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first season as a youth soccer coach

The article below first appeared on the excellent [bettersoccermorefun](#)

For the parent coach that's new to the game and coaching, the first two questions they usually ask are "What am I supposed to do and how will I do it?" This article offers information and direction on these questions. It also contains links to other pages so that even novice coaches can get a basic understanding of how to use small sided games and why they are such an effective learning tool.

How Do I Do This? Choosing a Model

Becoming a coach means adopting a set of behaviours on how to do a job. It amounts to assuming a role when dealing with the players, parents, opponents and officials. This can be seen as a [coaching style](#) which is based on a set of expectations of what a coach is and does. But choosing a model for this behaviour is limited by experience. For the new parent coach this experience might only be the memory of a Physical Education class from long ago. What's important is that it will form the framework for how the coach sees the game, the children, learning and themselves. It will be an unconscious, internalized starting point for every decision.

The Physical Education Teacher - The Physical Education model is the most dominate model in the game today. It divides the game into separate, distinct areas: technique, rules and basic strategy. This model sees the game as isolated components that can be learned separately in practices and reassembled later on in the game. It usually employs three different parts in a practice. A warm-up, the lesson and finally a scrimmage. This is an outline for the standard PE class lesson.

The strength of this model is that everything is controlled and quantified. Almost everything can be evaluated on an objective basis. This is what Physical Education teachers do. Control the environment, and the students, in order to evaluate them for a grade. The grade will be based on technical proficiency, knowledge of the rules and basic strategy. Players learn how to wait in line for their turn and follow directions, they learn little about problem solving or team work. At no time are end results

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(winning/losing) a part of the evaluation. In this way it's easy to justify the activities when the evaluation is isolated from a larger more complex picture.

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But success for a coach is different then for a PE teacher. Coaches are concerned with results from games. Mastery of any area is useless if it does not transfer directly to the sport. The structure used in learning PE (static positions, lines) can only be found on the field in a few brief moments, i.e. restarts if at all. The PE teacher exercises all of the control of the objectives and pace of the lesson. Students are dependent on the teacher as an external source of motivation and evaluation. But soccer is a player centred activity and [children](#) need to develop their own source of internal motivation and evaluative skills. They also need to learn for themselves how to control the pace and objectives of the game and themselves. So the basic weakness of the PE model is that it prepares the children for drills rather than games by both its focus and methods.

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Street Soccer Model - its focus is on learning how to play games by playing the game or, some modified form. It takes a holistic approach to learning. The upside of this model is that with it's focus on games children not only learn how to play soccer but simply how to play. Playing together without supervision is a rapidly vanishing activity. Children must learn not only the [skills](#) of the game but how to self assess, take responsibility for their own actions and work together in a competitive environment.

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The downside of this model is that much of the control is given to the children and they might not go in the direction that you want. They may choose different solutions or ignore the problem altogether. They will learn at their own speed, not yours because they are the ones who decide what is really important. (And since this is their childhood, who can blame them.) It can also be chaotic and that will be a problem for some adults. There is an element of uncertainty in the training which matches the uncertainty of the game itself.

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What Do I Do? Setting the First Seasons Objectives

In the Physical Education model the seasons overall plan will focus on improvement in key areas. This usually results in a grocery list of objectives. Techniques such as passing, shooting and dribbling. Tactical concepts such as spreading out, proper



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support, defending angles. Rules such as proper throw ins, penalty kicks and so on. With a grocery list, lessons become topics and the children and coach are held in the straight jacket of the agenda. Success is measured by how much the children improved in the topic, even if the children don't care about or have little use for it. "Tuesday we will work on dribbling, Thursday passing. We will be better dribblers and passers because that is what we have worked on." While this statement might be true, it does not necessarily follow that they'll be better soccer players.

In the street soccer model the season's objective will be to find the correct form(s) of the game and to help the players to increase their speed of play. This takes into account the players level and motivation. It will mean adjusting the resistance to meet the ever changing needs and situations. It allows the players to face constantly recurring and realistic situations under varying degrees of difficulty. As they progress in mastering the particular form their speed of play increases. Players' decisions and their ability to execute them improve. "This week we'll work on the shooting game, we might not be better shooters but we should be better soccer players because we have been playing soccer." The goal is not just to improve the tools of the game, but to improve the quality of the game itself.

A problem with the PE point of view for the new parent coach is that the grocery list of needs and objectives never ends. You simply keep adding on one more thing that you think they need to learn. In reality, the vast majority of youth players stop playing the game before they are 18. Lessons devoted to standing in lines and passing a ball back and forth or dribbling aimlessly around in a grid will have little relevance to their adolescent and adult needs. In the street soccer model the lessons are focused more on [communication](#), responsibility, and [team work](#) with the technical and tactical side being driven by how the players see their own needs. They'll be as good as they want to be, not as someone else wants them to be.

Some Age Appropriate Guidelines

The following will focus on a few general ideas.

5-6 Year Olds - Five and Six year olds can't play competitive team sports. They lack the experience to understand

cooperative play and the real meaning of winning and losing. Here soccer is a means to an end, a way to introduce social and motor skills to young children who are just beginning to experience the world outside of home and school.

Some of the children may experience a new form of conflict, the difference in what adults say and mean. One example is between the "just do your best and that's good enough" mantra and the realization that sometimes "your best is not good enough." Another is when the coach instructs them to take the ball away another child, (which isn't nice) while their teachers insist on sharing and being nice. This can lead to confusion about what adults, authority figures, really want.

The [basic game](#) format (2, 4 goals or use targets) allows the children to learn direction. 2v2 and 3v3 mini-tournaments allows for team work on their scale. Using an appropriate [field size](#) (too big and there is no pressure, too small and players will experience conflict and stress) can help teach the consequences when the ball goes out. Goals in unusual positions (in the corner of the pitch or at an angle) can help children to get their heads up and to see beyond their feet. All of the technical skills will come along with the games and the basic lessons of "work together, keep the ball on the field and let's try going the right way" can be learned.

7-8 Year Olds - One of the biggest problems at this age will be when children of different [levels](#) are mixed. Sometimes it's between children who have been playing for a while and those that are either new or really don't care about it. Sometimes the difference is in physical or mental qualities. When the levels are too great this puts a stress on everyone's relationship and is the hardest problem for a coach to solve. Ideally, the club should have a way to ensure that children play with others that are close in their own level and interests.

If the children have been playing SSG's for a few seasons they should have enough experience so that the basic games can be modified and made harder. The number of players can be increased, [line soccer](#) or [combined goals](#) can be introduced and some simple [rules](#) set. Changing the demands of the training games can improve the speed of the basic game and their real weekend match. If the children have only had exposure to the PE model they will need some time to adjust to the freedom that SSG's offer. Their speed of play will initially be slow but can

improve over time.

9-10 Year Olds - The separation between levels becomes more pronounced and often the parents of the top players bring increased expectations to the situation. Some parents see these years as a continuation of a hobby while others see it as the final preparation before the "real 11 a side game." This can cause conflicting agendas between adults on the same team and add to the stress that the children and coach already face. However, the separation in levels also means that some children will be faced with the choice of playing in a secondary role at a higher level, or, playing their preferred role at a lower level. Children who find themselves in a primary role but are faced with too much resistance from the too high a level will find a lot of [frustration](#).

Often this is the age when some children will start to gravitate to a position or a role. While it's too early to predict where a child is best suited to play in the future, they should be allowed the option of sticking to the position or role of their choice. This allows them the opportunity to experience the game in depth as it meets their needs. (If a 10 year old wants to play the violin do they need to practice the trumpet?) Later, if they want to change it's their choice. Soccer at this age is a hobby. Hopefully the children are there because they choose to be. If they are forced to play too often outside of their comfort zone they can simply pick a new hobby. The down side of this position is that the average 12 player team has 8 right wings and will require the coach to work out a diplomatic plan for playing time.

Children that have been playing a while might express a total commitment to the game, even dreaming of a professional career. The game has become the centre of their lives outside of school, church and home. But this attachment is like a first love and is subject to change with age and experience.

Unfortunately, many parents don't recognize this and it can also lead to increased expectations. In addition, some children go through a prepubescent growth spurt and their physical qualities can change almost overnight, usually for the worse. Children who only a year ago were stars can rapidly gain 15% in body weight, lose confidence and develop a fear of failure. This period of a crisis in confidence must be recognised as a temporary and natural process. They'll simply out grow it.

At this age children are capable of fairly sophisticated games. The [big goal, two small goals](#) and [5v2](#) games can help them

prepare for the building up phase of play. The ball will be getting off of the ground so [soccer tennis](#) and [heading games](#) will help as an introduction to this part of the game. If the children have mastered the [basic forms](#) of SSG's they should be able to quickly adapt to new problems and situations. When the resistance is correct this age is capable of quality play at a high speed.

Keep In Mind

A soccer season is short, perhaps 9 games and 20 practices. Ideally this might mean 29 hours for learning soccer. But some children will miss practices and games. Practices and games will be rained out. Children will arrive late and leave early. Many children will not practice at all away from the team. Time is lost for breaks and setting up new activities. All of these things will reduce the amount of time that the children have to learn. When the learning curve of the new parent coach is figured in it's easy to understand why the training must be first and foremost, efficient and effective. Keep things simple and don't forget to play soccer!

