# U6 Youth Coaching Module – Candidates Pre-Course Reading

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**WELCOME**

Congratulations on accepting the challenge of coaching a youth soccer team. Perhaps you have played or coached soccer before, maybe not. Regardless of your experience in the game, this primer is a great resource to get you started with the rewarding experience of coaching soccer.

As a youth soccer coach you have an opportunity to help children develop their values and ethics as well as their ball skills, physical fitness and sense of Fair Play. Your actions and words will echo with these youngsters for years to come. Many of them will not recall years from now where this positive influence came into their lives, but it was you. Enjoy your time with the players. Instill in them a love for the game.

**GOALS**

A commitment to provide educational materials and opportunity for education to every parent/coach working with players ages 4-8. These parents are generally the least experienced and most in need of relevant coaching information. Nearly 70% of all registered youth soccer players are under the age of 12, and are the ones most in need of good coaching.

Coaches of these young players should complete an introductory coaching education program prior to their first season. This should be considered as part of their responsibility and commitment.

Your willingness to accept pertinent information and utilize acceptable methods of coaching is critical to further the development of our young players. This would mean that the youth coach would agree that their central role is that of a facilitator: set up the right environment and let the game teach!

**THE PLAYERS**

***General Observations of Players from the Ages of Four To Eight***

Children of the same age may differ a good deal in motor skill development. A child's physical skills develop in a particular sequence: first they learn to crawl, then to walk, and then to run, jump and hop, in that order. There is a developmental sequence in learning a single technique too. As players train and practice a particular technique such as dribbling they use their bodies more effectively each time and reach a higher level of development in that technique.

Children progress through motor development sequences at their own rate. Players of the same age may be at different development levels because of differences in motor ability and in the amount of time they have practiced the technique. The important thing is that each player shows continued progress.

Children of the same age will differ in physiological development (bone growth and muscular strength). Stars within youth soccer are often more advanced physiologically than others their own age. They are loaded with energy and yet must be given rest periods. Compared to other periods in a child's life these are the slow years in physical growth, making it the best time to learn new techniques.

Children in the U6 and U8 age groups like to play with others but side by side, rather than together – "Me first…" rather than "Let's both do this…" It's a difficult time to teach tactics. Indeed the focus should be on teaching ball skills and Fair Play. Their training sessions should be mostly technical repetitions, psychologically friendly and positive, have simple combinations with decision making activities. Individual basic skills with an emphasis on keeping ball possession are crucial activities along with lots of balance and coordination exercises.

Much of the training time should be free play with trial and error, discovery and experimentation. Their games should be 3- to 4-a-side at U8 & 6 a side at U10 without leagues or standings. They may participate in festivals, but not tournaments. Weekends should be many fun and competitive games.

Players gain technical skills and game insight by playing in simplified soccer situations:

• Children have not yet learned the skills of compromise and team play. Expect frequent argument.
Do not interfere with their arguments, as it is a part of their learning process. Team games call for social and mental skills that they are just starting to develop.
• They have not learned to accept mistakes – their own or others.
• You should not expect the children to play a team game the way adults would. You should bend the rules to fit their physical and mental maturity. Fewer players result in more touches with the ball and equipment should be suitable to their age and size resulting in better play.
• They lack the ability to make quick decisions.
• Adult reactions to their efforts are often mistaken and become a blow to their self-confidence. They are in need of understanding and encouragement.

**THE PARENTS**
Parents must not lose sight of why youth participate in sport. Studies show that the most popular reason for playing youth sports was **'to have fun'**. The next most popular reasons for playing sport were to learn new skills, to be with friends and to experience the thrill of competition. Although the children do identify winning as a reason for playing sport it is not one of the most popular reasons. Many parents erroneously believe that winning is the number one reason that children want to play sports.

Parents who become preoccupied with winning and losing place an unreasonable amount of pressure on their child and risk turning their child off to youth soccer. An effective sport parent should also understand his or her role and the expectations associated with being a soccer parent. The primary role of the parent in youth soccer is to provide support for their children. At these young ages, parents need to provide encouragement, and help the child understand the lessons that soccer can teach.

Parents of Young Soccer Players Should …
• Listen to their children's views about playing soccer
• Provide unconditional love during both successes and failures
• Help children understand that the definition of a good performance is giving one's best effort
• Encourage the players to be self-reliant and to accept responsibility for their decisions and actions
• Encourage non-sport interests
• Allow their children to set their own standards of excellence
• Provide encouragement and hopeful optimism when needed by the youngster
• Emphasize enjoyment above all!

***How Parents Can Help!***

Parents of players play an active part in the enjoyment their children have in youth soccer. Encouragement to try new things is step one. Now that they are out there kicking, running, laughing, falling down and all chasing the ball simultaneously they need positive reinforcement. Many parents during matches and sometimes-even training sessions yell out to the kids what to do and when to do it.

They cheer when things go right and sometimes cry out in anguish when they don't. In all they are trying to be positive and help the kids. What many adults have forgotten from when they were 5-, 6-, 7- and 8-years-old is that children of those ages can focus on a limited number of tasks at one time.

Indeed it takes all of the attention capacity of an U6 player to control the ball. This is because they are still developing basic balance, coordination and agility. Also in a 3 versus 3 game the odds for the player with the ball are generally 1 versus 5. So during a game, the player needs to focus on the task at hand — trying to control the ball. Unfortunately he/she is distracted by all of the adults yelling from the touchline. Now the child has to make a choice, either play the ball or listen to the parents.

The match environment simply becomes more complex each year as there are new rules to learn, more players on the field, new tactics to learn and more space to cover. So the lesson is clear. If parents want to help the kids play their best they need to be quiet while watching the game. Just sit back and let the children play!

**TEAM MANAGEMENT**

*Parent – Coach Meeting*

The following list includes key points for you to remember when you meet with the players' parents at the beginning of the season:

• Introduce yourself and your assistant coaches.
• Be prompt and organized in starting.
• Have refreshments if possible.
• Introduce yourself and your assistant coaches.
• State your experience and qualifications, even if you have none, and your reasons for becoming a coach.
• Explain your philosophy and team objectives.
• Review your methods of coaching. Describe a typical training session.
• Discuss what is expected of parents and solicit their assistance.
• Collect parent contact information (postal address, phone numbers, E-mail addresses, etc.) and especially emergency contact information.
• Ask the parents to let you know if there is any particular medical condition about their child you should know.

• Distribute information on the club and the training/game schedule.
• Discuss and perhaps give the adults a handout on the rules for their conduct at games.
• Leave plenty of time so parents can ask you any questions or voice any concerns that they may have.

***Sideline Ethics***

Define appropriate sideline behavior. This would be for players, spectators and the staff. Don't allow yourself or spectators to verbally abuse the players or the officials. REMEMBER: A COACH IS RESPONSIBLE FOR HIS/HER SIDELINE!

Some things to discuss early in the seasonal year are:
• Encourage parents to cheer for all players, not just the "good ones." Know the difference between cheering and "oh my goodness, what are you doing out there?"
• Discourage coaching by spectators from the sidelines, as this will confuse players.
• Referees, especially young ones, are doing a difficult job. Let them do it.
• Criticism of officials usually results in the children learning the wrong lesson from the adults surrounding the field.
• Be a positive role model and set the standard of good sportsmanship.
• Do not negatively question or argue with officials.
• Do not engage in unsportsmanlike communication with opponents or their spectators.
• Maintain integrity. Your demeanor on and off the field will say a lot about you for a long time.
• Know and keep the rules and regulations of the local, state and national organizations.
• Always work within the spirit of the Laws of the Game. Do not "bend the rules" to your advantage.
• Regardless of the outcome of matches, wins and losses and trophy presentations, your actions as coach will always be how people remember you.

***Coaching Your Own Child***

Approximately 1 in 5 parents will become volunteer coaches for their child's team. Before doing so, you will need to clarify both how your child feels about this decision and how you feel about taking on the hard work involved in being a coach.

Many parents mean well when they volunteer to coach, but don't fully realize how much time and effort it takes to do this successfully. Some parents have found that coaching helps get and keep their children involved in soccer. Others find coaching their own children a recipe for disaster because the child resents the switch from nurturing parent to neutral or demanding coach who can't play favorites.

Even though coaching can be immensely fulfilling, it can also be a challenge, especially if you are dealing with your own child. Before rushing into coaching your child's team, take a moment to clarify your motives. Ask yourself the following questions when considering if you will make the commitment:

• Am I coaching to help make my child a star or ensure my child gets extra playing time?
• Can I treat my own child the same as the other members of the team and have the same expectations for him/her?
• Can I be objective in team assignments and not favor my child?
• Can I avoid favoritism?
• Are you willing to accept your child no matter where he/she is in terms of both skill ability and motivation level and not push him/her at all times to be the best one on the team?
• Can I modulate my emotions, especially during highly competitive situations?
• Can I avoid comparing my child's athletic achievement to my own?
• Will my other children feel excluded or jealous?

After you have thought this over discuss the decision with your child. How does your child feel about you coaching? Ask your child if it's okay. Talk with him/her about how you will need to pay equal attention to all the kids involved.

• Explain how you will treat him/her just like the other members of the team during training and games, but take off your coaching hat when you leave the field.
• Is your child concerned that your coaching will impact his/her friendships with other kids on the team?
• Make sure that your child feels both comfortable and enthusiastic about having you as a coach, is willing to share your attention and praise with teammates and is able to accept your directions and criticism.

• Coaching your child allows you to get to know his/her peers and gives you something to share and talk about with him/her, but it can also become a source of tension. Keep a watchful eye on how your child is handling your new role, as he/she may become overly concerned about gaining your approval or feel even more devastated by your disapproval.
• You will have to continually work to keep your roles as parent and coach separate. Remember to be a parent first and coach second.
• When your child experiences frustration after a game, he/she will want you to console him/her as his/her parent, not offer advice as the coach.
• Resist the temptation to talk with your child about other team members' performances. Once you leave the field, leave the game behind as well.
• Don't let soccer become the central focus of your conversations or of the quality time you spend together.
• Part of successfully coaching your child means recognizing when it's time to have someone else take over the role, either because your child has progressed beyond your own skill level or because coaching has caused both of you frustration.
• Not only does this mean avoiding favoritism, but it also requires not being tougher on your child than the other players.
By following these simple rules, you can avert some of the feelings of being misunderstood.

**PREVENTION AND CARE OF INJURIES**
Your primary role is to provide a safe and healthy environment for the children. You can do this by following this simple checklist for basic safety. Be sure to devote part of your team's first training and practice to basic rules. Here are the most important:

• Shin guards are mandatory equipment. Players must wear shin guards under their socks.
• Do not allow kids to play soccer while wearing jewelry or watches.
• Goals must be anchored to prevent them being blown or pulled over.
• Absolutely no swinging or climbing on goals. Never allow kids to move a portable goal.
• Keep warm-up areas clear of gear bags and other items players might trip over.
• Keep benches at least five yards away from sidelines.
• Insist that kids bring filled water bottles to every game and practice.
• Use corners flags made with flexible rods.
• Check fields before you play. Look for broken glass, storm drains, raised sprinkler heads, holes, protruding bolts, hooks or nails on goal posts or crossbars - anything that can cause injury.
In following the above, you have taken precaution to ensure a safe environment. However, there's no avoiding injury when it comes to playing sports. Again, be safe and prepared in the event of an injury to a player.

• Have a properly stocked first aid kit, including ice. Ask your physician, ambulance squad, or emergency medical facility to suggest a list of supplies for your medical kit. Check frequently that the kit is restocked.
• Tape several quarters inside the first aid kit, for telephone calls. Despite the prevalence of cell phones this practice is a good backup for an emergency.
• Take first aid courses, or better yet, advanced first aid.
• Prevent many injuries and sprains by teaching, and allowing time for warm-ups and cool-downs.
• Don't take chances; kids who are injured should be removed from the field. Injuries should never be "worked out" or "run off."
• Teach team parents the basics of RICE for minor injuries:

- ***Rest:*** Stop all activity that would further aggravate the injury.
- ***Ice:*** Use ice continuously for the first 15 minutes then 10 minutes on and 10 minutes off for the first 24 hours.
- ***Compression:*** To prevent swelling wrap the injury with an elastic bandage.
- ***Elevation:*** If possible raise the injured body part above heart level.

*RICE* should be employed for 24 to 48 hours depending on the severity of the injury.

***Discourage parents from seeking a player's early return from an injury, as returning too soon will often lead to re-injury.***

***Prevent Dehydration***
Adequate hydration is one of the simplest but most important things players need to feel and perform well.
• Kids dehydrate easier than adults.
• Thirst is not a good indicator of the need for fluids. Often kids don't feel thirsty until after they are dehydrated.
• Kids should drink fluids frequently, and in small amounts, during play - especially in hot or humid weather.
• Water, sports drinks and diluted fruit juices are all good choices for fluid replacement during play.
• Care should be taken that kids do not contaminate common drinking containers by putting their hands into water containers to scoop out ice or by passing around a common drinking bottle.
• NEVER withhold fluids from kids; thirst won't make them tough, it will just endanger them. Do not tell kids to just "wet their whistle" or "take a sip!"

For more information go to: www.SportsSafety.org

**TRAINING SESSIONS**

• Action as soon as possible. Have the team working at the outset without an involved and complicated explanation.
• Remember you are coaching players, not skills.
• Involve as many of the players as possible and try to ensure that each one has a specific job.
• Demonstration position – select a suitable demonstration position. This is important and certain basics should be followed:

- Coach must see every player…do not begin to speak until all are in front and standing still…the players nearest you should crouch down.
- Immobilize all soccer balls…have all balls out of the players' reach as you speak…if coaching in the activity, get the ball yourself.
- Do not speak into a strong wind.
- Players should not be asked to look into the sun at the coach…it is better that the sun is in the eyes of the coach.

***Assistant Coaches***

If you are fortunate enough to have other adults volunteer to assist you with the team then look for assistance with team management/administration and coaching. The assistant coach does not necessarily need to have experience as a player or coach to be helpful to you. Let the parents, your volunteer base; know this and they'll then be more likely to assist you.

An assistant coach could simply help with supervision, training and game organization, first aid, etc. Some adults will be more comfortable starting with these responsibilities and then ease themselves into helping you to actually coach the players. Whatever tasks you assign to your assistant be sure you communicate clearly and often. It is important that the coaches working with the players are on the same page. An assistant coach can be a real benefit to you, but only if you invest the effort to build a good working partnership.

***Equipment***

The key motivator in soccer is the ball; use it as much as possible in your training sessions. If you are using equipment, try to make sure that your layout has visual impact. The set up and collecting of equipment should be done efficiently. Prepare your lesson plan thoroughly, bearing in mind the players' abilities, the facilities and the equipment at your disposal.
As you begin each activity during your training, be sure you have all of the equipment where you need it to efficiently run that activity. Remove any unnecessary equipment from the training area. Involve the players in this process to a degree commensurate with their age. Players in all age groups can help pick up all of the cones or dribble all of the balls to one spot. However, U6 players most likely will not be able to use the cones to mark off a practice grid for you, but U10 players can do this.

Here's a short list of equipment you should consider obtaining to coach your team.

- First aid kit
- Emergency ice
- Extra water
- Spare soccer balls
- Ball pump
- Junior size training bibs (at least two colors)
- Disc cones (having some of different colors can be useful)

**How to Run a Training Session**

A training session should focus on one theme!

1. Warm-up: without the ball at first to challenge their physical fitness growth; i.e., at this age the fitness focus is on balance, agility, fundamental eye/hand & eye/foot coordination. Psychologically this needs to be FUN physical challenges - NOT - a calisthenics approach.
2. With the ball- simple challenges first and as their technique improves over time then increase the challenge of doing things with the ball. Activities done with the ball could be done with either the feet or hands.
3. Fun game-like activity that is done with the ball. Run two or three different activities now. Length of each activity depends on how much fun the kids are having and their attention span.
4. Finish with a 3 vs. 3 (U6) or 4 vs. 4 (U8) match. If you have more children in attendance then set up a second match. Throughout the session the coach allows the players to experiment and discover the ball skill being taught on their own. The coach should do some demonstration of the skill a few times during the session. Also during the session call out some of the key coaching points on how to execute the ball skill.

Praise loudly and positively when a player does the skill correctly — Positive Reinforcement! Encourage them to try to do new things with the ball throughout the soccer season. **It is VERY important for the training session that each player has a ball.**

**Design of a Training Session**

The training session will go from simple to complex activities.

Warm-up (1st activity)
2nd activity – alone & in pairs
3rd activity – pair's activity on cooperation
4th activity – pair's activity on competition
5th activity – small-sided games
Cool-down

Whenever you put together a lesson plan for a training session ask yourself these questions:

- Are the activities fun?
- Are they organized?
- Are the players involved in the activities?
- Are creativity and decision making being used?
- Are the spaces used appropriate?
- Is the coach's feedback appropriate?
- Are there implications for the game?

When you are writing out your lesson plan here are some of the items that should be included:

- Date
- Topic
- Training Objective
- Equipment Needs
- Outline of Activities
- Diagram of each Activity
- Coaching Points

One last note…avoid the three L's: Laps, Lines and Lectures! There's no more surefire way of boring the kids than the three L's. Kids at these ages are fit. They don't need to run laps. It's a waste of precious time when the kids could be combining fitness with skills. And as we've said before, every child should have a ball, then there's no need to wait in line for their turn. Use activities that have all the children active. And keep your comments and instructions brief. A lecture is the last thing a child wants when soccer time is supposed to be a fun time. A well organized training session will leave no idle time for their minds to wander.

Washington Youth Soccer provides an archive of lesson plans for training sessions on the web site at www.wsysa.com

**GAME DAY**

***Pre-Game***

• Tell parents that the kids should eat at least two hours before kickoff whenever possible.
• Be at the game site ten minutes prior to kickoff for U6 and U8
• Brief warm-up.
• Very short talk from the coach.
• Organize who will be on the field first.

***Game***

• Sit back, relax and enjoy watching the kids play.
• Help officiate the match when needed.
• Make sure all of the kids' play at least 50% of the game.
• During the game is a good time to speak with the parents to explain to them what is happening in the game and for what you want them to cheer.
• Watch for what the players do well in the game and praise it…otherwise be quiet.
• During breaks make sure the players get water and take care of any injuries.

***Post-Game***

• Tend to any injuries.
• Ensure all of the kids drink plenty of water.
• Thank the players and send them home.