



OPTIMAL YOUTH SOCCER DEVELOPMENT CHECKLIST PART 4

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PART 4: AGE-APPROPRIATE COMPETITIONS

The concept of readiness is very important in youth soccer development. It is important to recognize the stages of childhood development when putting together a programme of youth soccer activities. Unfortunately, in many cases we adults involved in the game are impatient to introduce young children to the adult game and the adult way of training.

For optimal development in youth soccer the following points should be considered:

1. The ideal competition structures we would recommend for optimal development are as follows:

- Multilateral games primarily before the age of 7
- 7/8/9 years = 3v3 on four goals Xcel-Coaching Model
- 10 years = 5v5
- 11/12 years = 7v7
- 13 years = 8v8
- 14+ years = 11v11

Children younger than 7 still need to spend a lot of time developing their Fundamental Movement Skills, sometimes called the ABCs (Agility, Balance and Coordination). Fun games with lots of different movements, even without a ball are recommended for this age group. These multilateral games should still be used in later years, but to a lesser extent.

For children 7-9 years of age we recommend 3v3 game with 4 goals.

10-year olds play 5 -a-side and 11 and 12 year olds play 7-a-side soccer.

We highly recommend that for one year, players at 13 years of age play 8v8 on a pitch with the goals moved up to the 18-yard line.

It is far better for children not to play in a league competition until at least 11 or 12 years of age. Many professional academies do not play competitive soccer until the late teens.

There are so many benefits to small-sided games for young players: more touches on the ball, more creativity and skills exhibited, more goalmouth action and chances to score, more transitions from attack to defence and vice versa, simpler decision-making and more repetition of basic game situations, to name a few.

2. Delay 11-a-side soccer until 14 years at the earliest.

Contrary to popular belief, the game of soccer is not a simple game. There are many tactical decisions to be made in the complex adult game and having an age-appropriate, step by step approach to learning and experiencing the game will bear more fruit than rushing children as young as 11 years of age, sometimes, into the adult game. Also, children before the age of 14 usually haven't experienced their growth spurt yet and are very small to be playing on a full size pitch. The distances young players must run on a full size pitch involves too much anaerobic activity which is unhealthy at this age. The small-sided games above offer a far more appropriate structure for children's competitions.

3. Multiple Competitions instead of one long competitive league per season which can create all sorts of pressures from the adults, it is far better to have short tournaments, one day events, triathlons, pentathlons and decathlons. Children benefit greatly from variety and also from shorter competition structures. In general having a less competitive structure at the younger ages reduces stress and enhances creativity along with many other developmental benefits.

4. The right size pitch, ball and goal for each age group.

In our hurry to have young children play the adult game, we often force them to play in the same conditions, forgetting that they are still developing children. Just imagine the unfortunate 11 year old goalkeeper in the adult goal playing 11-a-side. He may stand no taller than 4'6" and still has to defend a goal 8 foot high by 24 foot wide! Size 3 balls are recommended for 6-9 years, size 4 for 10-13 years and only from 14 years should the size 5 ball be used. Having the right size goal makes a massive difference to the young players. We recommend 4x2m goals for 5 a side and 6x2m goals for 7 and 8-a-side soccer.

5. Address the relative age-effect.

Many studies like the one below confirm that across all elite sports, children born early in the sporting year have a distinct advantage over those born later in the year. In elite soccer, early born players are 4 times more likely to succeed than late-borns.

Relative Age Effect in National Football Teams U15/16/17/18 in 2005

(Number of players and percentages for each country)

TEAM	1 st M	2 nd M	3 rd M	4 th M	5 th M	6 th M	7 th M	8 th M	9 th M	10 th M	11 th M	12 th M	1 st Q	4 th Q
England	21	15	11	5	5	3	4	6	8	8	5	3	50%	17%
Spain	8	4	6	11	7	4	4	1	0	2	2	1	36%	10%
Germany	18	17	17	6	13	7	9	7	5	2	2	0	50%	4%
France	9	3	6	5	5	3	4	0	0	4	1	1	44%	14%
Italy	14	12	10	7	6	5	6	9	5	1	0	2	47%	4%
Holland	14	15	11	6	8	7	1	12	14	6	5	2	37%	16%
Portugal	8	15	10	13	9	3	1	5	3	2	3	0	37%	7%
Sweden	6	8	3	5	7	4	4	1	0	2	2	1	47%	3%
Denmark	14	10	9	4	15	10	7	7	6	6	0	2	37%	9%
Belgium	15	10	12	13	9	10	9	6	5	3	3	4	37%	10%
Totals	16%	14%	12%	10%	11%	7%	6%	7%	6%	5%	3%	2%	43%	9%

6. Include multilateral competitions, not just soccer-specific.

Young soccer players, even up to the early teens are still developing their Fundamental Movement Skills (FMS) sometimes called ABCs, (Agility, Balance and Coordination). Including multilateral games, with different movement patterns will help to establish these fundamental skills, along with the soccer specific skills. In training multilateral activities should make up a good proportion of the overall programme, as much as 60% at 6 years of age, then 10% less for each successive year.

The above structural considerations are already bearing much fruit across Europe and many countries have moved closer to the ideal game structures recommended here with non-competitive small-sided games becoming ever more popular.