



AURORA ARSENAL SOCCER CLUB

AGE GROUP CHARACTERISTICS – U8

U8 Age Group Skill Priorities:

Dribble with all Sides of Both Feet

Dribble out of Trouble

Dribble Past Someone

Soft First Touch

Shielding

Introduce Proper Shooting Technique

Introduce Passing

Although U8 children may begin to be far more physically and emotionally advanced than U6 children, we must remain patient and not try to force them to develop too quickly. Dribbling still needs to be the primary focus of our efforts, though passing and shooting should be introduced at this age as well. U8 players tend to work best when in pairs and we should allow them to work in pairs (coach-selected) often. Similar to the U6 children, we need to make sure that fun is the central theme in practice. Player development will occur most appropriately and expeditiously if all players are enjoying themselves.

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

Characteristics of U8 Children:

- *tend to play well in pairs* – unlike 6 year-olds, these children enjoy playing in pairs. Try to set up the pairs yourself to control the games and manage the personalities.
- *understand another's perspective* – they now have a sense of how other's are feeling.
- *still unable to think abstractly* – still do not have this capability, be patient. Better at recognizing when the ball is out of play, and remembering what goal they are going for... but, in the heat of battle, they will sometimes still forget. They still find it difficult to really be aware of more than one thing at a time.
- *heating and cooling system still less efficient than adults* – still make sure to give frequent water breaks.
- *still much prefer playing to watching* – keep everyone active during practice and remember, no lines!
- *limited attention span (beyond U6, but still not extended - on average 15-20 seconds for listening, up to 20 minutes when engaged in a task)* – this may vary greatly on any given day depending on school, diet, etc. Try to get a gauge each day and do not fight crankiness.
- *have an understanding of time and sequence* – they now understand "if I do this, then that happens".
- *still constantly in motion, but many have incorporated a third or fourth speed into play* – not all players, but many players now have incorporated a speed or two between stopped and as fast as possible.

- *extremely aware of adult reactions (sensitive to criticism!)* – be very aware of your verbal and nonverbal reactions, as they look for your reaction frequently. They will remember negative comments a long time.
- *easily bruised psychologically* - need generous praise and to play without pressure; give "hints", don't criticize.
- *seek out adult approval* – be supportive when they ask about their performance or try to show you skills. They very much need reassurance and you need to help build their confidence to try new things at this age.
- *begin to become aware of peer perception* – a social order is beginning to develop...be sensitive to this. They want everybody to like them.
- *wide range of abilities between children at this age* – children all develop at varying paces. You may have an 8-year old who seems more like a 10-year old and one that seems more like a 6-year old on the same team. Your challenge to is to manage this range in your practice in a way that challenges each player at a level that is reasonable for that player.
- *some will keep score* – the competitive motors churn faster in some than others. Surely some parents are fueling the motors with their own. Regardless, we do not need to stress winning and losing at this age. Results should not be important at this age!
- *beginning to develop motor memories* – by attempting fundamental technical skills they are training their bodies to remember certain movements.
- *developing physical confidence (most are able to ride a two-wheeler)* – but their rapid skeletal growth often results in an apparent lack of coordination.
- *less active imaginations than U6 players* – still have active imaginations by adult standards, but some of the silliness that 6-year olds allowed will not be appreciated by this group. Still use their imaginations, just watch their reactions to games to read how far you can go with things. Starting to imitate older players or sports heroes; want the same "gear" as them.

Things You Can Expect:

U8s are a bit more compliant than their U6 counterparts. They will be able to follow 2 or 3 step instructions and are starting to have a good understanding about what it means to play a "game". They are also starting to cooperate more with their teammates. In fact, they now will recognize that they even have teammates by the fact that they occasionally, and I mean occasionally, will pass the ball to a teammate, on purpose. Often, they will repeat the phrase "I can't do that!", but will quickly run to you to show you that they can, even when they only think that they can. Some other things that you can expect to happen during a season with this age group are:

- There will be at least 200-300 falls during the season, but now they will usually pick themselves back up.
- The puddle in front of the goal is still too tempting to resist.
- Keep a spare pump in your bag as the players usually do not realize that their ball is flat until they try to kick it, or the coach tells them that it is flat.
- Some of the girls are a lot tougher than the boys.
- It will still be difficult to teach positional play.
- You will still see that old fan favorite "mob soccer" or "swarm ball"...be patient.
- Several players will still slap at the ball with their hands, or pick it up.
- Some players will still find the passing clouds above or a few scurrying ants in the grass more interesting than the game.

Involving the Parents:

It is imperative that coaches get the parents involved. Not only are they a major resource for your team, but the U8 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 U8 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:

Some of the players that are playing as a 7-8 year olds may have had two years of soccer experience and thus have already touched the ball a few thousand times in their lives. This, however, does not mean that these players are ready for the mental demands of tactical team soccer. True, they do have some idea of the game, but the emphasis still needs to be placed on the individual's ability to control the ball with his/her body. They are still there to have fun, and because some of the players may be brand new to the sport, it is imperative that activities are geared toward individual success and participation. Following are some more items that a coach of U8 players should consider.

- Small-sided soccer is the best option for these players. Not only will they get more touches on the ball, but it is an easier game to understand.
- Because of rapid growth spurts during this age, players will go through times when they seem to have lost control of their body. What they could easily do 2 weeks ago now seems unattainable. Be patient.
- Passing is not an important part of their game, no matter how much anybody yells at them to do otherwise. It is much more fun to dribble and shoot. Let them.
- Training once or twice a week is plenty, and should not last longer than one hour.
- Each player should bring their own size #4 ball to training. Learning how to control it should be the main objective. They need to touch it as many times as possible during fun activities that will engage them.
- Challenge them to get better by practicing on their own. There is no rule which states that they can't learn by themselves, no matter how important we think we are.
- Incidental things are important. They are forming the habits that will impact their future participation. Ask them to take care of their equipment (water bottle included), cooperate, listen, behave, and try hard. Realize, however, that they often forget and will need to be reminded often.
- Ask them to work with others to solve a particular challenge. Start them with just one partner and work from there.

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. Perhaps play to emphasize a particular skill (can only dribble the ball over a goal line in order to get a point). 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 head, then 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 U8 Players:

1) Free Dribble---Everyone with a ball, use inside, outside, and sole of the foot. Have players dribble with speed (outside of foot), change direction, and perform moves. Coach calls out moves or changes in direction and sets the pace as the manipulator of the session, kids carry the ball toward someone and try a move. *Version 2:* As players get comfortable, coach can walk around and put pressure on players as they are performing dribbling tasks. This adds fun and interaction.

2) Knock Out---In same space as previous activity, have players dribble balls while trying to knock other player's balls outside of the grid. Players can never leave their own ball. If their ball gets knocked out have them retrieve it quickly and get back into the game. You may wish to have them perform a skills task before re-entering such as 10 toe touches or juggling 5 times.

3) Shield-Steal---Half of players in the group have a ball and half do not. If you do not have a ball you need to steal one from someone who does. If ball goes out of bounds, person who touched it last does not get possession. You can teach players the technical points of shielding as a group at start of activity. Show technique with body sideways, arm providing protection, ball on outside foot, knees bent, turning as defender attacks, using feel to understand where defender is going. Fix technical shielding errors throughout this activity and make sure entire group knows how to properly shield.

4) Marbles---Players are in pairs, each with a ball. This time instead of chasing each other, one player plays out his ball and the partner passes his own ball in an attempt to strike the ball his partner played out. Players should keep track of how many times they hit their partner's ball. *Version 2:* Once players understand this game, make it fast paced by having the players take turns at trying to hit each other's ball without ever stopping. If player 2 misses player 1's ball, then player 1 immediately runs to his own ball and tries to hit player 2's ball (player 2 does not get to touch his ball after missing player 1's ball). After player 1 has a chance, then player 2 immediately tries to hit player 1's ball right back, etc., etc. This game is continuous and players should keep score. Hint: If 2 balls are very close to each other a player should kick their ball hard at the other ball so when they hit it, it is more difficult for the other to hit their ball back.

5) Gates Passing---Players are paired up and must successfully pass the ball through the cones to their teammate to earn a point. Players try to accumulate as many points as possible in the time allotted. Have players pass only with their left foot or right foot, or the outside of their foot.

6) Triangle Tag---Set up cones in a triangle formation with each side of the triangle being roughly 1 yard long. Every triangle has a pair of players, each with a ball. Similar to the tag game, one player is being chased and one is "it". However, this time the player who is "it" tags the player by kicking her ball and hitting the other player's ball or hitting the player below the knee. Players can dribble in either direction around the triangle and must stay close to their own triangle. Neither player can go through the triangle. *Version 2:* Allow the player being chased to go through the triangle. When in the triangle she is safe. However, after going through triangle, player must go completely around triangle before she can go through triangle again. She cannot stop inside the triangle. *Version 3:* Allow pairs to move from triangle to triangle (incorporates speed dribbling and traffic). If two pairs are at the same triangle at the same time that is fine, but players still only compete with their partner. Note: To increase difficulty, do not count hitting a player below the knee as a tag.

7) Get Outta Here---Place two small (2 yard) goals at the end of a field 15 x 10 yards. Place half of team behind each goal and coach stands at halfway line with all balls. When coach plays out a ball the first two players run out and try to score on each other's goal. If the ball goes in the goal or out of bounds, the coach yells "get outta here" and plays in a new ball immediately for the next two players. *Version 2:* Coach can stop yelling "get outta here" after a while and see if players recognize when balls go out and are attentive. *Version 3:* Coach can vary service of ball, sometimes play it to one player, sometimes toss the ball up in the air. *Version 4:* Have the first two or three players from each group come out each time a new ball is played and play 2 vs 2 or 3 vs 3.

8) Clean Your Backyard--- Break group into two teams and have each team stay only on their half of the field. Place a 6-yard buffer zone between halves that no one can enter or cross. Each player needs a ball. Place three small (2-3 yd) goals at the far end of each side of the field. Have both teams shoot balls at other team's goals in an attempt to score through any of the small goals (below knee height). Players cannot cross the buffer zone or go into the other half. Balls get recycled naturally in the game. This is a competition and teams need to keep score. Play 2 or 3 games and have teams re-strategize between each game. Teams can play defense though no hands. Only shots with laces count as goals.

9) 2 vs. 1 Keepaway---In a grid 10x15 yds, three players play 2 vs 1 continuous keepaway. Two attackers combine to keep the ball away from one defender. When the defender wins the ball, he or she immediately combines with the attacker he or she did not win the ball from and the attacker who lost the ball becomes the defender. Balls out of play are dribbled in or passed in.

10) 1 vs 1 to Endlines---In a space that is wider than long (15 x 20 yds) each player defends one endline and attacks the other. Players score by dribbling the ball in control over the opposing player's endline. *Version 2:* You can make this 2 vs 2, 3 vs 3 or 4 vs 4.

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*******