

The U8 Coach's Survival Guide

Dan Paolini, Rancocas Valley Soccer Club/Eastampton Youth Soccer Association

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Congratulations!

You either volunteered or were drafted to coach a U8 (under eight years of age) soccer team. Now what? This guide is an attempt to provide you with a safety net. If you are a new coach, there are suggestions to make your season more enjoyable. There are explanations that you might find out the hard way, if at all. If you are an experienced coach starting over again with a younger child, this is probably old news. Still – there might be something you can use in here.

There is a hierarchy to soccer that determines the rules under which games (matches) are played from youth level all the way through senior adult. Many of the rules will appear cryptic or illogical to you at first, but there are generally good reasons for them. Soccer has been played under formal rules for more than 150 years. The hierarchy of organizations is:

- FIFA – the international governing body
- United States Soccer Federation (USSF)
- United States Youth Soccer (USYS)
- New Jersey Youth Soccer (NJYS)
- Your league (Eastampton Youth Soccer or South Jersey boys & girls soccer leagues)

Soccer is played under seventeen “Laws of the Game” (LOTG). These laws are modified for youth soccer. The LOTG are not the same as high school soccer rules in the United States. The LOTG occasionally change/evolve, and binding interpretations and advice to referees are issued each year. At a minimum, you should read through the LOTG and seek out information about how the laws are modified for your league. Both the RVSC and EYSA have a copy of “Dan’s Laws of the Game for Youth Soccer” on their web sites, and it attempts to clarify the application of the laws and explain some of their more misunderstood aspects with regard to youth soccer.

What should be your priorities for coaching at this level? They are pretty simple:

- Player Safety – Always First!
- Fun – At this age, the activity must be fun.
- Physical Activity – For some children, this is the only physical activity they get!
- Player Development – Players should be better soccer players at the end of the season.
- Best Possible Effort – Maybe you will end up with a team of good players, maybe you will help them become good players; maybe they will just become better players than they were; but you should help them give their best effort always.

Where is winning? Winning comes after the above goals are achieved. More importantly, it ceases to be important as soon as the match ends. USYS and NJYS both specifically prohibit score posting, standings, playoffs, and results-based trophies for players under the age of ten. If your league does not follow this prohibition, it does not mean that winning should become your priority. Most importantly, your players should not get the impression that winning is a priority.

Coach, Player and Parent Conduct

The conduct expected of coaches, players, and parents is very simple.

Coaches

- They are to remain in their coaching areas. They may not enter the field unless requested by the referee (true emergency injuries are an exception requiring immediate response).
- They may provide limited technical instructions during the match. In youth soccer there is a belief that the players don't know what to do and need to be constantly yelled instructions. You will find that your players will learn to be better soccer players the less their coaches yell instructions to them.
- The coach may never through word or gesture indicate dissent with the decision of the referee. A one-time comment that "I saw it differently" may be respectfully directed at the referee, but a constant barrage of objections is unsporting behavior. While the league may permit a coach to be "cautioned" with a yellow card, it is in the referee's purview to dismiss (eject) the coach for continued dissent, or for any offensive, abusive, or insulting comments or actions.
- Referee abuse by coaches continues to be a problem in youth soccer. At this age, you will often have a young, relatively inexperienced referee. The only way they will get experience is to work matches. They will make mistakes. Experienced referees sometimes make mistakes. Those mistakes are a match condition like long grass or high wind. Since the result of the match does not matter, there is never any reason to lose your cool about a referee call or non-call. There is certainly no reason for an adult coach to ever berate a teen-aged referee, no matter how bad the call.

Players

- At this age, players tend to follow the behavior of their coaches and parents.
- They are not permitted to argue with the referee, nor insult the referee.

Parents

- Youth soccer should be much more like a polo match than a Little League baseball game.
- Parents shall remain on the designated side of the field, and should not be behind the goal line or closer to the goal than the outer line of the penalty area (the "eighteen").
- They are not permitted to argue with the referee, insult the referee, or address the referee in any manner. This includes shouts of "Come on, ref!", "Call it both ways!", "She pushed him!" and the like.
- Parents should cheer the actions of their child, his or her teammates, and the opponents.
- Parents shall not jeer the opposing players.
- Parents shall not "coach" from the sidelines. While occasional outbursts of "Shoot!" are understandable, parents should not be yelling explicit instructions to their child. There are several reasons: because it is not permitted by the Laws of the Game; players get distracted; if they are listening to anyone it should be you (and you know not to yell); and most importantly, youth sports are supposed to be fun and being yelled at is not fun

***And remember:* We will not have any referees if the so-called adults chase away our young referees with their (mis)behavior!**

General Practice Guidelines

- **No Lines!** – One ball per player*. Avoid low-paced activities in which the entire team is in one line for any period of time. Where necessary use two-line activities that move quickly. Players should not spend more time in line than they do performing the activity. Break your team up into three or four groups and have each group perform the same activities. Any drill that gets players running for half of the activity time will help conditioning as well as make the practice fly by.
- **Have a theme** for each practice. In general, these are the themes that work best with U8 players, in order of importance:
 - Dribbling – these players need as many touches as possible to develop ball skills
 - Passing – now we involve teammates and introduce concept of space
 - Defending – now we learn how to defend against a dribbling, passing team
 - Shooting – the least important skill to soccer player development, but important

New coaches do not find these topics “sexy”. They want to focus on tactics. These are the topics that make young players better soccer players. If you are not comfortable demonstrating any of these skills, borrow an older, experienced player (U12-U14 or high school player) to give you a hand. The younger players appreciate working with an older player who “knows” soccer.

- **No Lines!**
- **Time** - Practice, other than warm-ups, should be about the same length as game (48 minutes). This means that a practice from warm-up to cool-down should be an hour to seventy-five minutes in length.
- **No Lines!**
- **Organization** - For U8 players, practice should be broken into four fifteen-to-eighteen minute segments including warm up:
 - Warm Up
 - Segment 1 – Technical skill to be covered (dribbling, passing, defending, etc.).
 - Segment 2 – Tactical game designed to demonstrate skills under competitive pressure (with coaching); give a fun consequence (such as “five jumping jacks” or “three yabba dabba doo’s”) for losing squads to encourage competitiveness.
 - Segment 3 – Soccer game of some kind with no coaching – Let ‘Em Play!
- **No Lines!**
- **Hydrate!** - Make sure players bring water to every practice and every game. Have them drink before, and after each segment (about every fifteen minutes).
- And did I mention – **No Lines!**

** If your league (EYSA) uses a Size 3 soccer ball for matches, tell your parents to buy a Size 4 for their child. Using the larger ball in practice is fine, and it will serve them longer.*

Warm-ups

All practices and games should begin with a ritual-like warm-up session. By ritual-like, I mean that you will do it the same each time. Players will know what to expect, and everyone will start to get their minds focused on soccer.

General Format

- When players first arrive, while waiting to begin, have them lightly pass the ball in groups of two or three players. Do NOT let them begin shooting or passing “long balls”. We call this “waking up your feet”.
- Once players are gathered, have them do a light jog to get blood flowing. They should do this with a ball at their feet. They can pass the ball back and forth as they jog if you do not have enough balls, but the more “touches” the better. This is not a race, and players should be encouraged to stay together.
- Dynamic Stretching – while U8 players do not need much stretching, they should get used to the idea. For soccer, dynamic (moving) stretches are preferable to stationary stretches, as they reduce muscle stiffness. These include such stretches as: High Kicks, Side-Stepping, Cariocas, Squats, Butt Kicks, Knee Laterals, and Sprints. Perform the stretches in one long parallel line (together) or two columns serially (two at a time), with each set going about ten yards. Perform about ten sets and get ready to practice/play!

Practice Themes

For U8 players, there are four specific skill categories that should be your focus:

- **Dribbling** (ball control with both feet)
- **Passing** (primarily to teammate feet, possibly to space)
- **Defending** (recovering position and winning the ball back)
- **Shooting** (accuracy with proper form)

Equipment You Can Use

- **Soccer balls for all players.** Ask players to bring a ball to practice. If they need to buy one, make sure it is a size 4.
- **Some cones or training disks.** You don't need many, but at least eight. This will allow you to create three 10x10 training grids, two 10x20 no-goal mini-fields, one 20x30 small-sided field with goals, or four passing gates. If you don't have cones or disks, use old towels or shirts.
- **Youth-sized training vests.** This will allow you to form teams for small-sided games. Chances are, you don't have any – what to do? Ask your players to wear a dark t-shirt to practice and bring a white t-shirt with them.
- **Small first aid kit.** Band-aids, antibacterial cream, and a couple cold packs just in case.
- **Whistle.** Do not overuse during practice, but useful for stop/start drills and for teaching players how to react to referee calls during small-sided games.
- **Watch.** Make sure players are ready to go home when you told parents they would be.
- **Coaching License.** The NJ Youth Soccer F License course will give you dozens of training ideas and the basics for effective coaching of youth soccer.

Dribbling Theme

Teaching Points:

- Five foot surfaces (inside, outside, laces, sole, and heel – NOT the toe!)
- Use both feet
- Control the ball with the inside surface
- Keep the ball within playing distance
- Stop ball on command with sole of foot
- Reverse direction on command
- Speed dribble with the laces but be able to stop and control with sole of foot
- Keep head up and look for space

Example Technical Sessions (mix and match)

- Within a ten-yard grid (ten yards on a side using cones, rags, etc. to mark corners)
 1. Team on one side each with a ball, control dribble to the other side and stop.
 2. Team on one side, control dribble to the other side, turn and return.
 3. Half team on each side, control dribble to the other side and return (crisscross).
 4. Entire team inside grid control dribbling, stopping, reversing on command.
 5. Entire team inside grid control dribbling (also with commands) looking at number of fingers being held by coach and shouting out the number (keep head up).
 6. Entire team inside grid control dribbling (also with commands) trying to “high five” coaches as they walk around the inside of the grid (keep head up).
 7. Add “Speed Dribble” to skills and perform drills 1, 2, and 3 at speed.
 8. Add “Speed” command and perform drills 4, 5, and 6 with additional command.
- In practice area, set out four to six “dribbling gates” (gates from cones, shirts, etc.)
 1. Have players dribble around the area moving through gates randomly.
 2. Continue with random gates, but add Turn, Stop, Speed commands from above.

Example Tactical Sessions (mix and match)

- With a ten-yard grid (ten yards on a side using cones, rags, etc. to mark corners)
 1. Half team on each side, dribble to the other side and return (crisscross) to see which half-team can finish first. Slower group gets consequence.
 2. Half team split between two diagonal corners, other half team split between other two corners, perform relay race around outside of grid in opposite directions, losing squad gets consequence.
- In practice area, set out four to six “dribbling gates” (gates from cones, shirts, etc.)
 1. In a timed session have players count how many gates they can dribble through.
- Divide team into two or three teams for linear dribble relay race (with consequence).

Example Match Condition (soccer game)

- Using cones, rags, etc. set up two two-yard wide goals twenty yards apart.
 1. Split team into two squads
 2. Score by dribbling through the goal (player must have possession on both sides).

Passing Theme

Teaching Points:

- Short passes with inside surface
- Lock ankle, keep toe pointed up
- Swing through the ball
- Pass to teammate's feet so ball can be played
- Long passes with laces (no toe balls!) just like speed dribble
- Lock ankle, point toe down
- Pass to the space in front of teammate

Example Technical Sessions (mix and match)

- Triangles: Players in groups of three with a ball
 1. Players perform two-touch passes in one direction until told to "Reverse!"
 2. As above, but players perform one-touch passes as much as possible.
- Passing Circles: All players in circle with ball (if ten or more, two circles)
 1. Players call name of player and pass to that player (not to an adjacent player)
 2. As above, but players run to take the place of the player to whom they pass
- Within several ten-yard grids (ten yards on a side)
 1. Pairs of players with ball on opposite sides of grid, pass to each other, both feet.
 2. Half team inside grid with ball, half on perimeter with coaches, inside players call name of a player (or coach) and send wall pass as they move around in circle.
- In practice area, set out four to six "passing gates" (gates from cones, shirts, etc.)
 1. Have players dribble around the area moving through gates randomly.
 2. Continue with random gates, but use Turn, Stop, Speed commands from above.

Example Tactical Sessions (mix and match)

- With a ten-yard grid (ten yards on a side using cones, rags, etc. to mark corners)
 1. Pairs of players with ball on opposite sides of grid, pass to each other, both feet. Players count how many passes in one minute. Winning pair gets to "direct" the other players in their consequence, rotate the partners on one side and repeat.
 2. Half team split between two adjacent corners, other half team split between other two corners, perform relay passing race between corners by passing ball and then running to the back of the opposite line, losing squad gets consequence.
- In practice area, set out four to six "passing gates" (gates from cones, shirts, etc.)
 1. Split into two teams, in a timed session have players count how many gates they can pass through, player may not pass to the same player that passed to them or through the same gate consecutively, losing squad gets consequence..

Example Match Condition (soccer game)

- Using cones, rags, etc. set up a twenty by thirty yard field.
 1. Split team into two squads
 2. Team gets one point for making **five** consecutive passes (three if too hard).
 3. Defenders win ball and become attackers, keep running score.

Defending Theme

Teaching Points:

- Proper body balance, knees bent, feet wide
- Take a position to angle player from goal
- First defender is pressure, Second defender is cover, Third defender is balance
- Only go for ball when you have cover
- Fair shoulder charge
- Step-across ball

Example Technical Sessions (mix and match)

- Pairs of players with a ball
 1. **Showdown:** Mark off two lines ten yards apart, two rows of players on lines, one side with ball, player with ball attempts to dribble to opposite side against defender then players exchange roles.
 2. **Keep Away/Take Away:** One player attempts to shield ball in place (no dribbling) while second player attempts to win it.
- Three players with a ball
 1. **Channeling:** Mark off two lines twenty yards apart, player with ball on one side, second player half way, third player on opposite line, player with ball dribbles towards middle player who channels and waits for second defender to provide cover before pressuring ball, rotate roles and repeat.
- Four players with a ball
 1. **Four Corners:** Mark off two or three ten-yard grids, place three players on corners, one with ball, fourth player is defender, attackers without ball must always move to the adjacent corners of player with ball to receive pass (no diagonal passes), defender attempts to win ball, rotate and repeat.

Example Tactical Sessions (mix and match)

- Pairs of players with a ball
 1. **Knockout:** Mark ten-yard grid, two teams of players, one side with ball, players with ball dribble in grid for one minute while defenders attempt to knock ball out of grid, coach keeps running total, after one minute, switch roles and repeat, lower team score gets consequence.
 2. **Ladder Drill:** In a series of five-yard grids (one per pair) players face off, if odd number coach should participate, one end is penthouse, other end is outhouse, players play **Keep Away/Take Away** for one minute and switch, player with most take-aways moves up one grid, loser moves down, outhouse loser moves to penthouse, penthouse winner moves to outhouse (ties go rock-paper-scissors).

Example Match Condition (soccer game)

- Using cones, rags, etc. set up a twenty by thirty yard field.
 1. Split team into two squads
 2. Team gets one point for making **three** consecutive passes, can repeat.
 3. Defenders win ball and become attackers, keep running score.

Shooting Theme

Teaching Points:

- Use laces (no toe balls!) just like speed dribble and long pass
- Lock ankle, point toe down
- Proper plant foot – if ball is moving, plant ahead of ball
- Lift head before shooting and look at target
- When close to the goal, “pass” to goal with inside surface rather than shoot with laces

Example Technical Sessions (mix and match)

- Walk players through session: of planting with toe pointed at target, looking at ball for strike point, looking up for target, and striking ball with laces, using both feet.
- Make two lines ten yards apart, with one line consisting of two one-yard goals two yards apart (the outer ends of your regular twelve-foot goals). Coach stands between goals with all of the balls.
 1. **Fire and Ice:** Players line up in single file on opposite line (don't worry, this moves quickly), coach rolls one ball to player who takes hard one-time shot (Fire) and continues running towards a goal as the coach rolls second ball to player to control and “pass” into goal (Ice), players run to get their shots, return them to the coach's feet, and run to the end of the line without running through shooting lane, coach immediately starts the next player with Fire.
 2. **Bacon:** Players in two lines on opposite line, coach soft tosses ball between them and first player from each line attempts to win the ball, player that wins becomes attacker, other player defends, and attacker has reasonable time to get off shot, defender retrieves ball and players switch lines.

Example Tactical Sessions (mix and match)

- Set up same as above.
 1. **Fire and Ice:** Divide players into two teams that alternate, players get three points for a Fire shot that goes through one of the goals, two points for a Fire shot that goes between the goals, one point for an Ice shot that goes through one of the goals, and loses a point if the Ice shot goes wide of the goals (not between them), coach keeps running score, loser gets a consequence, mix up teams and repeat.
 2. **Bacon:** Divide players into two teams, players get two points for a ball through a goal and one point between the goals, defender retrieves ball, coach keeps running score, loser gets a consequence, mix up teams and repeat.
 3. **World Cup:** Like Bacon, only players on each team are given a number, and coach calls “Number Three” and the two “Three's” play the ball, coach can call more than one number for added excitement.

Example Match Condition (soccer game)

- Using cones, rags, etc. set up a 20x30 yard field with two two-yard wide goals.
- Create two-yard deep “goal boxes” in front of goals inside which no one can shoot.
- Split team into two squads
- Score by shooting through the goal (ball must not be higher than three feet).

Small-Sided Games are the Best Teachers (material from USYS and AYSO)

Many new coaches believe that their players will only get value playing in true match-like conditions (full field, full squad). While there is a need to see players in true match-like conditions, there are several problems with the belief that this should be your focus:

- Most teams are not big enough to field two complete squads.
- Scrimmaging against other teams changes the dynamics of the coaches and players and removes focus from the theme of the practice.
- Full-squad games mean that there are fewer touches per player, when the goal should be as many touches as possible.

Fortunately, there is a way for teams to address each of those problems – the use of small-sided (fewer than match condition, 2v2 through 6v6) games.

While 2v2 and 3v3 games have a place in technical training, the 4v4 game is the smallest model of soccer that still includes all of the tactical qualities found in the bigger game. The shape of the team is a smaller version of what is found in the eleven-a-side game in that there is width, depth, and height to the team. The shape is dynamic in that the players are able to combine and work together as team mates in order to be successful and there is the potential for a constant interchange of positions and roles.

A solid understanding of the principles of play, found in the basic 4v4 form allows for continued advancement as the players adapt to the added demands placed on them when more players are added to the tactical picture. From this number, we can begin to examine the qualities of the game that remain constant as we continue to add players up to 7v7. We can also examine the challenges that are introduced as more players are added into the mix.

The Progression from 4v4 to 6v6

4v4 – Pure Soccer

The basic attacking shape should create enough space to allow the players to find options in every direction, with the essential purpose of creating quality goal scoring opportunities. The most basic shape that allows for this space is the “diamond”, with a deep player who supports the attack from behind, two wide players who give the game width, and a high player who stretches the game forward and offers himself as a target for balls to be played into. Attention should be given to how the 4 players adjust as the ball and players move into the attack. Players must be prepared to move to different spots on the field, based on the movement of their teammates and the ball. For example, if the deep player steps forward with the ball, someone must replace him in the spot that he has just vacated, so that there continues to be support from behind.

The most effective defending shape should slow the opponent's movement forward with some form of collective defending. The need for quality pressure on the ball remains an essential part of the team defensive effectiveness. Added to this pressure is the ability of the group to supply good “cover” for the pressuring defender in case the quality of that pressure is not sufficient to stop the forward progress of the ball. Finally, the group must keep its compact shape, not allowing the team to become too “spread out”. This limits the time and space that the attacking team has at their disposal and maximizes opportunities for the defending players to work collectively.

At the same time, individual and group defending can also discourage the first ball forward by dropping and filling space closer to their own goal, rather than stepping and pressuring closer to the ball. These decisions by the players closest to the ball as well as the covering players need to be made based on the principles of defending, and what makes the most sense on any given play.

5V5 (4 “field” players plus the keeper)

As the team progresses to 5v5, the added dimension to the team's “shape” is that there now emerges a central midfield role for the team. The goalkeeper has the added responsibility of being the “last” player in the attack, allowing the “central back” to step more in to a midfield role. This, in essence, allows for another option for playing the ball forward out of the back, a role that serves as a “link” between players in the back and those up front. This further complicates the game as it demands that a player serve in a role that has pressure coming from all around him/her, rather than just basically from one direction. Now the basic shape remains a “diamond” but has a player serving in the “middle” of that diamond.

At the same time, as the central player becomes more competent, the attacking team now has a player who has the potential to play the ball in many directions, thereby making the attack less predictable and therefore more effective.

6V6: (5 field players plus the goalkeeper)

Again, the basic “principles” of play are still present in the 6v6 form, but in a more complex manner than with the smaller numbers. The added player affords the opportunity for the team to add another player in the “back”. This makes the play of the opposing forward that much more difficult as there now are two defenders that must be dealt with (the goal keeper and a field defender). A common form for play at this stage is a GK plus 1-3-1. This allows for a continuation of the relationships that were present in the 5v5 model, especially the potential for combinations between the players down the middle of the field.

For example, the 5v5 model included balls from the deep player to the high target, and back to the supporting central player. In the 6v6 model, there are now two sets of this combination (GK to central player and back to the defender, and defender to high target and back to central player). There will be a constant demand on the players to effectively read what their teammates are doing. Now there is always more than one option in every direction to be able to play the ball to. Defensively, there should always be “cover” provided, wherever the ball is. There is a more complicated understanding required of defensive shape as a team as it involves more players.

At the same time, essential goals in attacking and defending remain unchanged from those discussed in the 4v4 model.

Progression of forms:

- **4v4 (No GK)** diamond/kite shape (0-1-2-1); 40 x 30 yards; 2 yard cone goals
- **5v5 (GK + 4)** central player (1-1-2-1 or 1-3-1); 45 x 30 yards; 4 yard cone goals
- **6v6 (GK + 5)** (1-1-3-1, 1-3-2, 1-2-3); 70 x 40 yards; 4 yard full goals