

U6 Benchmarks, Coaching and Player Development

U6 is for many of the players, their first-time playing soccer in an organized environment. This division will consist of players in Kindergarten and First grade or the age equivalent of these grades. Players of this division still developing their coordination skills so a hands-on approach towards development with an emphasis on games that help facilitate skills is the optimal environment.

There are no goalkeepers in the U6 age group so that all the players may chase the ball around the field. The kids want to be where the action is and at this age it is around the ball. This will provide the opportunity for the children to develop their running, jumping, and kicking coordination. These are valuable traits for all soccer players to develop. The smaller number of players considers the egocentrism of this age group and therefore allows each child more opportunities for shooting and dribbling the ball. With fewer players on the field each child has an increased number of contacts with the ball and has more actual playing time. Additionally, the players will be required to make more decisions and experience repeated game situations frequently. The involvement of players will be more consistent. It is important to note that children in the U6 age group are egocentric (me, my and mine)! The smaller number of players on the field will make it easier and more likely that dribbling, shooting, and scoring will occur.

U6 Division Rules:

- No Goalkeepers (this also means that no player can ‘camp’ out near the goal to stop kicks from going in).
- 3 vs 3
- Size #3 ball
- No throw-ins, goal kicks, or corner kicks. Coaches are on field and will throw a ball back into play if ball goes out of bounds.
- 4 8min quarters
- All players are to play at least half of the game.

Components of the Game for the U-6 Age Group

1. **Fitness:** Introduce the idea of how-to warm-up and movement education. Balance, walking, running, how to start and stop, jumping, hopping, rolling, skipping, changing direction, bending, twisting, and reaching.
2. **Technique:** Dribbling (stop and start) and shooting. Experiment with the qualities of a rolling ball.
3. **Psychology:** Sharing, fair play, parental involvement, “how to play” and emotional management.

General Characteristics & Expectations for a U6 Coach:

- Patience. Players at this age are just learning the game of soccer and more importantly, learning social behaviors. Patience is key with a U6 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 most 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.
- 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.

General Characteristics of a U6 Player

- Catching skills not yet developed
- Constantly in motion – love to run, jump, roll and climb.
- Eye-hand and/or eye-foot coordination is primitive at best – not ready for bouncing or flighted balls.
- No sense of pace – go flat out.
- Physical coordination is immature – can balance on dominate foot.
- Controlling the ball is a complex task.
- Prefer large soft balls and foam balls.
- Only understand simple rules.
- Individually oriented (me, my, mine) – little or no concern for team activities.
- Physical and psychological development of boys and girls are quite similar.
- Psychologically, easily bruised – need generous praise.
- Short attention span – tends to one task at a time.

Typical U6 Practice Structure

- A typical U6 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.
- Thinking games/creativity games: encourage players to use their imagination.
- Games Activities, mostly of a body awareness type along with some maze games.
- Finish with 3v3 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.

Games and drills below are a few examples of some drills to start off practice with once warm-ups 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/YObEW0nLPEk>
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>

End practice with a small sided scrimmage or game (3v3)

- Mark out a small sided field around 20' x 30' with cones.
- Play 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.
- Keep it simple, at this stage of development, getting teams to go in one direction is a big plus. Use this time to also teach the basic rules of the game, i.e. which goal to score on, simple passing to team-mates, etc. Again at this age level, having fun is the key.

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. 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?