep interest levels soaring.

## *Practice planning*

How you design your practices and the drills you choose to teach impact the kids' enjoyment of playing for you. Practices that kids look forward to can send the learning and skill development skyrocketing. Practices that you put together while sitting in your car five minutes before the players arrive tend to smother learning and fun.

While working with your team, keep the following thoughts in mind to help squeeze the most out of every practice:

- ✔ **Be more than a coach.** Sure, you'll teach kids the basics of football, but your impact on their lives can extend far beyond how to properly run a slant pattern or make a tackle. Your position as coach gives you a special opportunity to make a significant difference in a lot of other areas. For example, while the kids are warming up, you can briefly talk to them about the importance of doing well in school or speak about staying away from tobacco and drugs. The words you deliver may stick with a child for the rest of his life.
- ✔ **Create a positive atmosphere.** Make your practices stress-free sessions where youngsters can make mistakes without the fear of criticism or embarrassment. Let the kids know from the first practice of the season that mistakes are a part of the game and that all you ask is that they listen to your instructions and give their all. Kids who know they can make mistakes without unpleasant repercussions will be much more relaxed and will perform better.



When choosing practice drills, opt for those that keep kids moving and are challenging enough to hold their interest. Using drills that force kids to stand in line awaiting turns are boring and cut into how much time each child actually gets to work on that particular skill. The array of drills for offense, defense, and special teams in Chapters 11, 14, and 18 can challenge and excite beginning, intermediate, and advanced players.

## *Game day*

Coaching youth football requires constantly adapting to ever-changing conditions. This is especially true on game day, when you're challenged to make all sorts of decisions with little time and lots of distractions. You have playing time to monitor, plays to call, formations to adjust, and pre-game, halftime, and post-game talks to deliver. Yes, game day brings a lengthy list of responsibilities, but don't go reaching for the antacid tablets just yet. In Chapter 7, you can find all you need to help your game day go smoothly.



Besides giving kids the chance to use their skills against opponents, game days provide some great teachable moments. Reinforce what you brought up during practice, such as the importance of working together as a team, displaying good sportsmanship toward the opponents and officials, abiding by the rules, doing their best at all times — and having fun, regardless of what the scoreboard reads.

## *Coaching Your Own Child*

Climbing Mount Everest is hard. So are winning a Nobel Peace Prize, running a marathon — and coaching your own child in football. Most of you already know that being a parent presents daily challenges and is enormously difficult at times. Well, that doesn't stop after you step on the football field with your youngster and dozens of other kids. A number of parent-child issues can arise during the season. Most of these challenges are as minor as getting your child to go to bed on time so he gets plenty of rest for tomorrow's game. But problems that you never dreamed of when you volunteered to coach this season can appear. Don't panic!

Yes, the job of coaching your own child can be complex and confusing, but when you handle it properly, it's one of the most rewarding experiences you'll ever have. Sure, chances are pretty good that there'll be the occasional bump along the way, but by being aware of the potential problem areas and working together, you can enjoy some very special memories that you and your child will savor for a lifetime.

## *Kicking around the coaching decision with your kid*

Before you decide to grab the clipboard and assume the role of football coach, sit down with your child and gauge how he feels about your coaching the team this season. The decision isn't about fulfilling your dream of coaching a football team. It's about ensuring that your child will be comfortable with your instructing him and his teammates all season long. If you don't ask him how he feels, you'll never know. Many kids are thrilled to have their parent as coach, and if you see that grin on your child's face and the sparkle in his eyes when you bring up the subject, that makes all the time and effort you'll be putting into the season well worth it.

On the other hand, some children — for whatever reasons — don't feel comfortable with the idea and would prefer that their parent didn't coach the team. Take their wishes into account before deciding 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 start diagramming plays, teaching tackling techniques, and giving pre-game pep talks:

- ✔ **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 can spend 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 automatically expect that he'll play the position of his favorite professional player simply because you're his parent. Explain ahead of time 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 own motivations.** Don't take on the task of coaching your son if your goal is to make him a star. You have to 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'll be "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 underway.

After the two of you have talked 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. Plenty of seasons are left in his future, and you can revisit the subject with him the following year to measure his feelings again. 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 from the sport and make him uncomfortable. So embrace your role as a supportive parent. Be a positive influence in the stands. At home, help your child work on skills his coach is teaching him, and your youngster may well be open to the idea of playing for you sooner than you think.

## *Acting as both parent and coach*



If you and your child agree that coaching his team is a good idea, keep these tips in mind as you navigate through the season to help ensure that everything runs smoothly:

- ✓ **Remember that you're still the parent.** Whether the team wins or loses, you have to put down your playbook and keep in mind that you're a parent first and foremost — and that means asking your son whether he had fun and piling on the praise.
- ✓ **Keep talking.** To effectively monitor how the season is going, you want your child to understand that he 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 force extra practice at home.** If your child has a rough or somewhat unproductive practice, you may be tempted to continue working on a skill with him as soon as you get home. Refrain from pushing your child in this direction. It's okay in casual conversation to ask him whether he'd like to spend some time working on a certain skill at home if you sense he's really interested. If he is, that's great, but if not, let it go. Pushing your child to perform extra repetitions can drain his interest in the sport.
- ✓ **Never compare siblings.** Let your child develop at his own rate. He should never feel burdened by your expectations to match the skills or abilities of his older (or younger) brothers who play football, too. These types of comparisons can crush self-esteem, destroy confidence, and chase him away from playing football in the future.
- ✓ **Praise, praise, praise!** Be sure to praise your child's willingness, understanding, and cooperation in this special venture.



As a parent, you naturally want your child to excel on the football field or in any activity he's involved in. Just don't allow yourself to view your coaching position as an opportunity to control your child's destiny. When this happens, you push him harder than the other kids, demand more from him, and criticize him when he's unable to fulfill your unfair expectations. If you lose sight of the point of youth football, you'll encounter problems that impact your child's emotional well-being and his interest in football.

### **The multitude of parent-coaches**

If you're coaching your kid, you may be interested to know that you're not alone in this endeavor. Roughly 85 percent of volunteer football coaches have their own child on the team, so you've ventured into common parenting territory that countless other parents have

successfully negotiated and reaped the rewards of. Other parents who've coached their own child can be great sources of advice. Check with your local recreation director for names of some parents who'd be good contacts.