

attack the play of 5 & 6 year olds....

Or You Can Sit Back – Relax – and Have as Much Fun as They Do!!!!

By Mike Parsons, former Director of Coaching Education for the National Soccer Coaches Association reproduced by kind permission of the [Abbotsford Soccer Association](http://www.abbotsfordsoccerassociation.co.uk) by footy4kids. (original link: http://www.footy4kids.co.uk/attack_the_play_of_5_year_olds.htm)

It's good to know that some things never change in life – like the play of 5 & 6 year olds on the soccer field. We can all agonize over how to discover the special training techniques that will enable them to score more goals – certainly those who have been in the game for a long time **must know the secrets!** Or we can stay up late at night and draw diagram after diagram that reveals in precise detail where every player should be in relation to the ball – that will solve the bunching up problem and it will look like **real soccer!** Or one might infiltrate the marketing department at Mickey D's to figure out why the Happy Meal is more important than the score! However, to Mom and Dad (especially Dad – he's a winning machine!), the game of soccer at 5 & 6 years old remains a game – with the thrill of winning taking a back seat the excitement of merely chasing the ball! Anyone... and I mean anyone... can look at a situation and tell you the problems. Instead of that approach, I'm going to make some suggestions for possible solutions to some of the common problems coaching the very young in "chase-the-ball-no-matter-where-it-goes-until-I-need-a-break-and-then-do-it-again-till-the-game-ends" (that's what soccer for 5 & 6's should be called).

Here we go...

Bunching Up Around the Ball. God forbid that **all** of the kids chase the ball – that would mean that every child would be having FUN!! You see, that is what every player at this age likes about the game – they can run anywhere they like – no adult is going to tell them to walk – and they love the challenge of touching the ball all by themselves! We tend to forget that there is very little organization in the mind of a 5-6 year old and that sharing is not on the top of the list of their favourite things to do. (Do they share their favourite toys with their brothers and sisters???) Remember ... It's **my ball** !!!!! Soooooo.....let them chase the ball!! They will spread out as they learn to play with their teammates.

Scoring Goals ... is an accident most of the time at this age. Let's be honest-that clump of grass has more to do with the direction that the ball travels than the one who kicks it (at this age shooting and passing are merely "kicking"). However, scoring goals should be the only thing on their mind at this age. Remember this...we can all focus on one thing at a time – focus the young on scoring goals – that's the object of the game!

He/She is a Ball Hog....

Which brings us to the question – Are Ball Hogs good or bad? As a parent the answer is (like it or not) bad if the neighbour's son/daughter won't give the ball to our little cherub – good if the ball is always with our "talented little child prodigy". Wrong!!! This age is the beginning of individuality – flair for those who really want to exaggerate. Encourage them to dribble the ball and try to beat other players – my best friend boldly told his son at six years old..." don't pass the ball until you are eleven – and don't worry about the coach when he screams at you to pass. His son can't dribble!". In fact, all training sessions at this age should be based around each child and a ball. Acceptance of failure (it's OK not to succeed at first ...try again) and the encouragement to try again will help the learning process.

Practice Sessions...the longer the better!

What a great way to turn play into work! Ever try to play golf every day on your vacation – double rounds if possible? It gets old fast. So why do we keep 5-6 year olds at the practice field for an hour or more during training? Mom got some more shopping to do? Or is Dad feeling a win coming on after 90 minutes of practice? More is not better at this or any age. Train them for the same amount of time that the game will take on Saturday. Thirty to forty minutes will be long enough to wind them up ...then give them back to their parents to calm them down. The excitement of the soccer experience will then remain fresh.

WINNING ... it's why we are here...

Wow, I hope we all have had childhood experiences that were fun and not necessarily based on winning. Everything in life is based on winning... Do we really want to emphasize the down side of competition – losing - to 5-6 year olds? They are not concerned (except for that Happy Meal) what the end of the game

brings – so why should we? Remember that youth sports were started so that kids could have fun. So, bring a chair and your favourite beverage to the next game and save some room for a Happy Meal of your own afterwards! Work on the Fundamentals in Practice... While other sports work on fundamentals (and soccer's numbers keep getting larger) we have found that the most important things to teach at this age are motor skill development – the ability to control my body – and an appreciation for the fun aspects of the game – me and the ball - look at what we can do! We tend to forget that soccer is not a hand-eye coordination activity like all other sports in the U.S. In addition the kids are presented with an incredible challenge to make their bodies do what they want them to (kind of like Dad playing in the over forty league in any sport – he gets it going, you better get out of his way cuz' no one knows if he'll be able to stop). As a result, the objective becomes one of making my body and the ball work together as one.

Goals and Objectives for the age group...

Are they necessary? Can a teacher instruct a group of students if he/she doesn't know where to start – to end – or what they should be able to accomplish at a particular age? Obviously, the answer is no. Therefore, it is necessary for all clubs and programs to develop a list of goals and objectives for each age group. Has your club or league given you – the coach – your goals and objectives for the season?

So – Sit Back – Relax – and Have as Much Fun as They Do!!!!