

Mass Youth Soccer U6 Specialty Clinic

Coaching at the U6 level can be one of the most rewarding experiences in sports. The children's enthusiasm is contagious and their smiles can brighten up even the gloomiest of days. Coming home after a long day of hard work and arriving at the park to be welcomed by the cheers of players who think you are the harbinger of fun is an experience I would hope everyone gets to feel at some point in their life. That being said, a little crankiness or malaise can make coaching U6 players a very difficult challenge at times. Remembering these general guidelines will help maintain everyone's happiness throughout the entire season.

- Remember that U6 players are children, NOT miniature adults
- Children have wonderful imaginations at this age, try to use those imaginations in your practice as it will help keep them captivated
- There is only one toy and that is the ball...make sure everyone has their own toy (you may wish to have a couple extras with you at each practice for those who have forgotten to bring their own)
- Do not expect children at this age to understand passing as that means they are giving their toy away
- Children at this age have 2 speeds.....really fast and stopped
- Children at this age heat up extremely fast, activities should last 8 minutes at most
- Give water breaks after every 2 or 3 activities
- Speak to the children at their level. Kneel or bend down and make sure you have gained eye contact
- Make sure all players are always in your view
- Focus on dribbling, motor coordination, and social development
- Practices should never last more than 1 hour and should really be 45-50 minutes in length
- Children do not want to listen to you speak, they want to play. Be clear, concise, and direct with your words and try to keep the players playing as much as possible
- If playing games where there are special roles (e.g. a few players start as sharks or as ice monsters) make sure you give every player a chance to be "special"
- If you find particularly shy players, try to pair them up with friendly, mature children who can help create a social bridge
- If you have a particularly angry/aggressive player, immediately set firm conditions to control this behavior and insure the safety of the larger group
- If you are concerned about the behavior of any player, contact that child's parents to either inform them or seek advice as to how to work with the player most effectively
- No laps, no lines, no lectures
- Have fun!!!

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Activities:

- 1) Tag---Every child dribbles a soccer ball in the space defined while trying to tag other players with their hand. Players cannot leave their own ball. Have them keep count of how many people they have tagged and, if playing twice in a row, see if players can tag more people than they did in the first game. *Version 2:* Players must tag other players on their knees.



- 2) Hospital tag---Same as tag in that each player dribbles a soccer ball and that they try to tag each other with their hands. In this game, each time a player is tagged he/she must place their hand on the spot on their body at which they were tagged. Obviously, if tagged a third time, players have no more hands to cover those spots, so they must go to the hospital to see the doctor. The coach acts as the doctor and performs a magical task (pretend) to heal all the little soccer players so they can continue playing the game.
- 3) Red light/Green light---All players have a ball and dribble in a limited space (or towards the coach). When coach says “red light”, players must stop ball and put foot on top of ball. When coach says “yellow light”, players must dribble very slowly. When coach says “green light”, players dribble fast. Coach controls this game with frequency of light changes and variety of changes. Once players catch on to this game, add other colors and affix different actions to them. (i.e. purple light = hop back and forth over ball, orange light = run around the ball, black light = dance, blue light = hide behind the ball etc. etc.)

- 4) Gates---Set up many pairs of cones (with roughly 2 yards in between pairs) all around the playing area. These pairs serve as gates or many mini-goals. Players each have a ball and must dribble through the gate in order to score. Have players count how many goals they score and when playing a second time ask them if they can beat their score by one goal. Coaches can vary this by asking players to dribble with left foot or right foot. If players end up dribbling back and forth through only one goal, set up a rule to protect against this.

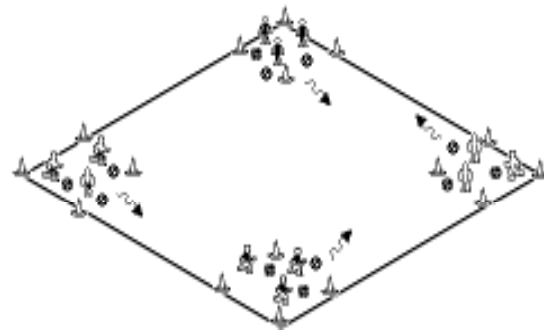


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5) Freeze Tag---Break up the group into two teams. Everyone must dribble their soccer ball, but one team tries to tag (freeze) the other team. If they do tag a player on the other team, that player must freeze, place their ball above their head and spread their legs. Another player on their team must kick his/her ball through the frozen player's legs to unfreeze the teammate. If all players are frozen, game ends and the frozen team becomes the taggers. Otherwise, stop game after a few minutes and have team reverse roles. *Version 2:* Coach can be the freeze monster and try to tag all the players with players unfreezing each other in same fashion.

6) Kangaroo Jack---All players except two or three begin with a ball. Players without balls are kangaroo jacks and must hop like a kangaroo and try to tag players. If a player gets tagged, he/she becomes a kangaroo as well until all players are turned into kangaroos.

7) Planets---Set up cones into multiple squares or triangles that serve as planets (or cities). All players must follow coach's order and dribble into the planet he calls out. Coach can have all players follow same directions or break up team so they start at different planets and then have them dribble through the solar system in clockwise or counterclockwise fashion. Coach can have groups dribble in opposite direction through the solar system.



8) Cops and Robbers---Coach sets up 8-10 stand up cones in a 15yd x 15yd space. Robbers all have soccer balls and knock over the cones (banks) by kicking their balls into the cones and knocking them over. Cops (have 2 or 3 cops for each game) do not have soccer balls and need to stand the cones back up (before all the banks' money falls out). Coach can help knock over cones or pick up cones as he/she sees fit. Rotate who gets to be cops.

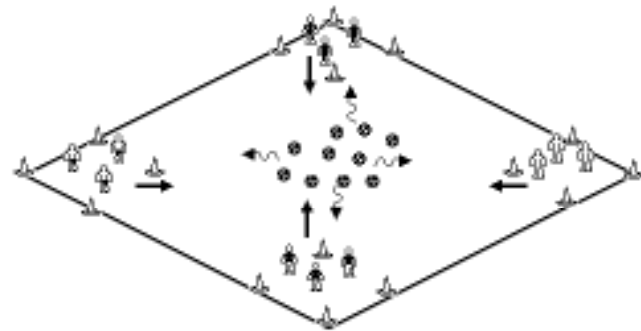
9) Crab Soccer---Set up a grid roughly 18yd x 10yd. Have 3-4 players inside the grid acting as crabs. These crabs do not have a soccer ball. Other players start at one end of the grid and when the coach says "Go", they dribble their soccer balls to the other end of the grid. The crabs try to kick the balls out of the grid. If a dribbler's ball goes out of the grid, that player becomes a crab as well. Play until all players turn into crabs.

10) Snake---In an appropriate space for the numbers you have, have all players dribbling soccer balls except for 2-3 players to start. These players hold hands and work together as one snake to tag the other players. The players with balls try to avoid getting tagged by the snake. If they are tagged, they join hands with players making up the snake. The snake grows until all players are part of the snake. The snake must stay together as one animal and not break off into little parts. Encourage fun by having the snake hiss. ☺

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11) Ball Tag---Similar to other tag games except players try to tag others with their soccer ball instead of their hand. Have them keep count of how many times they kick their soccer ball and tag another person. Have the tag count if their ball hits another player or that player's ball. Can have the players tag the coach for 10 or 20 points. Then can have players tag other selected players for 50 or 100 points etc. etc. *Version 2:* Rather than having players tag each other, have them tag the coach by kicking their soccer ball. The coach moves around without a ball to avoid being tagged. Have players count up how many they got and can do the same variations as in the other game by affixing a lot of points to players.

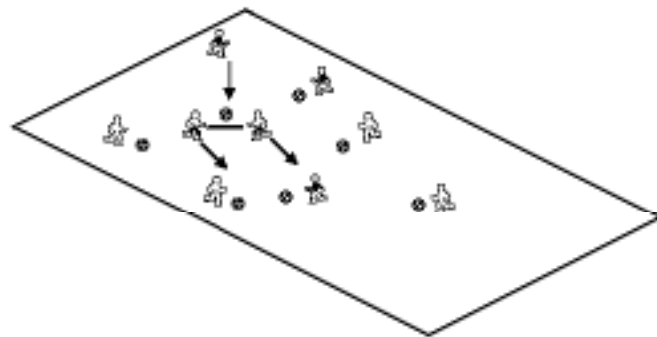
12) Capture the Balls---Set up three or four "home bases" (squares) with cones roughly 2-3 yards wide. Break up the players into teams and have each team get together in their home base. Place all the balls in the center of the space between the home bases. On the coach's command the teams are free to gather as many soccer balls as they can into their home base. Players cannot use hands and there is no pushing each other or sitting/laying on the balls. Teams try to gather as many balls as possible into their home bases. Teams can steal balls from each others' home bases. Coach calls time and counts up how many balls are in each space to determine a winner. Coach allows team 1 minute to make up a new team strategy before playing again.



13) Shrek/Spiderman/Spongebob---Place a couple players in pennies and have everyone else get a soccer ball. Set up a 20 yd x 15 yd space and have the players with balls dribble around in the space. The players in pennies are Shrek or Spiderman or SpongeBob etc. etc. and try to tag the players who have soccer balls. When players are tagged they go into the goal (castle, spidernet etc. etc.) and can only get back out if a teammate with a ball tags them or the coach uses his/her magic powers to let everyone free. Use any character or images you like for this and make sure all players get a chance to be one of the special characters at some point during every practice.



14) Moving Goal---2 coaches use a pennie or an extra piece of clothing to form a movable goal with each coach serving as a post and the shirt serving as the crossbar. Players each have a ball and try to score by kicking their ball through the goal. However, the coaches constantly move and turn to force the players to keep their head up and to change direction as they dribble.



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15) Body Part Dribble---In designated area, coach has all players dribble a soccer ball. When coach yells out the name of a body part, players must touch that body part to the ball as quickly as possible. Coach should vary body parts and rate at which he calls out body parts. At times, call out body parts consecutively (i.e. tummy, nose, elbow) during one stoppage or call out two body parts at once (i.e. both hands or both feet).

General coaching points:

- Keep your instructions to a minimum, these games are simple to understand and should stay that way. Do not talk for more than 20 seconds at a time and try to keep it much less than that
- By counting down the last 5 or 10 seconds of an activity you can add excitement to it
- If you see players not understanding or enjoying a game, be flexible and change it
- Keep all players involved all the time, do not have players knocked out who then sit and watch
- When sending players on a water break, have them go backwards or have them act like a rabbit or frog and hop. Have them act like a monkey or dinosaur, or anything else they come up with for fun and to help coordination skills.
- Be animated
- Change the inflection of your voice, do not be monotonous
- Have fun

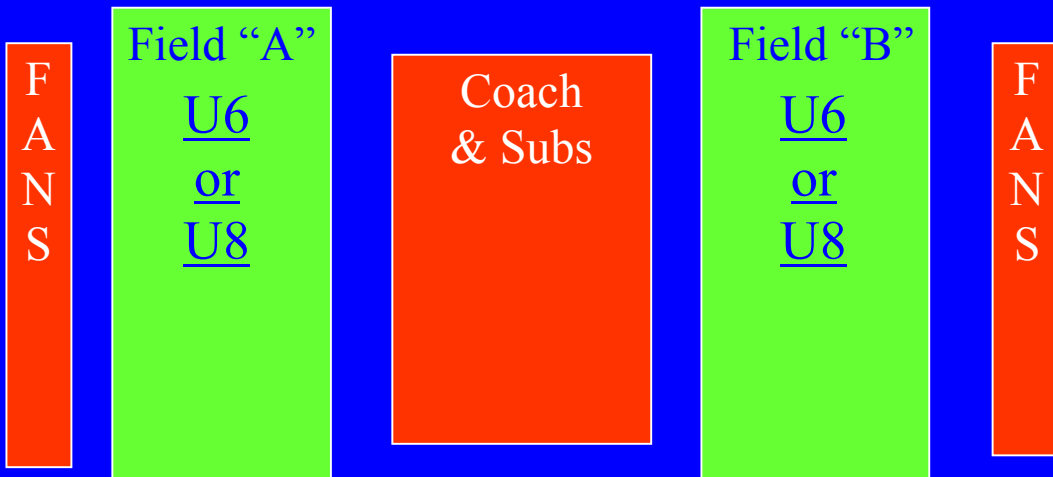
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US YOUTH SOCCER U6 GAME RECOMMENDATIONS

- Under 6's play 3 vs. 3 (*without a goalkeeper*)
- Field Size: 30 yds x 20 yds
- Ball: #3

Game Day Arrangement

- 3v3 & 4v4: Play "dual field" format



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SAMPLE LETTER TO PARENTS AT THE U6 & U-8 LEVELS

TO: Parents of U-6/U-8 players

FROM: Club Director of Coaching

RE: Welcome to our Club!

The purpose of this letter is to outline the club philosophy for the U-6 & U-8 players. By explaining to you the skill priorities and program objectives for your child, the program's format, and your role within the program, we hope we can clarify many of your questions and work together to make sure we provide a wonderful experience for everyone involved. Above all else, please remember that, as a Club, our primary objective is to make sure that every player has fun.

Skill Priorities

The primary objective of the U-6/U-8 program is to teach players to dribble. We want players to be comfortable with the ball at their feet and want to help build their confidence. By encouraging them to dribble, we hope to encourage creativity as well and will promote their adding their own personality to the game. Only a few players at the U-8 level will begin to develop passing skills. This will not be a stress in our program, though we will begin to introduce basic passing technique for the oldest and most mature players. Please recognize we do not list kicking as an objective. We do not want the children to aimlessly kick the ball as it is not helpful to their development as a player. They need to touch the ball as often as possible and to develop skills. We much prefer they learn how to dribble as opposed to just kicking the ball. Typically, young players find dribbling much more fun.

Field Layout

You will be asked to sit a few yards away from the sidelines during games in an area designated as the Parent's Area. The objective here is to give the players a sense of freedom, encourage the players to think for themselves and minimize the effect that we adults have on the children's play. We hope to encourage them to think for themselves when on the field and wean them out of their dependency on the adults.

We ask that you:

- 1) Refrain from coaching. Leave the coaching to the coach.
- 2) Do not tell the players to 'kick it' during the games or the practices.
- 3) Avoid encroaching beyond the parent's designated area until the game is terminated.
- 4) Feel free to cheer and applaud. This is not "silent" soccer, but it should be "positive" soccer. Please refrain from offering negative comments and please applaud good plays by both teams.
- 5) Exhibit good sportsmanship and make the other team feel welcome.

Please refer to the attached handout for a more detailed rationale of our program. Feel free to speak to me if you have any questions or concerns. I hope your child and you have a nice season and have fun!

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A. PROGRAM RATIONALE FOR U-6 AND U-8

Skill Priorities

The game of soccer has a number of basic skills, or *techniques*, that players have to learn, such as dribbling, receiving passes, making passes, shooting and heading. These skills make up the foundation of the game. However players always need to learn how to use these skills. This includes making decisions during the game, such as when to dribble, when to pass, and to whom to pass. These players' decisions are referred to as *tactical* decisions.

The first principle of soccer development is that players should master the basic techniques before they can learn the tactical side of the game. **Technique before tactics!** Think of techniques as vocabulary, and tactics as the grammar rules for forming sentences and paragraphs. Now, imagine a young immigrant who arrives in America without speaking a word of English. Before we can teach this immigrant about the rules for joining nouns, verbs, and adverbs to form a sentence, we have to give him a chance to learn a number of nouns and verbs in order to construct a sentence. If a child knows no words, than knowing the rules by which to organize the words is useless. If this child knows words we can typically understand the gist of what he is trying to say, despite his lack of grammatical knowledge. Of course, the more grammar this child learns, the more we will consider him fluent in the language. The same is true with soccer. Teaching players' tactics when they do not have the skills to complete them will prove fruitless. Teaching them technical skills will allow them to play and the games we watch will seem somewhat like soccer, but not like the soccer we see on television. Once they master the skills (grasp the words), then we can teach them how to use the tactics (construct sentences and paragraphs). Then their game will look like the game we see on television (or be fluent). This will not happen at the U-6 and U-8 ages.

In terms of soccer development, your child is just beginning his/her 'schooling'. We use the word 'schooling' here because there are many similarities between a regular school and a youth club, which can be considered as essentially a soccer school. Some techniques should be taught before others. The first technique that children should learn is **dribbling**. The ability to dribble is absolutely critical since dribbling is the foundation skill and preparation for all the other fundamental techniques of soccer, such as receiving, passing and shooting. When players are receiving the ball and making preparation touches prior to passing or shooting, they are essentially engaged in a mini-dribble. Young players need to learn to dribble within a variety of playing situations, such as dribbling forward unopposed, changing speed and direction with the ball, shielding the ball from opponents, dribbling past an opponent, and dribbling to get away from pressure. A limited ability to dribble leads to a limited range of passing or shooting. There are also times in the game, when the player with the ball has no passing options and the only way out of tight pressure is to dribble.

Aside from the fact that dribbling forms the foundation for all the other skills, there are many other reasons why we need to focus on dribbling at U-6/U-8. First of all, it takes years to become a comfortable and confident dribbler. Players have to learn to combine body control, agility, coordination and balance with the mechanics of dribbling and the sooner they start, the better. Just like any complex bio-mechanical skill such as skating or gymnastics, the later you

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start, the harder it is to achieve perfect form. Secondly, the process of learning to dribble involves trial and error. At first, the players' rudimentary attempts at dribbling will often result in failure as they discover the contrast between a soft touch and a hard touch on the ball. The players will slowly develop a 'feel' for the ball as they experiment at controlling and propelling it. Young players do not get discouraged easily if they do not succeed. They are not thinking in terms of peer assessment. They live for the moment, in the here and now, and the fact that they did not succeed the last time they dribbled will not even enter their minds. Of course, since we play 3 vs. 3 or 4 vs. 4, we guarantee that players will get another chance to show their skills very soon so they would not even have time to think about it if they were capable of doing so. If we wait for the players to mature before we emphasize dribbling, many of them will lose their confidence if they do not succeed and will become reluctant to dribble. Once they become aware of others' perception and peer review, they will not be so daring and creative. Thirdly, in 3 vs.3 and 4 vs. 4 play, the fields are so small that dribbling is always an option since the ball is almost always within reach and the goals and other players are also close. Once the game moves to the larger sized fields, dribbling becomes less effective on it's own and must be combined with passing to get the ball from point A to point B. Lastly, it is better to go through the process of trial and error when game results are not important and standings are not kept. At the older ages, game results assume more importance, making it hard for the parents, other players, and coaches to show patience and tolerance for mistakes, and putting added pressure on players to 'get rid of the ball' rather than risk losing it. Once games become competitive, the resultant environment is not ideal to start learning how to dribble.

To Cheer or Not To Cheer—That is the Question

Most coaches and parents of beginner players unknowingly emphasize the wrong skills. In a typical U-6/U-8 club play, the players are encouraged by both the parents on the sidelines and the coaches to 'boot' the ball up the field. Shouts of "get rid of it!" and "kick it!" are all too common. The further forward a player kicks, the louder the cheers. Players are so indoctrinated to 'kick it forward' that very few of them dare to get out of pressure by dribbling. Even when no one is around to pressure them, we see players just kicking the ball without any thought. Part of this might be because of the cheering they get from the sideline when they do this. However, kicking is not a skill. All of us, with no learning, can kick a ball. What we really want to emphasize is learning and skill development. So, please, do not cheer for kicking...cheer for dribbling and creativity. We do not want to 'coach' the players out of developing ball skills and showing creativity—do we?

On the surface it is easy to say that results at U-6 and U-8 do not matter and that there is no need to keep standings. In actuality, players at this age often do not know the score when the game ends. I am willing to bet they know the directions to the nearest ice cream store however. Even with this understanding it is hard for you to watch your child lose the ball in front of his own goal and for the other team to score. It is difficult to not place importance on the score as we are tallying it in our head. Despite this, we need to remember what is best for the players. Partner with your spouse or a friend and help stop each other from saying "kick it". It is especially hard when the ball is front of their goal and you want them to clear it, but please remember, every time they kick it, they lose another opportunity to learn to dribble.

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Many of you may be wondering about teaching passing as that is certainly part of soccer. However, just as in school, we are taking one step at a time. Before we do multiplication and division, we are doing addition and subtraction. There is a progression to learning and the players are most capable of learning dribbling at this age. You will not typically see any passing in a U-6 game, and very little in a U-8 game. Passing is simply beyond the ability of U-6 and most U-8 players. Most players realize there is only one toy on the field and they want to play with the toy. They do not understand the logic in giving their toy to someone else. If they do that, they no longer get to play with the toy. Think of dribbling as 'passing to oneself'. If players cannot pass to themselves, how can they be expected to pass to a teammate 15 yards away? Despite our grandest hopes, let us be honest with ourselves as well. Some of those kicks that end up going to teammates are still just kicks. The fact that they randomly ended up with a teammate does not make the kick a pass. ☺

Weaning Young Players Out of Adult Dependency

In addition to technical development, we want to help players with mental development. Just as they practice technical skills to improve their play, they also need to practice decision making. This can very easily be done by placing them into situations repeatedly and allowing them to make decisions on their own. If natural consequences do not teach them what the best decision is, then the coach can help clarify that with the player. If we constantly tell these young players what to do and prevent them from making these decisions, they will never improve their decision making skills, a very important part of the game. Typically, children aged 4 to 8 are naturally dependent on their parents for many of their daily needs. In youth sports, this dependency is manifested as parental coaching from the sidelines. The players themselves will tend to look to their parents for help since they are conditioned to be dependent on them. Although it can be very hard, we need to allow these players to make their own decisions. The hardest part will be that some of the decisions will be faulty. However, we must allow them to learn from their successes and failures as both provide vital information and help in development. Therefore, another important objective of our U-6/U-8 program is to wean the players out of their dependency on adults during games. This is crucial for the development of soccer players. Since coaches do not have time outs and the game runs continuously, coaches have very little control over games once they start. Soccer players must learn to think for themselves, and the sooner they learn to stand on their own feet, the better. Since results do not matter at these age groups, no one should be overly concerned if players make mistakes that lead to goals. Parents and coaches must resist the urge to tell their players what to do for the good of the players. Not surprisingly children tell us that they actually have more fun when they are not being told what to do constantly....imagine.

Commonly, we see parents sitting and standing very close to the sidelines and even encroaching onto the field. We realize that we get excited and are enthusiastic and that is great! However, parents sitting so close to and on the field impacts the players' behavior, response and performance. If we want to give the players a sense of freedom and the ability to make their own decisions, we need to physically step back. This is why we ask you to sit some distance from the field, where you can still enjoy watching without your presence intimidating the players. What we lose in coziness, we gain in giving an invaluable sense of independence to the players.

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Individual Concept vs Team Concept

As parents, you are mainly and thankfully concerned with the welfare and development of your child. When your child goes to school, you become very interested in how he/she is progressing in school. Do you care how the class is doing as a whole? You are likely happy as long as your child is doing well, the teacher creates a supportive learning atmosphere, and the teacher is keeping pace with the required academic standards for his/her age. It seems laughable to imagine parents boasting that their child's class average was higher than the class next door. It does not seem to be a concern. The class concept in school is seen as a logistical convenience where children of like-age are grouped together to learn academics and social skills within the dynamics of a group. The same concept should be applied to youth sports. Just like a classroom, a youth team should be seen as a convenient way to group players of similar age and ability together, to learn how to play soccer, as well as develop social skills. Just as we do not brag about how strong our child's entire class is in academics, we should not brag about the strength of our child's team in soccer.

People want to be part of a team. They feel safe and comfortable. There are many positives in a team environment, such as building lifelong friendships, sharing common goals, learning to trust and depend on others. But when the team assumes too much importance or consumes your life, it can lead to tension and conflicts. Games become more stressful. The mood of the family unit for the rest of the day hinges on the game result. 'What's best for the team' overrides what's best for the individual players. The negative aspects of the team concept manifest themselves in many ways: the amount of playing time players get, rivalry between teams spilling over into arguments and even hostility, coaches fighting over players, referee abuse, etc.

Though we are ingrained in the American culture to place a high value on winning, we urge you not to place importance on winning, but rather on making sure your child is having fun and is being given the opportunity to play and learn the game. Your child's U-6 or U-8 team's record will have absolutely no impact on the future well being of your child. Mia Hamm is not playing for the National Team because her U-10 team won the state championship. She is on the national team because she has developed into a skillful and athletic player. Your child might develop into a high level player or he/she might not. Some of this depends on our genes and is pre-determined before your child was even born. As long as he/she is having fun and developing a lifetime habit of healthy participation in sport, we should all be happy. Remember that the team is there to serve your CHILD'S needs. Your child is not there to serve the team's needs. If the team's performance produces strong emotions in you, you need to step back and take a deep breath and suppress these emotions. If your child is having fun, that is the most important thing. The team is just a logistical way to engage a bunch of children in play. Tomorrow, your child will be part of another team.

Parents must beware of coaches who seem intent in building a 'dynasty' at these young ages. If a coach approaches you with the intent to recruit your child into his/her team because "He wants to build a strong team", you should question his agenda. The chances are he/she will emphasize the wrong type of development and training. The chances are that he/she will replace your child down the road when a better player pops up.