

U8 Benchmarks, Coaching and Player Development

U8 is the next progression for a player. The basic skills that were taught in U6 & U7 are to be further developed with a few new concepts added. While many of the players that play in U8 are returning players from U7, many will still be new to Soccer. Please adjust your practices accordingly to this. While you may have some players that are a little more advanced, many players will still need to the basic concepts taught to them as in U6 & U7.

Children in the U8 age group will start to pull the concepts of teamwork and group play together. The coach must set up numerous activities where the players are together but are still involved in individual play as well. This age group prefers team activities, their competitiveness will start to grow.

Again, the focus for players at the U8 age group is to continue to develop their skills while learning new ones and learning the concept of teamwork and team play. Players will start to learn positions and concepts such as Offense and Defense but will still primarily bunch together as in the previous divisions. Strategy and game planning should not be a focus, rather encouraging players to have fun, participate, and refine their developing skills is the most important aspects.

U8 Division Rules:

- No Goalkeepers (this also means that no player can ‘camp’ out near the goal to stop kicks from going in).
- 4 vs 4
- Size #3 ball
- throw-ins, goal kicks, or corner kicks introduced. Players should be given opportunity during games to correct incorrect throw-ins, goal kicks and corner kicks. Coaches can be on field and assist players if no referee is present.
- Referees introduced more frequently. Players to start to recognize the referee’s job. Coaches to still play a hands-on role during games (i.e., helping direct players).
- 4 8min quarters
- All players are to play at least half of the game.

Components of the Game for the U-8 Age Group

1. Technical– These are the skills used to play the game, i.e., the “fundamentals”. This includes things like dribbling, passing, shooting, receiving, tackling, juggling, etc.
2. Tactical– Tactics focuses largely on decision making, i.e., how players can make the correct decision given a particular situation. We should try to understand the progression of tactics and develop the players in the proper sequence, so that players are comfortable solving easier problems (1v1, 2v1) before they move on to solve more complex ones (4v4):
3. Psychological–For youth soccer, this relates to whether the player is having fun playing soccer, and other aspects such as how they deal with winning and losing, their level of motivation, and how they interact with teammates, coaches, and their parents.
4. Physical– Fitness can be largely achieved by just letting them play soccer.

General Characteristics & Expectations for a U8 Coach:

- The Characteristics of a U8 Coach are the same as a U7 coach, continuing the focus of team and pair concepts to the players.
- Patience. Players at this age are just learning the game of soccer and more importantly, learning social behaviors. Patience is key with a U8 player.
- Keep instructions simple. Players of this age group will only understand simple tasks. Detailed drills and explanations will confuse them.
- Encourage participation. Many players will initially be shy and not as engaging, so try to be inviting and encouraging to players.
- Constantly keep the players on the move. The less instruction the better.
- Keep all players engaged. All players for many drills and games should have their own ball. This will allow all players to participate and minimize players standing around. The more a player stands around, the more likely they will lose focus and not pay attention. Continue with pair drills, so one ball per pair would suffice in this scenario.
- And lastly the most important rule: Keep it Fun! Players will be more engaging, better focused and learn more if they are having fun. All drills and games should be oriented to maximize the fun factor.
- Set the example. Players will feed off your energy whether positive or negative. Set the example for Sportsmanship, fair play, and teamwork. Players will be more competitive in this age than previous ones so continue to emphasize teamwork and sportsmanship.

General Characteristics of a U8 Player

- 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.
- are now able to take another’s perspective – they now have a sense of how others are feeling.
- still unable to think abstractly – still do not have this capability, be patient.
- still much prefer playing to watching – keep everyone active during practice.
- limited attention span (on average 15-20 seconds for listening, up to 20 minutes when engaged in a task)
- understand time and sequence – they now understand “if I do this, then that happens.”
- 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 – be very aware of your verbal and nonverbal reactions, as they look for your reaction frequently.
- 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.
- 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 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. Do not need to stress winning and losing at this age. Results should not be important.
- beginning to develop motor memories – by attempting fundamental technical skills they are training their bodies to remember certain movements.
- less active imaginations than U6&U7 players.

Typical U8 Practice Structure

- A typical U8 training session should not exceed 1hr.
- Every child should have a ball.
- Warm-up activities should include balance coordination and agility, all activities done with a ball.
- Continue with partner activities and Drills.
- A mixture of individual and partner activities. Add more maze-type games. Introduce target games with a variety of player combinations: 1v1, 2v1, 1v2 and 2v2.
- Finish with 4v4 game to small goals, NO GK's.

Practice Structure

Warm-ups: Proper stretching of legs arms, and body. Have the players form a circle around you the coach and demonstrate each stretch. have the team count out the length of each stretch. After stretches, have each player have a ball placed in front of them. They will work on ball skills.

1. Have the players place their right foot on top of the ball. Then have the players roll the ball with their foot from heel to toe 10 times with their right foot, repeat with the left foot.
2. Have the players again place their right foot on top of the ball this time have the players roll the ball side to side of their foot, do this 10 times, and repeat with the left foot.
3. The next drill will start again with the ball in front of the player only they will start with both feet on the ground. They will then do touches on the top of the ball with their right and left feet. The ball should not move only the player. This will take the player a while to get use to. Do this 20 times (10 for each foot).
4. In place dribble. Have the ball in between the players legs and have them dribble the ball from right foot to left foot in place. As with the previous drill, there will be a learning curve but by the end of the season, you should see a noticeable improvement in the players ball handling skills with these drills.

Pairs drills that Coaches can work with the players:

1. Passing and Trapping: two (or even 3 players in a triangle) take turns passing the ball amongst themselves. Have the players practice proper passing with the inside of their foot and proper trapping of the ball (stopping the ball in front of the player).
2. Throw-ins: two or three players take turns properly doing a throw-in, i.e., throwing the ball into bounds over their head with two hands and keeping both feet on the ground. The keeping both feet on the ground is the hardest concept for the players to learn so a possible solution for players that are having trouble with this is to have the players cross their legs when doing a throw-in.

3. **Dribbling and passings:** pairs of players start with one player dribbling and then passing to their partner going down the field, they will take turns dribbling and passing the ball to advance the ball down the field.

Games below are a few examples of some drills to start off practice with once Drills are done.

1. **Red light, green light:** This activity is played the same way as the popular children's game, but the players dribble the ball as they play. This can help players develop techniques related to ball control, speed adjustments, balance, and dribbling. <https://youtu.be/Y0bEW0nLPEk>
2. **Freeze tag:** Coaches mark a relatively small area (approximately 20-by-20 square yards) and ask most of the players to dribble their balls around the area. Two or three players will not be dribbling and will instead be designated as taggers. The taggers attempt to catch the dribblers and tag them. Tagged players then freeze and hold the ball above their head, yelling "Help!" Other dribblers can unfreeze frozen players by kicking their ball through the players' legs. This helps players develop techniques related to ball control, speed adjustments, evasion, and controlled kicks. <https://youtu.be/1SakjVdtiTU>
3. **The Ouchie Game:** The coach or coaches run around, and players attempt to use their dribbling and kicking skills to target the coach with the ball. This can improve ball handling and directional techniques.
4. **Controlled craziness:** The coach creates a relatively small area (approximately 20-by-20 yards) and players must dribble within this space. At the coach's cue, the players will attempt to kick their ball at someone else's. If they hit someone else's ball, they get a point. If someone else hits their ball, they lose a point. Players should keep track of their points until the coach decides to end the game. This game encourages kids to develop techniques related to protecting and controlling their ball, controlled kicks, and field awareness.
5. **Sharks and Minnows:** Coaches demarcate an area into three sections. The outer two sections are safe zones, while the middle section is the danger zone. Players with balls attempt to dribble from one safe zone to the other without getting their balls stolen by the "bulldogs." Bulldogs are players without balls in the danger zone who will try to kick the other players' balls out-of-bounds. This game encourages players to develop techniques related to stealing balls, protecting, and controlling balls, and handling a ball at speed. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tONiMWAgIAA>
6. **Clean the room:** Coaches demarcate an area into two sections, and then scatter soccer balls throughout one section. Players occupy the section with soccer balls, while the coaches occupy the section without soccer balls. At the whistle, players begin to pass the soccer balls into the coaches' half of the field, while the coaches try to get to the balls and pass them back into the players' side. When the players have successfully gotten all the balls onto the coaches' side at one time, they have won. This game helps kids develop techniques related to trapping and passing the ball, as well as stopping and turning quickly. It also promotes endurance and aerobic conditioning. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3fmzVhOmmLE>
7. **Monkey in the middle:** players form a large Circle with one player in the middle. The players on the outside of the Circle must pass the ball to each other through the circle with the player in the middle trying to steal the ball. https://youtu.be/sUKIMV4LzVA?list=PL39KufQ2_rga7IEtaoQ6AlZyBLWcGLP9
8. **Steal the Bacon:** Set up a Field (slightly smaller than a scrimmage field) with goals on each end. At opposite corners of the field player two cones about 3' apart from one another to make a 'Gate'. Divide the players into two teams with each team at one of the gates. Place a ball in the

center of the field and when you say go a player from each team will race around the field clockwise to the opposite gate. They cannot enter the field of play until they go through the gate. Once they go through the gate they can proceed to score on the goal opposite of the gate they entered the field in. This game can be played a number of ways and variations: for example: you can play 1v1, 2v2, or 3v3. You can also introduce other rules like a number of passes before shooting on the goal. Change it up and make it your own!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fshcCCpd-L4>

End practice with a small sided scrimmage or game (4v4)

- Mark out a small sided field around 20' x 30' with cones.
- Play 4v4, 3v3, 2v2, 1v1 a different possible combination depending on the number of players at practice.
- Spend the last 10-15 minutes of the practice for this scrimmage, allow players to take breaks as needed. Utilize pennies to distinguish teams from one another.
- Incorporate the new concepts of Goal Kicks, Corner Kicks and Throw-ins in scrimmage.

Game & Sideline behavior

- It is strongly recommended to have an Assistant Coach or a Team Parent for your team. This way you have a coach on the sideline and on the field. This will help manage the players on the sideline.
- Players should be attentive to the game when on the sideline and be ready to go in. they can cheer their teammates.
- Players should not engage in horseplay, or any disruptive behavior while on the sideline.
- At the end of the game, all players are to line up and shake the opposing teams' players hands as a sign of sportsmanship.
- All items and trash should be picked up and the field clear before teams depart.
- Any issues with players should be brought up with the players parent in a private setting. Do not discuss player behaviors in front of the player and other players.

This is a guideline for structuring your practices. Please adjust this as needed to fit your teams needs. Some players will need further guidance and training as opposed to other players. Be flexible in your approach and keep the following things in mind when out there:

- Are the activities fun?
- Are the activities organized?
- Are the players involved in the activities?
- Is creativity and decision-making being used?
- Are the spaces used appropriate?
- Is your feedback appropriate?
- Are guiding or controlling the players in the activity?
- Are there implications for the game?