

Understand Why Children Participate In Soccer

A majority of the reasons children participate in the sport are for intrinsic reasons. The top priorities are:

- To learn and improve skills
- To have fun
- To be with friends
- To experience the excitement of competition
- To enhance their physical fitness
- To demonstrate their competence

Notice that the extrinsic goal of **winning and beating others is not at the top of the list**. Similarly, when children drop out of soccer, their withdrawal can be traced to the inability of the sport experience to meet their primary motivations for participation. The common reasons are:

- Failing to learn or improve skills
- Not having fun
- Not being with their friends
- Lack of excitement, improvisation and creative opportunities
- Lack of exercise, meaningful movement and fitness improvement
- Lack of optimal challenges and/or consistent failure

Practical Suggestions For Coaches:

1. Encourage players to measure their performance by improvements in their own, personal levels of proficiency and ability rather than by comparing themselves to other players or to other teams based on the game outcome.
2. Because children have several reasons for participation and not just one, **design practices to meet as many different participation motives as possible** (i.e. learning, fun, friendship, fitness, challenge, etc.).
3. **Utilize the K.I.S.S. principle** (Keep It Short and Simple) **when introducing new skills**:
 - **give short effective demonstrations** while briefly explaining the new skill or concept
 - use picture cues liberally
 - focus only on one or two important aspects critical to performance success (**avoid "paralysis by analysis"**)
 - **decrease time spent in transition between activities**, drills and games. Keep practices short, clear and well-planned
4. Utilize a positive approach to skill instruction by focusing on what the athlete did correctly ("**catch them being good**").
5. Make practices meaningful, fun challenging and exciting:
 - **avoid static line drills**
 - **encourage creative** improvisation by players
 - optimally challenge all athletes throughout the full range of abilities (avoid coaching only the mid-ability performer)
 - **eliminate "elimination games"** because players most in need of improvement and repetitions are usually the first to be eliminated
 - **be fully focused on the players and the activity** (coach the players as well as the game)
6. Plan time for the children to meet and make new friends (ice cream stops after practice, pizza parties, watch a video, free time before and after practice).

7. Focus on teaching players the active, ever-changing game of soccer rather than the static, predictable soccer drills.
8. Utilize dual function fitness activities that concurrently enhance fitness and also improve soccer skills (i.e. soccer tag with a ball) and/or psychological dispositions (players are having so much fun they don't realize that they are conditioning too).
9. Provide competitive challenges for athletes that can help define success not only by comparison to others but also by improving one's own standard of accomplishment.

Dr. Colleen Hacker
Sports Psychology
Pacific Lutheran University
Tacoma, Washington