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Chapter **1**

Teaching Soccer to Children

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

Before you step on the field, you need to be aware that you're taking on a very important role: Ensure that the season is memorable for all the right reasons. How you manage the youngsters on your team and the way you interact with them during practices and games affect how they feel about the sport and even themselves for years to come. How you handle the lengthy list of responsibilities that comes with the job either helps them develop an unquenchable passion for the game or drains their interest in ever participating again.

All you need — besides a bunch of soccer balls and endless enthusiasm — 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 have a safe, fun, and rewarding season.

It's All About the Kids — Always!

Coaching a youth soccer team is all about meeting the needs of all the players all season long, but that's a lot trickier than it sounds. You may not have considered lots of factors that can wiggle their way into a season and be disruptive and even destructive. Being aware of the biggies is key so you can prep to prevent them from sabotaging your season.

For starters, you've got to ditch your ego (we all have them!). This season is not about you, how knowledgeable you may be about the sport, how great of a soccer player or all-round athlete you were, what a savvy soccer strategist you consider yourself to be, or how many wins you can lead your team to this season. While you naturally want to look good in front of the parents, it's important to keep in mind that your team's won-loss record is not a reflection of your coaching acumen.



REMEMBER

The best barometer of your coaching skills and impact is whether the kids on your team learn and develop soccer skills and either want to play again next season or bail on the sport. (And when they are clamoring to play for you again, that's the biggest win of all!)

But once the scoreboards are turned on, and there's that game day buzz of excitement swirling in the air, remembering who the season is all about can get murky. (In Chapter 4, we share all-important information on crafting a kid-first coaching philosophy — and sticking to it.)

Doing Your Homework

Whether you volunteered to coach youth soccer this season because you want to spend more time with your child or because the league has a shortage of coaches and you're willing to step forward, you're accepting a massive responsibility that you can't take lightly. Before you roll out the soccer balls at your first practice, you have plenty of work to do behind the scenes to ensure that the season gets off to a smooth start and stays on course.

Working with — and not against — parents

The overwhelming majority of parents with children involved in organized youth soccer programs are a supportive and caring group who want only the best for their children. Of course, parents in the minority can turn out to be a source of season-long aggravation that you may be forced to deal with. You can head off many potential problems by gathering the parents together before the season

begins and laying the ground rules on your expectations for behavior during games, how they can best support their child and the entire team, and how some can even assist you in helping provide a fun-filled and productive season for everyone.

Coaches and parents finding ways to work together — the adult form of teamwork — is a formula that produces tremendous benefits for the youngsters. Coaches and parents who clash over everything from playing time to why Junior isn't getting to be the goalkeeper spoil the experience for that child and quite possibly others as well. Kids sense tension and turmoil among adults, and when negativity seeps into the team's practice sessions or envelops game day, fun is squashed and interest in continuing with the sport dwindles.



REMEMBER

With parents, keep the following in mind:

- » **Be proactive with them.** Outlining your expectations and coaching methods before the season paints a clear picture to parents about how you plan to handle the season. When parents hear firsthand that you're a process-based coach committed to skill development over winning (we go more in-depth on that in Chapter 4) and that you adhere to the league's equal-playing-time rule, you leave no room for petty squabbles over how much playing time their children receive. Playing time is the No. 1 headache maker for youth coaches and if you don't jump out in front of this before the season starts and clarify your approach for parents, you're asking for a heap of trouble — and you'll get it, too. In Chapter 2, we help you develop your coaching philosophy and become familiar with your league so that you can clearly communicate these points to the parents.
- » **Involve them.** Parents invest a lot of time and money in their child's soccer experience, and being included (instead of simply watching practice from the car or dropping their youngster off and then running errands) makes it far more worthwhile to them and their children. Parents can do more than bring treats after the game, too. Find ways to involve them at your practices and recruit the right ones to assist you on game day; doing so helps you turn the season into a rewarding one for everyone involved. Throughout the book, you can find tips on boosting parental involvement, from practice drills that have team parents sticking around (see Chapter 6) to working with parents at higher levels of play.
- » **Communicate with them.** Besides a preseason parents' meeting (which you can read all about in Chapter 4), keep the communication lines open all season long. Talk to the parents about the kids' progress; share your thoughts on where they really make improvements; offer suggestions for things they can do to help their youngsters develop in other areas; and check in from time to time to find out whether their children are having fun playing for you. You



REMEMBER

can even send a short weekly email with a rundown of what skills you will be focusing on in practice that week to help keep parents in the loop.

Sharing honest feedback is a two-way street: While you're speaking openly and honestly about their child, be willing to listen to what parents have to say about your coaching and the impact you're having on their child. Perhaps during your parental conversations you can pick up some valuable nuggets on areas you can focus on to have a greater impact with specific children. Including parents in all facets of the season is the right thing to do and the smart thing to ensure that their children have positive experiences. In fact, we suggest that you meet 1-on-1 with each parent as part of your midseason progress review (see Chapter 8).



TIP

Suggest to parents that they abide by a 24-hour rule. If something upsets them at practice or in a game, encourage them to wait until the following day to address the issue with you. This waiting period helps calm the emotions of the moment and usually leads to more productive conversations.

Despite your best efforts, problems may arise with parents. Our advice is to remain calm and in control of your emotions and never allow situations to escalate. Check out Chapter 19, where we help you troubleshoot this issue and other problems coaches are most likely to face throughout the season.

Deciphering rules and mastering terminology

You've taken the job of teaching kids the world's most popular sport, but perhaps you never played organized soccer growing up. Therefore, to fulfill your responsibilities, you have to get a good handle on the basics of the game and be able to explain rules, introduce terminology, and teach strategies to your young players. Sound complicated? It isn't; it just takes a little time and effort on your part to learn 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. We open up the rulebook in Chapter 3 and cover all the terms that you need to know. And we concentrate on the skills, techniques, and strategies that you need to pass along to your kids throughout Parts 2 and 3 of this book. Whether you need to brush up on fundamental skills for a beginning team or work out a defensive formation when you play against that high-octane older squad, we have you covered.



TIP

One of the most important steps you can take is to find out what special rules your league operates under. Quite often, the rules that leagues utilize vary depending on the age and experience level of the players. Everything from the size of the field, to the number of players on it, to which rules are enforced changes from

community to community. Knowing these rules — and sharing them with your players (and parents, too!) — makes a tremendous difference in your players' enjoyment of the sport and the parents' understanding of what is happening on the field. Many parks and recreation departments modify rules for their program based on the age of the kids, such as banning heading or not allowing cleats to be worn. Some programs are conducted under the guidance of national organizations and utilize their rules. Each state also has a governing body for youth soccer that provides resources and information.

Taking the Field

Coaching youth soccer is all about the kids: connecting with them, motivating them, inspiring them, teaching them, having fun with them, and cultivating a lifetime love of soccer and healthy physical activity. What you say and do from day one through the course of the season has a major impact on whether these kids take a great interest in the sport and continue playing it for years to come or choose to turn their backs on it.

Practice planning

The drills you choose to teach kids skills and the manner in which you go about designing your practices influence your team's enjoyment and progress during the season. Action-packed practices that kids look forward to with the same enthusiasm as the first day of summer vacation promote learning and skill development. On the other hand, practices that you scramble together in your car in the parking lot five minutes before the players begin arriving stifle learning and smother fun. While working with your team, keep the following thoughts in mind to help squeeze the most out of your sessions:

» Be more than a coach. Although you're teaching your players the basics of the game, you also have the opportunity to impact their lives in so many other important areas. While they warm up, talk to them about the importance of doing well in school and ask them what their favorite subjects are. Taking a genuine interest in who they are outside of sports helps establish those special coach–player relationships. And the more kids feel that their coach is invested in them and cares about more than whether they can score goals or play great defense, the more rewarding the experience for all involved. Plus, kids tend to play harder for those coaches who they recognize want the best for them both on and off the field.

» **Create a positive atmosphere.** Turn your practices into sessions in which youngsters can make mistakes without the fear of being criticized or yelled at in front of their teammates. Letting the kids know from the first practice of the season that making mistakes is part of the learning process allows them to relax and, in the process, helps them learn skills more quickly and perform better. Remind players — and parents! — that if there aren't any struggles, challenges, or difficult times, no growing or developing isn't taking place. Players don't improve if they aren't nudged out of their comfort zone and forced to adapt and work on new skills and techniques of the sport.



TIP

Choose drills that keep kids moving at all times and are challenging enough to hold their interest while also promoting skill development and building on what they have learned. Drills that force kids to stand in line awaiting turns are not only boring, but also dramatically cut down on the number of touches of the ball each child receives, which minimizes learning. Sometimes drills require lines, but always strive to keep those as short as possible. With older players, any drill that features a scoring system usually ignites more focus and effort by making it game-like. Check out Chapters 10, 14, and 17, where we provide all sorts of drills and ideas for beginning, intermediate, and advanced players.

Game day

Coaching is about constantly adapting to ever-changing conditions, and that's most evident on game day, when you're challenged to make all sorts of decisions in a short period of time. With younger kids just starting out in the sport, you want to make sure you rotate them around to all the different positions so they can experience the sport from a variety of perspectives. With the older kids, you may find yourself making halftime adjustments and determining whether a more aggressive approach serves the team best in the second half or whether a more defense-oriented style of play is warranted. But don't worry; we help you handle it all in Chapter 7.



REMEMBER

Game day provides many great teachable moments for the kids. It gives you a chance to reinforce some of the points you talk about all week during practice, such as the importance of working 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. And, remember, players take their cues from you. So, if you're smiling, relaxed, and having fun and you're treating the officials with respect no matter the calls being made, your players will be more likely to behave in a positive manner, too.

Balancing Parenting and Coaching

We certainly don't have to tell you that being a parent is a difficult job, but here's what we can share with you: Coaching your son or daughter's soccer team is equally tricky. After you step inside the white lines and your child straps on the shin guards, you're likely to encounter an assortment of issues, especially at the older and more advanced levels of play. We hope most of them are minor, but some may be problems that you never even dreamed of dealing with before. Don't panic! Although coaching your child can be complex and confusing, it can also be, if handled properly, an extremely rewarding experience for both of you. Sure, you'll probably experience occasional bumps along the way, but if the two of you work together, you'll enjoy some very special memories to savor for a lifetime.

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

Kicking around the decision with your kid

At the beginning levels of youth soccer, many programs are desperate for volunteers, so stepping up to take over a team is a wonderful way to support your local recreation department and have a positive impact in the community. Plus, your child who is new to soccer will probably think it's pretty cool having mom or dad as the coach. But as kids gain experience in the sport, taking on coaching roles with your children's teams brings on many new challenges. So before you decide to assume the role of soccer coach, sit down with your child and gauge how they feel about you overseeing the team this season. If you don't ask them how they feel, you'll never know. Many youngsters are thrilled to have their dad or mom as coach as they progress through the sport, and if you see that sparkle in your child's eyes when you bring the subject up, that makes the decision an easy one and all the time and effort you put into the season well worth it.

On the other hand, some children — for whatever reason — aren't going to feel comfortable with the idea and would prefer that their parents don't coach the teams. Take your child's wishes into account before making the decision to step forward. As much as you may love coaching, you don't want to take on the role if it's going to drive your child from the sport.



TIP

Here are a few tips to help you reach the right decision on whether you and your child are ready for you to coach their team this season:

- » **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 will be spending more time together than before and that, as the coach, you'll ensure that your child and the rest of the team have fun as they learn new skills. Resolve the negatives by working with your child to develop solutions. For instance, your child may expect to play a certain position simply because you're their parent. Explain that you must be fair to everyone and can't show favoritism and that your child and their teammates will have an equal chance to play different positions.

- » **Examine your motivations.** Don't take on the task of coaching your child if your goal is to make them a star. Harboring thoughts of college scholarships and athletic stardom is simply a blueprint for trouble. Plus, coaches have the all-important responsibility of helping every player on the team, not just their own.
- » **Explain to your child that being the coach is a great honor.** The fact that they're "sharing" you with the other kids during games and practice sessions doesn't mean you love them any less. Explain to him 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.
- » **Listen to your child's concerns.** Some kids may be hesitant to have their parents on the sidelines for all sorts of reasons, so listen to what they have to say. They may feel added pressure to excel having their parent as the coach, or perhaps they want the experience of playing for a new coach if they have already played a season with you leading the way. If you've already had the chance to coach your child, sometimes it's good to step back and allow them to gain the experience of playing for somebody else.

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

Focusing on family-friendly field rules

If you and your child agree that having you grab 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 have to step out of coaching mode and remember that first and foremost, you're a parent — and that means asking your child whether they had

fun and praising them for doing their best and displaying good sportsmanship. Take your child out for that post-game ice cream or pizza whether they scored a goal or tripped over the ball on a breakaway.

- » **Keep talking.** To effectively monitor how the season is going, you want your child to understand that they 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 practice at home.** If your child has a bad practice, you may be tempted to work with them on specific skills as soon as you get home. Never push your child in this direction. In casual conversation, ask them whether they want to spend a few extra minutes practicing a certain skill that may be giving them a bit of trouble. If they do, that's great, but if not, let it go. Pushing your child to perform extra repetitions can drain their interest in the sport.
- » **Never compare siblings or teammates.** Let your child develop at their own rate. They should never feel burdened by your expectations to control or kick a soccer ball as well as their sibling did at this age, or as well as the neighbor next door who is also on the team. These types of comparisons can crush self-esteem and smother confidence.
- » **Praise, praise, praise!** Be sure to praise your child's willingness, understanding, and cooperation in this special venture. Coaching your child can be one of the most rewarding experiences you ever have, even though it isn't always easy.
- » **Be careful with car conversations.** A lot of adults have the natural tendency to replay the game on the drive home, and that's perfectly okay if the youngster is an enthusiastic participant in the discussion. But if the game didn't go as well as you planned or your child had one of those difficult days on the field that all athletes experience from time to time, refrain from dissecting every mistake and don't spend the ride probing the youngster for reasons why the team lost or why they didn't perform up to the best of their ability.
- » **Refrain from pushing too hard.** All parents naturally want their kids to excel, no matter what the activity. In a sport like soccer, sometimes parents go overboard and take their newfound coaching position to the extreme by viewing the position as a chance to control their child's destiny. When this happens, the youngster's experience is unfairly compromised because the parent typically pushes them harder than the other kids, demands more from them, and piles on criticism when they're unable to fulfill the unfair expectations. When parents lose sight of the big picture of what youth soccer is all about, problems materialize that impact the child's emotional well-being, as well as their interest in learning and playing soccer.



WARNING

Evading the extremes

Coaching your 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 coaches who are unfamiliar with their roles) tend to fall into. Ideally, your behavior should fit somewhere between these two extremes:

- » **Providing preferential treatment:** Parents naturally lean toward showing preferential treatment to their own children, whether they realize it or not. Typically, they give their children extra playing time, shower them with more attention during practices and games, and assign them special duties, such as team captain. Showing favoritism throws your child into a difficult spot with their 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 children. Quite often, the coach reduces their child's playing time or gives their child less 1-on-1 instruction during practices. Taking away playing time from your child to steer clear of the favoritism issue does, in effect, create a negative atmosphere for your child. They will question why you're punishing them unfairly.



TIP

GAME-DAY QUESTIONS TO ASK YOUR CHILD

Ideally, your child is looking forward to game day. Keep in mind that the conversations you have with your child on game day — whether at the breakfast table or in the minivan on the drive to the game — have the power to either minimize nervousness and ensure a fun and relaxed demeanor or to fuel stress and hamper your child's ability to perform. Here are a few questions that result in positive game-day discussions:

- **What are you most looking forward to about the game?** Your child's response speaks volumes about their state of mind and often provides valuable insight on the mood of the entire team. If your youngster seems overly uptight, the rest of the team may be as well. Perhaps this apprehension stems from the extra emphasis you're unknowingly putting on this game or the way you've been interacting with the kids during practices recently. Listen to your child's response, but also pay attention to the tone of their voice and body language.

- **How about trying that new skill today, if you get a chance? I'm looking forward to seeing it.** Genuinely and enthusiastically letting your child know that you can't wait to see them put their new skill to use is a real confidence-booster. This comment shows your child that you're pleased with how they've picked up the skill, and it gives them that little extra impetus to want to use it during the game.
- **Where do you want to go after the game?** Getting your child's input on where they would like to grab a post-game burger or pizza is a powerful reminder that no matter how the game goes, you're going to enjoy spending time together through the wonderful sport of soccer. These types of subtle reminders help free kids up to do their best, fully enjoy the competition, and not be so worried about making mistakes.



WARNING

While it can be difficult, refrain from launching into a post-game analysis of everything that happened on the field the moment your child hops in the car. Dissecting plays and decisions before you are even out of the parking lot — especially if your child struggled or the team performed poorly — can put a real damper on the day. Instead, give the young athlete a chance to rest and reflect and let them bring up the game whenever they are ready to do so. Discuss the rocky patches if they want to, but always remember to keep your comments positive and supportive. Focus on aspects of the game that are under your child's control, such as praising their effort, attitude, and teamwork, and let them know that you really enjoyed watching them compete and do their best.

