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Chapter **1**

Getting into the World’s Most Popular Sport

Soccer, the world’s game. It’s called that for a reason: No sport attracts more participants and followers across the globe. The soccer World Cup is watched by billions of people every four years, and superstars like Lionel Messi or Cristiano Ronaldo rival any celebrity in the world for their number of fans. (Ronaldo is the most followed human being in the world on Instagram, with 640 million followers!)

Why is soccer so popular? Well, for a start, it is very easy to play. It’s also been called the simplest game because if you have a ball — or really, any spherical object — you basically have all the equipment you need to get out there and play. Throw down a couple of objects to craft a makeshift goal to score in, find a few friends, and you (and your child) can be playing on a field, street, or beach anywhere in the world right away.

This utter simplicity is what will make it easy for your kid to pick up the game of soccer as well. While America woke up later to the “world’s game” than most countries, every town or city in America these days has a soccer team or league that your child can take part in (and in many cities, a bewildering number of options this book will help you parse through). You can also get your kids started yourself in the back yard or at a local park by just kicking around a ball for fun.

Adding Up the Benefits of Youth Soccer

So, why should your kid join the millions of soccer participants in the United States? Because it can provide a lifetime of fun and fitness, and a fantastic opportunity to follow and play a game so popular around the world.

Having fun and making friends

There is one cardinal rule to remember when your kid starts playing soccer: They are doing it primarily to have fun and burn off some of that excess energy almost every kid has. Don’t worry about your kid being the next Cristiano Ronaldo. Very, very few of the millions of youth soccer participants will go on to become professional soccer players.



REMEMBER

The score doesn’t *really* matter in youth soccer games. Some parents put far too much pressure on their kids to excel and win games — instead of allowing them to develop a pure love of the game. Far too often, this leads to teenagers who grew up enjoying the sport burning out under the pressure and spoiling that passion.

Soccer is ultimately all about the joy of the game. Making a good pass, saving a goal, scoring a “screamer” (a brilliant goal) — these are the moments that make kids light up with smiles. Because the ball is always moving in soccer, boredom rarely creeps in — and unlike with individual sports, that joy is shared immediately with others on their team.

In fact, soccer is a sport particularly dependent on teamwork to be successful, so it's a great way for children to learn the value of working together toward a common goal (pun intended!).

Perhaps even more importantly, playing on a team provides an instant opportunity to make a whole bunch of new friends. Your kid will be playing with a dozen plus other children at practices and at games, as well as likely soon spending time with them outside of soccer. Lifelong friendships are made on the soccer field.

Developing fitness and physical skills

Soccer is a great way for your kid to keep fit — and is definitely more fun than calisthenics. Running is integral to soccer in training and at games, developing stamina and burning off some of that childhood energy.

Coordination, endurance, and agility are three further key physical components of the game that your child can develop while playing the sport. The fun of soccer — chasing the ball in all sorts of directions — helps develop strong physical motor skills such as balance and acceleration without your kid even realizing it. Exercise that your kid finds fun and wants to do is certainly the best kind!

Over the long run, playing soccer frequently develops important physical skills including

- » **Coordination:** As with playing any ball game, soccer helps develop coordination between the eyes and body movements, responding to the moving object — the ball. Even though soccer players (except the goalkeeper) do not use their hands, the coordination required to “see ball, kick ball” helps develop skills that can transfer to other athletic activities or even playing an instrument.
- » **Balance:** Soccer is a sport particularly reliant on body control, because almost every movement in the sport requires getting into a balanced position. Players are constantly turning, changing direction, and reacting to

rapid movements of the ball — being able to pivot quickly and position the body to kick the ball effectively requires plenty of agility. Soccer players' balance has been compared to that of gymnasts.

- » **Speed and acceleration:** Soccer is one of the least stationary sports — compare it to baseball or (American) football — so your kid will be running a lot. And not just running a lot: Sprinting quickly after the ball and accelerating as fast as possible over short distances are critical parts of the sport. Playing soccer frequently will develop sprinting muscles and quickness.
- » **Strength:** Soccer isn't a sport in which lifting weights is necessarily a plus. But playing it will develop muscle and bone strength, lower body fat, and provide a great workout. This is particularly true for lower body muscles, such as hamstrings and quadriceps, and this can translate into improved athletic strength for other sports and everyday life.
- » **Stamina:** Few ball sports require as much running as soccer, with repeated short and long runs taking place in practices and games. Players are on their feet moving for prolonged periods of time. This helps develop endurance and is fantastic aerobic exercise!

Fortunately, while playing plenty of soccer helps develop all these physical attributes, this isn't a sport that only those supremely physically fit or those blessed with unusual size or strength can enjoy.



REMEMBER

A variety of body types and sizes can participate at recreational levels and excel at the elite level. Unlike for basketball, for example, height is not necessarily an advantage in soccer. Some of the best players in the sport's history, like Lionel Messi (5'7") and Diego Maradona (5'5"), are below the height of an average male. Guile, skill, and a low center of gravity can beat pure size and strength.

Different positions on the field suit different body sizes and shapes. Defenders playing in the center, where leaping and

heading the ball may be called for, are often taller players, while a shorter but speedier player may be better suited for sprinting up and down the sideline.

What this means for your child is that their genetic inheritance for height won't limit how they enjoy and progress in soccer. It's a sport for everyone to participate in at all levels of the game.

Discovering the world's game

Playing soccer will naturally develop an interest in the wider world of the professional game for any child playing. Kids often want to know who the big stars are, watch and emulate the skills they showcase, and perhaps start following a team as a fan.

This opens a global-sized chance to develop fandom. Soccer has a rich history and an incredible tapestry of teams playing all over the world to discover. It can be a great way for your child to find out a little about global geography — from Madrid to Manchester and beyond. Soccer players come from all countries and continents, representing areas that are less commonly seen in other American sports.



TIP

Following star players is also a great way for your kid to be inspired and look to copy some of the moves and styles of play practiced by the world's top players.

Fortunately, it's now easy in the United States for kids to watch the stars and the action from the world of soccer. Some of the biggest competitions to follow include the FIFA World Cup and FIFA Women's World Cup, both held every four years, along with the top European competitions such as the UEFA Champions League, UEFA Women's Champions League, the English Premier League, and Spain's La Liga, along with the American domestic leagues.



REMEMBER

A lifetime of fun fandom can follow for your kid as they explore the world of soccer, which will further encourage them to play and find out more about tactics and styles of play, informing their own efforts on the field.

Understanding How the Game Is Played

Soccer games are played by two teams on a rectangular field with a goal at each end. The objective for each team is to score goals (points) by getting the ball into the opponent's goal.

Each game is played for an allotted length of time, and the team with the most goals at the end of that time period is the winner. If the teams score the same number of goals in a game, it's considered a tie — or in soccer parlance, a *draw*.

Players in soccer primarily use their feet to strike the ball, with only the goalkeeper permitted to use their hands.

Examining the field of play

At the highest level of soccer, such as a World Cup, soccer is played on a pristine rectangular grass field — often called a “pitch” — measuring between 110 and 120 yards lengthwise and between 70 and 80 yards across. It's just a little larger than an (American) football field. The longer lines on either side of the rectangle are called the *sidelines* while the shorter lines at each end are called the *goal lines* — because centered on this line at either end is the goal.

A goal at either end provides the target for the two teams, consisting of 11 players each, to score in. The goal measures 24 feet wide by 8 feet tall, consisting of two posts and a crossbar connecting them. A net collects the ball struck over the goal line into the goal.

In front of the goal is the *penalty area*, a box measuring 18 yards from each post (see Figure 1-1). This part of the field is particularly important because infringements by the defensive team in this area can result in a penalty kick for the attacking team. (See the “Mastering offside and other key rules” section, later in this chapter, for more information).

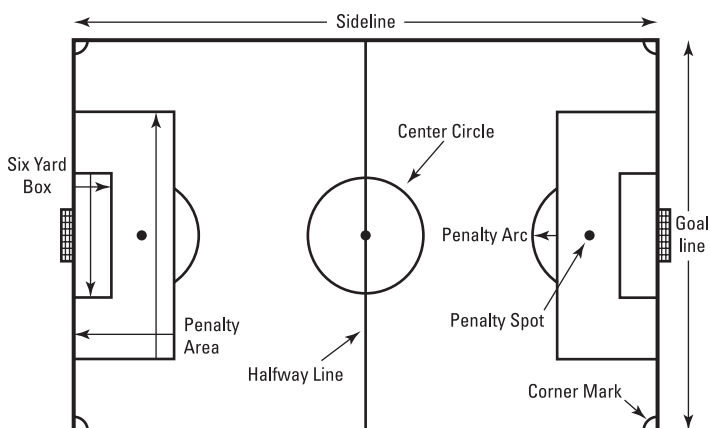


FIGURE 1-1:
The field
of play.



REMEMBER

On your child's journey in soccer, they will play on a vast variety of different sized playing fields, some with natural grass and some with green artificial turf. Full-size fields aren't played on in youth soccer until children are in the over-12 age bracket in most states, because it's far too much space for smaller legs to cover.

Younger kids play on smaller fields with fewer players on each team than at older ages. The size of the pitch and the number of participants increases as age progresses. The size of the goals also changes, from smaller dimensions at younger ages to full-size goals for teenage players.

Roughly speaking, you can likely expect your child to play on the following size fields in these age brackets:

- » **Ages 0–7:** 25–35 yards long and 15–25 yards wide
- » **Ages 8–10:** 55–65 yards long and 35–45 yards wide
- » **Ages 11–12:** 70–80 yards long and 45–55 yards wide
- » **Ages 13+:** 110–120 yards long and 60–80 yards wide

Keeping players and positions straight

Just as the size of the pitch and the dimensions of the goal can vary with the age of those participating, the number of players

on the field and the positions they play varies dramatically between younger and older age groups. Children under six play with only two or three teammates, but by the time they've hit the ripe old age of 13, that number will have increased to 11 players on each team.

Though this can vary a bit by local standards, the number of players per team for each age group is roughly as follows:

- » **Ages 0–7:** 3 versus 3, 4 versus 4, or 5 versus 5
- » **Ages 8–9:** 6 versus 6 or 7 versus 7
- » **Ages 10–11:** 9 versus 9
- » **Ages 12+:** 11 versus 11

The positions on the field that players fill can be roughly grouped into four categories. For two of them — *goalkeepers* and *defenders* — the primary aim is to prevent the other team from scoring a goal. (*Note:* The goalkeeper is the only player allowed to use their hands — though only within their own penalty area.) Defenders play in front of the goalkeeper, and are tasked with tackling opponents, intercepting the ball, and passing it to teammates further forward on the field.



REMEMBER

Tackling in soccer isn't the same as tackling in (American) football! You aren't allowed to haul players down with your hands in soccer. Tackling in soccer means using your feet to strip the ball from the opponent's possession — by kicking the ball, not the other player!

Midfielders are typically required to help significantly on both the defensive and offensive aspects of the game, so they need to develop good all-round skills. Players in those positions are particularly relied upon to pass the ball, linking up the play between the defensive and attacking players. And they need to be able to tackle an opponent and intercept the ball to try and stop the opponents from reaching the defensive third of the field.

Attackers are tasked with trying to get the ball into the opponent's net, with the "striker" position aptly named — their role is to strike the ball into the goal.



REMEMBER

At the younger ages, particularly for under-sevens, it's worth noting that positions are relatively nominal. Toddlers can't but help to chase the ball, often ending up in a somewhat amusing scrum of kids grouped maniacally around the ball. There also aren't usually dedicated goalkeepers for the small goals preschoolers play with.

As kids age up and progress into 6 versus 6 or 7 versus 7 games, some structure starts to develop and goalkeeping is added to the mix. A typical setup in a 6 versus 6 game may see a team have a goalkeeper, two defenders, two midfielders, and one attacker.

Once the game scales up to 9 versus 9, usually at ages 10 to 11, positions become specialized even further. The pitch is now larger, so where players cover the field becomes segmented horizontally across as well as vertically up the pitch. For example, midfielders — the ones who play in the middle of the pitch vertically — will now often be further divided into left, central, and right segments horizontally. Similarly, defenders will cover the center, right, or left of the pitch, also usually in groups of three or four. Attackers, usually numbering only one or two on a team, usually stay fairly central, chasing passes from the players behind them.

As well as location on the field, the role a player has can vary and gets further specialized in older age groups. It is, however, quite simple in the younger age groups. At the under-11 level, the instructions kids are given are usually fairly straightforward to follow — defenders defend, midfielders look to intercept the ball and pass it, and attackers try to score goals.



REMEMBER

A good coach will rotate younger players around different positions to ensure that they are learning the game from different perspectives. A defender can learn how to stop an attacker more easily if they have played the position themselves and understand the movements that position requires, for example. It's also fun to try different positions and utilize new skill sets.

At the 9 versus 9 and particularly the 11 versus 11 game sizes, the intricacies of positional play get far more advanced, especially in competitive soccer. It's no longer as simple as a defender defending or an attacker attacking. These more differentiated roles are important to understand so that you know why your

kid is playing a specific role, rather than trying to do everything on the field. Some of the most common positions and associated jersey (shirt) numbers are listed in Table 1-1.

TABLE 1-1 **Soccer Positions and Their Associated Jersey Numbers**

Area	Position	Jersey Number	Role
Goalkeeper	Goalkeeper	#1	Stopping the ball from going in the net, typically using the hands.
Defense	Center Back	#4 & #5	Plays in the middle of defense. Usually a strong, taller player and, at older ages, will need to head the ball well.
Defense	Full Back	#2 & #3	Plays wide on the left or right side of defense. Usually a fast player who has the stamina to run up and attack as well as defend well.
Midfield	Holding Midfielder	#6	This player's duty is to shield the play just in front of the defensive line. They are tasked with breaking up opponent's attacks and passing the ball to attacking players.
Midfield	Attacking Midfielder	#8	The playmaker role in soccer is often taken by an attacking midfield player. The aim of this role is to create chances for other players to score goals by providing incisive passes as well as trying to put the ball into the net themselves.
Midfield/ Attack	Winger	#7 or #11	"Wingers" hug the sideline or "wing" of the field, attacking aggressively with speed and dribbling skills. Right footers tend to play right wing and left footers left wing.
Attack	Striker	#9	Goals, goals, goals. The primary job of a striker is to find the back of the net — they spend their time around the opponent's goal looking to shoot.
Attack	Center Forward	#10	While also still looking to score goals, the "number 10" or center forward also plays a role linking the midfield and attack. This is done by looking to pass the ball to other attacking players.

Determining the length of play

Just like the size of the field and the number of players on it, the length of the games your child will play increases as they get older. Typically, the game is also divided into two halves, with a halftime break to allow players to rest. This break is a few minutes for younger players (under the age of 10) and as long as 15 minutes for older players. At younger ages, typically under 8, games are often divided into quarters instead of halves, playing short six- to eight-minute segments with a brief break between each quarter.

As players reach middle school grades, teams start playing halves of 25 minutes each. The game lengths then steadily increase up the years until around the high school age, when a full 45 minutes per half — the same length as a professional match — is reached.



REMEMBER

The clock typically counts *up* in soccer (for example, to 45 minutes) rather than down to zero, so you'll need to remember how long each half is set to be. And at most youth soccer games, up until elite tournament level, you won't see a game clock on the field at all. So if you want to know how long is left in a half, remember to start a timer on your phone or watch to keep check. The referee keeps the official time on their own watch.



TIP

Even when the designated time period is up, extra time is usually added on for stoppages in play (such as injuries or substitutions). The amount of time added is at the referee's calculation and discretion, so you'll never know exactly when a game will end until the whistle peeps three times to signal "full time."

Contemplating the all-important soccer ball

A full-size soccer ball is far too big for a small kid to kick effectively, so it's no surprise that the size and weight of the main object on the field starts smaller and lighter and gets larger and heavier as players age.

In fact, it's very important that kids don't start playing with a ball too large at too young an age. Playing with a smaller ball

more suitable to the size of their feet allows kids to develop better skills with the ball. Many of the world’s greatest players, such as Lionel Messi, mastered controlling a tennis ball as a child — and this translates into more easily manipulating a larger ball.

So how do you know which size ball your child should play and train with? Balls for outdoor play are grouped into five different sizes by circumference and weight. The smallest is a size 1, which is used by the youngest age groups (under 3) or for technical training at older ages. Size 2 comes into play for toddlers, while size 3 is typically used for beginner youth soccer games at ages 5–8.

Next comes the size 4 ball for 8- to 12-year-olds; it measures 25 to 26 inches in circumference and weighs 11 to 13 ounces. Finally, for teenagers and up into adult games, the size 5 ball comes into play — and your child is now playing with pretty much the same size and weight ball as the top stars at the World Cup. (Table 1-2 summarizes the different ball sizes and weights.)

TABLE 1-2 Regulation Ball Sizes and Weights

Ball Size	Ages	Circumference	Weight (ounces)
1	0–2	18"–20"	7–8
2	3–5	23"–24"	10–12
3	6–8	23"–24"	11–12
4	9–12	25"–26"	11–13
5	13+	27"–28"	14–16

Beyond these relatively standardized sized balls for outdoor play, you will also see balls of various other shapes, sizes, and weights. Some are just for fun — how about a glow in the dark ball to play in the dusk in the back yard? Or a soft felt ball so your kid can kick the ball around inside without breaking all the furniture? It’s always good to have a variety of balls around the home or in the yard. The more your kid kicks the ball around for fun, the better their foot skills will get.



REMEMBER

Some balls have a specific purpose for different formats of the game — a futsal ball (see Chapter 10) has a heavier weight and smaller size to help players keep it under control in a smaller sized field of play, for example.

Fundamentals for Scoring and Stopping Goals

Soccer, as I say earlier, is a simple game to grasp — each team is trying to score a goal, and each team is trying to stop the other from doing so. The skills players need to help their teams score or stop goals can be broken down into a few fundamentals that will be at the heart of all the soccer your child plays growing up.

Here we dive into the basics of each core soccer skill (see Chapter 8 for my perspective on each unique position and skill set):

- » **Dribbling:** Though it has a funny name, running with the ball — keeping it at your feet — is a fundamental core skill when it comes to playing soccer. Little kids naturally want to run with the ball — the harder task is often getting them to pass it! Being able to dribble with the ball at increasing speeds, and using both feet, is a great start to developing good soccer skills.
- » **Tackling:** Approximately half the time, any given team will be defending. Being able to stop an opponent — stripping the ball from them to win possession for their team, or at least blocking the ball to prevent the opponent from moving past them — is a critical skill. Doing so requires stepping in to intercept the ball from an opponent. Players must be careful when tackling — they're not permitted to kick an opponent or haul them down with their arms like in (American) football.
- » **Passing:** However fast any soccer player is at running, they aren't as fast as the ball can move when kicked. This basic truth is why passing is so important and is what makes soccer a team game: The ball can move more quickly from

defense to attack if passed accurately from player to player. Being able to accurately pass and having the vision to know where to pass the ball will make your child a great teammate.

» **Shooting:** For your team to win, someone needs to put the ball in the back of the net to score a goal. Learning to shoot accurately is a key skill — even better if a player can do so with either the right or left foot, to be able to score from a variety of angles, distances, and opportunities.

» **Ball control:** Being able to stop the ball and get it under control quickly is a critical skill at any level of soccer. If the ball bounces heavily away off a player's shin or foot, it is likely to go straight to an opponent. Having a good "first touch" — being able to stop the forward momentum of the ball and get it into position to then dribble, pass, or shoot — will position your child to make the right next move with the ball.



REMEMBER

There will never come a time when your child has truly mastered all of these skills. Even a top professional continues to practice and refine all of these elements. But an early focus on the technique needed to be successful in each of these fundamental elements of soccer will pay off in the long run — the ability of children to absorb and learn new skills is stronger at younger ages.

These techniques, the core skills of soccer, are more important to absorb and practice at younger ages than strength or stamina exercises, as those can be supplemented more easily as needed later on. It's much more difficult to learn how to control a soccer ball effectively at older ages, just like learning a language gets harder as we get older.

Mastering offside and other key rules

Soccer may be a simple game to pick up and play, but in organized games there are plenty of rules to get up to speed on to avoid confusion at the peep of a whistle. Most are straightforward to grasp — for instance, unless you're the goalkeeper,

don't touch the ball with your hands! — while others are a little more nuanced.

Untangling the offside rule

The offside rule is the trickiest one. Few decisions cause more confusion on the sideline of a youth soccer game than an offside call. This rule won't even be enforced at younger ages because it's difficult for small kids to grasp, but once at the 9 versus 9 level, you'll usually see offside start to be enforced.

The nuance with offside is that the positions of the attacking players, defending players, and the ball itself need to be taken into account. It can be hard from the sideline of a soccer field to even see this accurately, which is why those calls are often controversial.

To boil it down, an attacking player will be penalized for being offside if they are nearer to the opposing goal than both two opponents (including the goalkeeper) *and* the ball when it is played forward to them from a teammate. (See Figure 1-2.) If the ball is played backward to them, a player cannot be offside.

It's important to remember why the offside rule exists. The purpose is to stop attacking players from continually standing next to the goal, which in turn — without an offside rule — would force teams to keep defending deeply to stop balls that are booted up to attackers. The offside rule helps keep the game more balanced and fluid.



REMEMBER

Players cannot be offside when play is restarted on a corner kick, goal kick, or throw-in. Nor can a player be offside when within their own half of the field.

Looking at fouls and penalty kicks

If you hear the referee blow their whistle at a youth soccer match, more likely than not it'll be for an infringement of the rules — an offense by a player that impedes the other team. This may include foul play, such as tripping, kicking, or knocking over an opponent, or striking the ball with the hand (which only the goalkeeper is allowed to do and only inside their own penalty area).

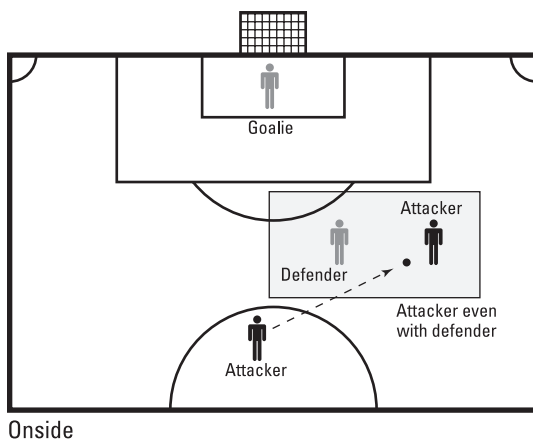
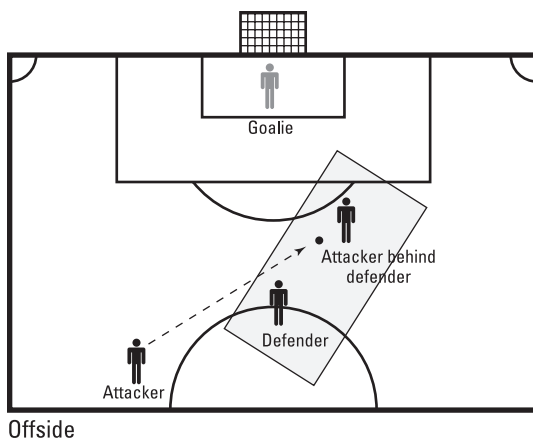


FIGURE 1-2:
The
offside rule
illustrated.

These types of offenses will result in a *direct free kick* for the opposing team. This means the ball is placed stationary where the offense occurred, and the opposing team has a free kick of the ball — which can be used to pass or shoot directly on goal.

If the offense takes place in the defensive team's penalty area, a penalty kick is awarded to the attacking team — giving them a free shot at goal from 12 yards out (that is the distance on a full-size pitch — it will be marked closer to the goal on

smaller-sized youth fields). On the defending team, only the goalkeeper is allowed in the penalty area when a penalty kick is taken, starting on the goal line and attempting to save the shot.

More rarely, *indirect free kicks* are awarded for less serious offenses — such as a pass back from a defender to a goalkeeper that they pick up (the goalie isn't allowed to handle a pass back). It's called indirect because players cannot shoot the ball directly at the goal — it must be passed to a teammate first.

Handing out yellow and red cards

Serious offenses are also subject to further repercussions for the offending player in the form of yellow and red cards.

A yellow card is the lesser of the two cards and is essentially a “caution” (also called a *booking*, because the referee writes the details down in a notebook). Yellow cards are shown for a variety of reasons, including for serious or repeated fouls, time-wasting, or dissent toward the referee. If a player receives a second yellow card, they are then automatically shown a red card and ejected from the game.

A red card can also be shown directly and the player removed immediately from the match if the referee deems a significantly serious offense to have taken place — such as violent conduct toward another player.

In youth soccer, referees won't issue yellow or red cards at the youngest ages. Up to the age of around 10 or 11, although cards may be given out, they are relatively rare and should be used as coaching moments for players to understand that their actions have consequences.

Cards become more frequent at upper middle and high school ages, especially at more competitive levels of play that come closer to senior-level standards. A red card will also result in a player being suspended from playing in the next match as a further punishment.

Dealing with throw-ins, corner kicks, and goal kicks

When the ball goes out of play, the team who last touched it loses possession. The game is restarted by the opposing team. There are multiple ways play is restarted:

- » **If the ball crosses the sideline (the longer lines marking the field), play is restarted with a *throw-in*.** To throw it in, a player places the ball in both hands, holds it behind their head, and then throws it into play from directly above their head. Both feet must be planted down behind the touchline.

Although this technique is not especially difficult, it can be difficult for kids to grasp or remember some of these nuances. It's quite common in youth soccer to see a kind referee coach a youngster who has made a mistake on how to do it correctly — or to see a strict referee pass the ball to the other team!

The person taking the throw-in cannot throw it to himself. The ball has to be touched by another player first after it is thrown in.



REMEMBER

- » **If the ball crosses the line on either side of the goal and is last touched by the defending team, a *corner kick* is awarded to the attacking team.** As the name suggests, this kick is taken from the corner of the field, where the sideline intersects the goal line. This creates a good opportunity from a “set play” — the attacking team will often then cross the ball into the penalty area to try and set up a shot on goal.
- » **If the ball crosses the line on either side of the goal and is last touched by the attacking team, a *goal kick* is taken by the defending team.** The ball has to be kicked from within the 6-yard box that surrounds the goal. This kick is usually, but doesn't have to be, taken by the goalkeeper. They can pass it short or boot it long. The attacking team can't enter the penalty area until the ball is kicked, allowing the defending team to get a clear opportunity for the kick to take place.



When restarting play from a penalty kick, free kick, or corner kick, the player taking the kick can only strike the ball once until another player has touched it. Kicking the ball twice in a row results in a turnover to the other team. This prevents a player from simply dribbling the ball into play.

Handling substitutions

Along with the starters on the field, each team usually has a set of reserve players on the sideline who can be substituted in for another player during the game. At youth level, the number of “subs” usually varies — not every kid on the team roster can make every match, after all. Teams at youth level are usually permitted an unlimited number of substitutions for each match, and players can come in, be subbed out, and return to play later on.

Substitutions take place for a number of reasons, including

- » **Injuries:** If a player receives an injury and can't continue playing or needs a break to recover and be assessed, a replacement player is sent in.
- » **Tactics:** The coach may make a tactical adjustment that requires changing the personnel on the field — for example, if their team is losing, the coach may replace a defensive player with an attacking player to increase the offensive effort.
- » **Playing time:** Particularly in youth soccer and especially so at younger age levels, it's important that every player gets plenty of playing time so they have an opportunity to develop during game play. If your kid is sitting on the sideline every game not playing and not getting subbed in for long, they won't be getting the chance to improve.
- » **Rest:** Soccer, especially if the weather is hot, is a very tiring sport, so it's important for the coach to rotate players and give them a chance to rest on the sidelines and get a drink of water to refresh and be ready to go back in.

In official games, substitutions can only take place when play is stopped and the referee signals to the players that they may enter the field. They should wait for the player they are replacing to reach the sideline before subbing in.

At older levels of play, especially in college soccer, restrictions on the number of substitutes on the sideline and the number of substitutions that can take place come into effect. Your local league will have all the information on what is permitted for substitutions.

Different rules for different ages

Between the ages of 5 and 15, almost everything about the soccer your child plays will change. While the fundamental purpose of kicking a ball into the net to score a goal stays consistent, many of the rules are different for smaller, younger players just getting to know the game at preschool or elementary school age. By the time your kids are teenagers and approaching college, the game looks and follows rules almost identical to adult play.

I explore some of the fundamental differences in the field sizes, ball size, and number of players earlier in this chapter. But there are also some important differences in the way the rules are applied to games for younger players under the age of 10. See the following information for a guide based on official US Youth Soccer rules, though note there may be adjustments in different leagues.

Under 6 (3 versus 3 — no goalkeeper):

- » Games consist of four 8-minute quarters. There's a 2-minute minimum break between the first and second quarters, a 5-minute break between the second and third quarters (halftime) and a 2-minute break between the third and fourth quarters.
- » When the ball goes out of bounds on the sideline, players throw it in. If they do not follow the proper throw-in procedure (see the earlier section "Dealing with throw-ins, corner kicks, and goal kicks"), they are allowed a second attempt.

- » There is no penalty area marked out, and therefore no penalty kicks are awarded for fouls.
- » Infringements lead to free kicks that are indirect (cannot be shot directly at goal, must be passed to another player first).
- » There are no corner kicks — kick-ins or throw-ins are taken instead.
- » An unlimited number of substitutions are allowed, and coaches should make sure players all receive equal playing time.
- » No offside rule is applied.

Under 8 (4 versus 4 — no goalkeeper):

- » Games consist of four 12-minute quarters. There's a 2-minute minimum break between the first and second quarters, a 5-minute break between the second and third quarters (halftime), and a 2-minute break between the third and fourth quarters.
- » When the ball goes out of bounds on the sideline, players throw it in. If they do not follow the proper throw-in procedure (see the earlier section "Dealing with throw-ins, corner kicks, and goal kicks"), they are allowed a second attempt.
- » There is no penalty area marked out and therefore no penalty kicks are awarded for fouls.
- » Infringements lead to free kicks that are indirect (cannot be shot directly at goal, must be passed to another player first).
- » At this age, corner kicks and goal kicks are introduced.
- » An unlimited number of substitutions are allowed, and coaches should make sure players all receive equal playing time.
- » No offside rule is applied.

Under 10 (8 versus 8):

- » At this age, when kids are typically 8 or 9 years old, everything expands quite drastically — from the size of the field, ball, and goals to the number of players, and perhaps most significantly, the addition of goalkeepers. This reflects that a larger goal is now deployed to shoot at.
- » Rather than the quarters used at younger ages, games are now divided into two halves of play like senior soccer matches. The halves last 25 minutes each with a 5-minute break for halftime.
- » When the ball goes out of bounds on the sideline, the standard methods of restart outlined earlier — throw-ins, goal kicks, or corner kicks — are deployed.
- » Penalty areas are now marked out, and penalty kicks are awarded for fouls.
- » Infringements lead to free kicks that can either be indirect or direct — see “Looking at fouls and penalty kicks” earlier in this chapter for an explanation of what this means.
- » An unlimited number of substitutions are allowed, and coaches should make sure players all receive equal playing time.
- » No offside rule is applied.

Once players are past the age of 10, the rules begin to adhere more closely to adult soccer, with the introduction of full-size pitches and goals, offside calls, and longer games that by the time kids become teenagers, largely match the basic rules of the game outlined earlier in the chapter in “Understanding How the Game is Played.”