



AURORA ARSENAL SOCCER CLUB

AGE GROUP CHARACTERISTICS – U6

U6 Age Group Skill Priorities:

Dribble with all Sides of Both Feet
Dribble out of Trouble
Dribble Past Someone
Soft First Touch

Although sometimes we may mistake 5-6 year olds for little adults, they clearly are not. They have many years of childhood and development to enjoy before they are able to look at life in a similar fashion to adults. They need time to intellectually, emotionally, and physically develop. In order to make practices run as smoothly and happily as possible, it is extremely important for us to understand the following characteristics about U6 children. Fun must be the central theme of practice and games.

No lectures (they learn by seeing and doing), no lines (everyone plays), no drills (no fun)!

Characteristics of U6 Children:

- *focused on themselves/individually oriented* – reality to them is solely based on what they see and feel (me, my, mine)...little or no concern for team activities...little or no concept of "team".
- *unable to see the world from another's perspective* – it is "the world according to me" time. Asking them to understand how someone else is seeing something or feels is unrealistic.
- *unable to think abstractly* – asking them to think about spatial relations or runs off the ball is unrealistic. May or may not understand or remember what lines mean on the field, what team they are on, what goal they are going for. We need to be patient and laugh with them as they get 'lost' on the field.
- *can attend to only one problem at a time.*
- *everything is in the here and now* – forget about the past and future, they live in the moment.
- *heating and cooling systems are less efficient than adults* – we need to give frequent water breaks (every 8-10 minutes) or they may just run until they cannot run anymore.
- *typically have 2 speeds* - extremely fast and stopped...constantly in motion or stopped...no sense of pace. They will chase something until they drop. They are easily fatigued, but recover rapidly.
- *enjoy playing, not watching* – they feel no enjoyment from watching others play when they could be playing, too. Make sure every player has a ball in practice so every player is always playing...no lines!
- *prefer "parallel play"* - will play on a team, but will not really engage with their teammates. Thus, a 3v3 game is, in reality, a 1v5 game because they all want the ball at the same time.

- *limited attention span* (on average 15 seconds for listening, 10-15 minutes when engaged in a task) – keep your directions concise and to the point. No lectures! When in an open environment with a lot of nearby distractions (e.g., other teams practicing), their attention span will dwindle toward 10 seconds.
- *visual* – they learn by seeing and doing, not by listening.
- *effort is synonymous with performance* – if they have tried hard, they believe they have done well. This is a wonderful quality and we should be supportive of their enthusiasm.
- *active imaginations* – if we utilize their imaginations they will love practice!
- *look for adult approval (sensitive to criticism)* – watch how often players look to you for approval or to see if you are looking. Also, be encouraging when they say “Coach, look what I can do!”
- *easily bruised psychologically* - need generous praise and to play without pressure; give “hints”, don’t criticize.
- *usually unaware of game scores* – we should keep it that way.
- *often like to fall down just because it is fun* – they are just children having fun.
- *often cannot identify left foot vs. right foot* – they know which foot they use most and if they point to their feet you can help teach them left and right.

Things You Can Expect:

As coaches of these younger players there are things that we know that we can expect during training and games. If we know what to expect, we will be more effective in dealing with the hundreds of situations that come up. This will help us relax, and, in turn, allow us to enjoy the unpredictable nature of working with these children even more. Here are some of the things that we can expect.

- Most players cry immediately when something is hurt. Some cry even when something is not hurt.
- No matter how loud we shout, or how much we “practice” it, they can not or will not pass the ball.
- Don’t even consider teaching positional play.
- Twenty seconds after the start of a game, every player will be within 5 yards of the ball (welcome to “mob soccer” or “swarm ball”...enjoy it).
- Several players will slap at the ball with their hands, or pick it up.
- Some players will find the passing clouds above or a few scurrying ants in the grass more interesting than the game.
- During the season, they will do something that is absolutely hysterical...make sure that you laugh!

Involving the Parents:

It is imperative that coaches get the parents involved. Not only are they a major resource for your team, but the U6 player still views their parents as the most significant people in their lives. A pre-season meeting should be held with the parents so that objectives and team policies can be addressed. Some topics that you may want to address at this meeting are:

- A means of contacting everyone without one person doing all of the calling (i.e, phone chains).
- Choosing a team manager - someone to handle all of the details.
- Discuss the laws of the game.
- Carpool needs.
- Training and game schedules. How you feel about starting and ending on time, what your attendance expectations are, what you think is a good excuse to miss training.
- What each player should bring to training: inflated ball, filled water bottle, soccer attire, shin guards (cleats are not mandatory).

- Most importantly, your philosophy about coaching U6 players. Let them know that everyone plays; that the game does not look like the older player's games; that you are there to ensure that their player is safe and has a good time, as well as to learn how to play and enjoy soccer.
- What you expect of the parents during game time. How do you want them to cheer? Do they know that they should not coach from the sidelines?
- Above all, try to enjoy yourself. If you do they probably will too.

Coaching Rationale:

It is important to understand at the outset that players coming to any sport prior to the age of 6 years old, in general, do not do so by their own choice. As a result, their coaches need to give them something about which to get excited. Further, at this age, learning to play soccer is secondary to most other things in their lives.

With the above assumptions, let's look at some things that we can do to energize the U6 players, and, hopefully, get them to the point where they will enthusiastically initiate the sign up for next year!

- Each session should be geared around touching the ball as many times as possible. Involve the ball in as many activities as possible. Basic movements such as running, skipping, hopping, etc. need to be emphasized. If these can be done while kicking, catching, rolling, or dribbling a ball... all the better!
- Training should not last for more than one hour. This is primarily due to physical fatigue and attention span considerations. Train once or twice a week. Any more than this may lead to their, and your, burnout.
- Have as many different kinds of activities ready as you can get into one hour. Emphasis needs to be placed on what is FUN!
- Every player should bring his or her own size #3 or #4 ball.
- Remember, although they may have very similar birthdates, their physical and/or mental maturity may vary by as much as 36 months. Activities need to accommodate these individual differences whenever possible.
- Team play and passing is an alien concept to these players. They know that if they pass the ball, they may never get it back. In fact, they often will steal it from their own teammates. Do not get uptight if they do not pass, let them dribble to their heart's content.
- Plan for at least 4, 90-second drink breaks, especially in warmer weather. Their "cooling system" is not as efficient as older players.

Typical Training Session:

Here are some items that should be included in a U6 training session:

WARM-UP: A brief warm-up is appropriate in order to get the players thinking about soccer and to prepare them physically for the time ahead. This should involve individual body activities that should involve the ball. They can chase their ball as it is thrown by the coach, bringing it back with different parts of their body. Or, they can chase someone with their ball at their feet. Static stretching is also appropriate at this time, again, hopefully done with the ball. "Soccernastics" activities are very appropriate, like: rolling the ball with the bottom of their feet, with their elbows, backwards, with the back of their neck while holding on to it; throwing it up and catching it; keeping it up with their feet while sitting.

INDIVIDUAL ACTIVITIES: Follow the warm-up with some kind of individual activity, not a real 1v1 game, but some kind of activity where players act as individuals in a game environment. An example would be a kind of tag game, or "Red Light - Green Light", or a game where players are trying to knock their ball through gates. Keep players in motion at all

times. Avoid having them wait in lines. Play games of "inclusion" instead of games where the "loser sits".

PLAY THE GAME: Move on to the real game, but make sure it is a 2v2, 3v3, or 4v4 game. Switch the game every 5 minutes or so. Be creative. Play with 4 goals, or 2 balls. Play with or without boundaries. Use cones if you don't have real goals. Keep players involved. Have more than one game going on at a time if necessary.

COOL-DOWN & HOMEWORK: Finish the session with a few minutes of a cool-down. Give them some more stretches to do with the ball. You may want to review what you started the session with. Also, give them some homework so that they practice on their own. Think of some ball trick that you would like to see them try to do, like bounce it off their thigh and then catch it. It is important to finish on time. This is especially essential if the players are really into it. Stop at this point and you will get an enthusiastic return.

Some Recommended Games for U6 Players:

1) Tag---Every child dribbles a soccer ball in the space defined while trying to tag other players with their hand. Players cannot leave their own ball. Have them keep count of how many people they have tagged and, if playing twice in a row, see if players can tag more people than they did in the first game. *Version 2:* Players must tag the knees of other players.

2) Hospital Tag---Same as Tag in that each player dribbles a soccer ball and that they try to tag each other with their hands. In this game, each time a player is tagged he/she must place their hand on the spot on their body at which they were tagged and continue. Obviously, if tagged a third time, players have no more hands to cover those spots, so they must go to the hospital to see the doctor. The coach acts as the doctor and performs a magical task (pretend) to heal all the little soccer players so they can continue playing the game.

3) Red Light/Green Light---All players have a ball and dribble in a limited space (or toward the coach). When coach says "red light", players must stop the ball and put their foot on top of the ball. When coach says "yellow light", players must dribble very slowly. When coach says "green light", players dribble fast. Coach controls this game with frequency of light changes and variety of changes. Once players catch on to this game, add other colors and affix different actions to them (e.g., purple light = hop back and forth over ball, orange light = run around the ball, black light = dance, blue light = hide behind the ball, etc., etc.).

4) Freeze Tag---Break up the group into two teams. Everyone must dribble their soccer ball, but one team tries to tag (freeze) the other team. If they do tag a player on the other team, that player must freeze, place their ball above their head and spread their legs. Another player on their team must kick his/her ball through the frozen player's legs to unfreeze the teammate. If all players are frozen, game ends and the frozen team becomes the taggers. Otherwise, stop game after a few minutes and have teams reverse roles. *Version 2:* Coach can be the freeze monster and try to tag all the players with players unfreezing each other in the same fashion.

5) Planets---Set up cones into multiple squares or triangles that serve as planets (or cities). All players must follow coach's orders and dribble into the planet he calls out. Coach can have all players follow the same directions or break up the team so they start at different planets and then have them dribble through the solar system in clockwise or counterclockwise fashion. Coach can have groups dribble in opposite directions through the solar system.

6) Kangaroo Jack---All players except two or three begin with a ball. Players without balls are kangaroo jacks and must hop like a kangaroo and try to tag players. If a player gets tagged, he/she becomes a kangaroo as well until all players are turned into kangaroos.

7) Snake---In an appropriate space for the numbers you have, have all players dribbling soccer balls except for 2-3 players to start. These players hold hands and work together as one snake to tag the other players. The players with balls try to avoid getting tagged by the snake. If they are tagged, they join hands with players making up the snake. The snake grows until all players are part of the snake. The snake must stay together as one animal and not break off into little parts. Encourage fun by having the snake hiss.

8) Ball Tag---Similar to other tag games except players try to tag others with their soccer ball instead of their hand. Have them keep count of how many times they kick their soccer ball and tag another person. Have the tag count if their ball hits another player or that player's ball. Can have the players tag the coach for 10 or 20 points. You can have players tag other selected players for 50 or 100 points, etc., etc. *Version 2:* Rather than having players tag each other, have them tag the coach by kicking their soccer ball. The coach moves around without a ball to avoid being tagged. Have players count up how many times they got the coach and you can do the same variations as in the other game by affixing a lot of points to certain players.

9) Capture the Balls---Set up three or four "home bases" (squares) with cones roughly 2-3 yards wide. Break up the players into teams and have each team get together in their home base. Place all the balls in the center of the space between the home bases. On the coaches command the teams are free to gather as many soccer balls as they can into their home base. Players cannot use hands and there is no pushing each other or sitting/laying on the balls. Teams try to gather as many balls as possible into their home bases. Teams can steal balls from each other's home bases. Coach calls time and counts how many balls are in each space to determine a winner. Coach allows teams 1 minute to make up a new team strategy before playing again.

10) Moving Goal---2 coaches (or a coach and a parent) use a pinnie or an extra piece of clothing to form a movable goal with each coach serving as a post and the shirt serving as the crossbar. Players each have a ball and try to score by kicking their ball through the goal. However, the coaches constantly move and turn to force the players to keep their head up and to change direction as they dribble.

11) Follow the Leader---Divide the players up in pairs, each with a ball. The leader dribbles around the field while his/her partner follows, also dribbling. Each player takes turns leading and following. Encourage creativity, change of direction, change of speed.

12) Sharks & Minnows---All players start with a ball except one who is the 'shark'. The 'minnows' must dribble their ball successfully from one end of the field to the other while the shark tries to tag as many minnows as possible. Once tagged, the minnows become sharks and the game resumes. The last minnow starts the next game as the shark. Variation— instead of tagging, try to knock the ball out of bounds or to steal the ball.

***** **Every practice should include a scrimmage*******