

Chapter 1

Coaching Children in Football

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Congratulations on your decision to coach a youth football team this season. You are embarking on a wonderful journey that will be filled with many special moments that both you and your players – regardless of their age or skill level – will remember for the rest of their lives.

Before you step on the pitch, please be aware that you have taken on a very important role. How you manage the youngsters on your team and the way you interact with them during training sessions and games impacts on how they feel about the sport and even themselves for years to come. How you handle the lengthy list of responsibilities that come attached with the job helps them develop an unquenchable passion for the game or drain their interest in ever participating again.

All you need – besides a whistle and clipboard – is some good information to guide you through the season. In this chapter, you find useful, straightforward insight and tips to help you and your team members have a safe, fun, and rewarding season, and one that they – and you – will look back on fondly for years to come.

Striking a Balance between Parenting and Coaching

I certainly don't have to tell you that being a parent is an enormously difficult job, but here's what I can share with you: Coaching your son or daughter's football team is equally as tricky. After you step inside the white lines and your child straps on the shinguards, you're likely to encounter an assortment of issues. I hope most of them are minor, but some may be problems that you never even dreamed of dealing with. Don't panic! Although the job of coaching

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your own child can be complex and confusing, if handled properly it can also be an extremely rewarding experience for both of you. Yes, expect to experience occasional bumps along the way, but if the two of you work together, you can enjoy some very special memories to savour for a lifetime.

And take comfort in the fact that you're not alone. Approximately 85 per cent of all volunteer football coaches have their own sons or daughters on the team, so you have ventured into common parenting territory.

Kicking around the decision with your kid

Before you decide to grab the whistle and assume the role of football coach, sit down with your child and gauge how she feels about you overseeing the team this season. If you don't ask her how she feels, you won't know. Many youngsters are thrilled to have their dad or mum as coach, and if you see that sparkle in your child's eyes when you bring the subject up, that makes all the time and effort you put into the season well worth it.

On the other hand, some children – for whatever reasons – aren't going to feel comfortable with the idea and would prefer that their parent didn't coach the team. Take their wishes into account before making the decision to step forward.



Here are a few tips to help you reach the right decision on whether you and your child are ready for you to pick up the coaching whistle:

- ✓ **With your child's help, put together a list of all the positives and negatives about being the coach.** On the positive side, you may list that the two of you can spend more time together, and that, as the coach, you can ensure that your child and the rest of the team have fun as they acquire new skills. Resolve the negatives by working with your child to develop solutions. For instance, your child may expect to play in a certain position simply because you're her parent. Explain that you must be fair to everyone and can't show favouritism, and that your child and her teammates will have an equal chance to play different positions.
- ✓ **Examine your own motivations.** Don't take on the task of coaching your son or daughter if your goal is to make your child a star. You must be willing to do whatever is best for your child's overall development, and harbouring thoughts of professional football and international caps is simply a blueprint for trouble.
- ✓ **Explain to your child that being the coach is a great honour.** The fact that she will be 'sharing' you with the other kids during games and training sessions doesn't mean you love her any less. Explain to her that your responsibility is to help all the players on the team. Taking the time to explain your role to your child helps promote better understanding and reduces the chance of problems arising after the season gets under way.

After the two of you have talked things through, take your child's thoughts seriously. If she still isn't comfortable with the idea, push your coaching aspirations to the side for the time being. You can revisit the subject with her the following season to measure his feelings. Just because she isn't ready this season doesn't mean she won't want you guiding her team next season or at some point in the future. The last thing you want to do is turn your child off the sport and make her uncomfortable.

Focusing on family-friendly football rules

If you and your child agree that having you take up the coaching reins is a good move, keep these tips in mind as you navigate through the season:

- ✓ **Remember that you're still the parent.** Whether the team wins or loses, you've got to step out of the coaching mode and remember that first and foremost you're a parent – and that means asking your child whether she had fun and praising her for doing her best and displaying good sportsmanship. Take your child out for that post-game ice cream or pizza whether she scored three goals or tripped over the ball in front of an open goal.
- ✓ **Keep talking.** To effectively monitor how the season is going, you want your child to understand that she can come to you with a concern or problem at any time. Just because you're the coach doesn't mean that certain topics are now off limits.
- ✓ **Don't push training at home.** If your child has a bad training session, you may be tempted to work with her on specific skills as soon as you get home. Never push your child in this direction. In casual conversation, ask her whether she wants to spend a few extra minutes practicing a certain skill that may be giving her a bit of trouble. If she does, that's great, but if not, let it go. Pushing your child to perform extra drills at home or in the park can drain her interest in the sport.
- ✓ **Never compare siblings.** Let your child develop at her own rate. She should never feel burdened by your expectations to control or kick a football as well as her brother or sister did at her age. If you compare a child like this, you can crush her self-esteem and smother her confidence.
- ✓ **Praise, praise, praise!** Be sure to praise your child's willingness, understanding, and co-operation in this special venture. Coaching your child can be one of the most rewarding experiences you can ever have, but it won't always be easy.

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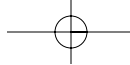


Coaching your own kid can be a great experience for both of you, but the job can feel a bit like walking a tightrope at times as you try to avoid two common traps that many coaches (especially those coaches who are unfamiliar with their roles) tend to fall into. Ideally, your behaviour should fit somewhere in-between these two extremes.

- ✔ **Providing preferential treatment:** Parents naturally lean toward showing preferential treatment for their own children, whether they realise it or not. Typically, they provide their children with extra playing time, shower them with more attention during training sessions and games, or assign them special duties, such as team captain. Showing favouritism throws your child into a difficult spot with her teammates and weakens team camaraderie.
- ✔ **Overcompensating to avoid the preferential-treatment label:** Coaches can also go too far out of their way to ensure that no one thinks they're giving preferential treatment to their own child. Quite often, they reduce their child's playing time or give their child less one-on-one instruction during training sessions. But, taking away playing time from your child in order to steer clear of the favouritism issue will, in effect, create a negative atmosphere for your own child. She will question why you're unfairly punishing her.
- ✔ **Refraining from pushing too hard:** All parents naturally want their kids to excel, no matter what the activity. In a sport like football, parents sometimes go overboard and take their newfound coaching positions to the extreme by viewing it as the chance to control their child's destiny. When this happens the youngster's experience is unfairly compromised because the parent will typically push her harder than the other kids, demand more from her and pile on criticism when she's unable to fulfil the unfair expectations. When parents lose sight of the big picture of what youth football is all about, problems begin materialising that impact on the child's emotional well-being, as well as her interest in discovering and playing football.

Doing Your Homework

Whether you volunteered to coach youth football this season because you wanted to spend more time with your child, or the club had a shortage of coaches and you were willing to step forward, you've accepted a responsibility that should not be taken lightly. You have plenty of work to do behind the scenes before you roll out the balls at your first training session to ensure that the season gets off to a smooth start. See Chapter 4 for more on preparing to run training sessions.



Working with – and not against – parents

The overwhelming majority of parents with children involved in organised youth football programmes are supportive and caring and only want the best for their children. Of course, there are those parents in the minority who can turn out to be a source of season-long aggravation that you may be forced to deal with. You can head off a lot of potential problems by gathering the parents together before you begin working with their kids and laying down the ground rules on what you expect in terms of behaviour during games, as well as their roles and responsibilities.

Coaches and parents who find ways to work together – the adult form of teamwork – is a formula that's going to produce tremendous benefits for the youngsters. Coaches and parents who clash over everything from playing time to why junior isn't getting to play centre forward will spoil the experience for not only that child but quite possibly others as well, if the negativity seeps into the team's training sessions and envelops match day. When it comes to working with parents, it makes good sense to keep the following in mind:

- ✓ **Be proactive.** Outlining your expectations and coaching methods before the season paints a clear picture to parents about how the season is going to be handled. When parents hear first-hand that you are committed to skill development over winning, and that you will be adhering to the league's equal playing time rule, this leaves no room for petty squabbles over how much playing time their child receives. If you don't clarify these issues for parents well in advance, you are asking for a heap of trouble – and you'll probably get it too.
- ✓ **Involve them.** Parents invest a lot of time and money into their child's football experience, and being able to include them will make it far more worthwhile to them and their children instead of simply watching training from the car or dropping their youngster off and running errands. Parents can do more than bring treats after the game, too. Find ways to involve them at your training sessions and recruit the right ones to assist on match day, and turn the season into a rewarding one for everyone involved.
- ✓ **Communicate with them.** Besides that pre-season parents meeting, keep those communication lines open all season long. Talk to parents about their child's progress, share your thoughts on areas of the game that the child has really made improvements in and that have impressed you; offer suggestions for things parents can do to help their youngster develop in other areas; and check from time to time to find out whether their child is having fun playing for you. Including parents in all facets of the season is the right and the smart thing to do, to ensure that their child has a positive experience.

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Deciphering rules and mastering terminology

You're going to be coaching kids in the world's most popular sport, and as a volunteer coach, you may not have played much football yourself. That means that in order to fulfil your responsibilities you've got to have a good handle on the basics of the game and be able to explain rules, introduce terminology and pass on strategies to your young players. Sound complicated? It's not; just take a little time and effort to understand some of the quirky rules, like offside; and some of the terms, like corner kicks and indirect free kicks, that are at the heart of this great game. Check out Chapter 3 for more on rules and terminology.



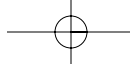
One of the most important steps that you can take is to find out what special rules your league operates under. Quite often the rules that leagues use vary greatly depending on the age and experience level of the players. Everything from the size of the pitch to what types of rules are enforced change from community to community. Knowing these rules – and being able to share them with your players – will make a tremendous difference in their enjoyment of the sport.

On the Pitch

Playing on the pitch is what coaching youth football is all about: The kids, their smiles, and their eagerness start discovering football and developing skills under you. What you say and do from Day One through the course of the season will have a major impact on whether these kids take a great interest in the sport and continue playing it for years to come or whether they choose to turn their backs on it.

Planning training sessions

The exercises you choose in order to pass on skills to kids, and the manner in which you go about designing your training sessions, will influence your team's enjoyment, and progress, during the season. Training sessions that kids look forward to with the same enthusiasm as they have for the first day of summer vacation are going to promote their acquiring and developing skills. But, training sessions that are not well thought out and are put together in your car in the car park five minutes before the players begin arriving are going to stifle all discovery and put a road block on fun. While working with your team, keep the following thoughts in mind to help squeeze the most out of your sessions:



- ✓ **Control the tone of your voice:** While correcting errors, do so in a way that's non-threatening and that applauds the child's effort in the process. Also, don't just focus on spotting mistakes in technique, but give the youngster some easy-to-understand feedback that they can use to correct the mistake the next time.
- ✓ **Create a positive atmosphere:** Turn your plans into sessions in which youngsters can make mistakes without the fear of being yelled at in front of their teammates. Letting the kids know from the first training session of the season that making mistakes is part of the process of acquiring new skills will allow them to relax and, in the process, help them to pick up skills quicker and perform better. Flip through to Chapter 6 for the inside track on running great training sessions.

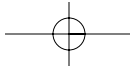


When it comes to choosing exercises for your training sessions, always go for the ones that keep kids moving at all times and are challenging enough to hold their interest. Exercises that force kids to stand in a queue waiting for their turn are not only boring, they dramatically cut down on the number of touches of the ball each child receives, which minimises their development.

Match day

Coaching is about constantly adapting to ever-changing conditions, and that's more evident than ever on match day, when you need to make all sorts of decisions in a short period of time. With younger kids just starting out in the sport, make sure that you rotate them around to try all of the different positions so they can experience the sport from a variety of different perspectives. When it comes to the older kids, you find yourself making half-time adjustments and determining whether a more aggressive approach would serve the team best in the second half or whether a more defensive style of play is warranted.

Match days also provide many great able moments for the kids. Take the chance to reinforce some of the points you've talked about all week during training, such as the importance of working together as a team, displaying good sportsmanship toward the opposing team and the officials, abiding by the rules, doing your best at all times and having fun, regardless of what the scoreboard reads.



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