



Dear Parents,

We are excited to have you join us this season in our Parent/Child Introductory Class (Parent Participation Program). The goal of this program is to provide an introduction to soccer to 2 and 3 year old children while also helping children improve their balance, coordination, and confidence. This is one of my favorite programs every season, and I look forward to working with you this season. Please read through the enclosed materials to familiarize yourself with how the program is run. The following contents are included in this manual:

1. Rationale
2. Session Format
3. Skills Learned
4. Parent Expectations

If at any time you have any questions about the program, please do not hesitate to reach out to me. I am available via email at [zsalchli@skysoccer.org](mailto:zsalchli@skysoccer.org) or by phone at (270) 864-6325.

Thank you,  
Zach Salchli  
Director

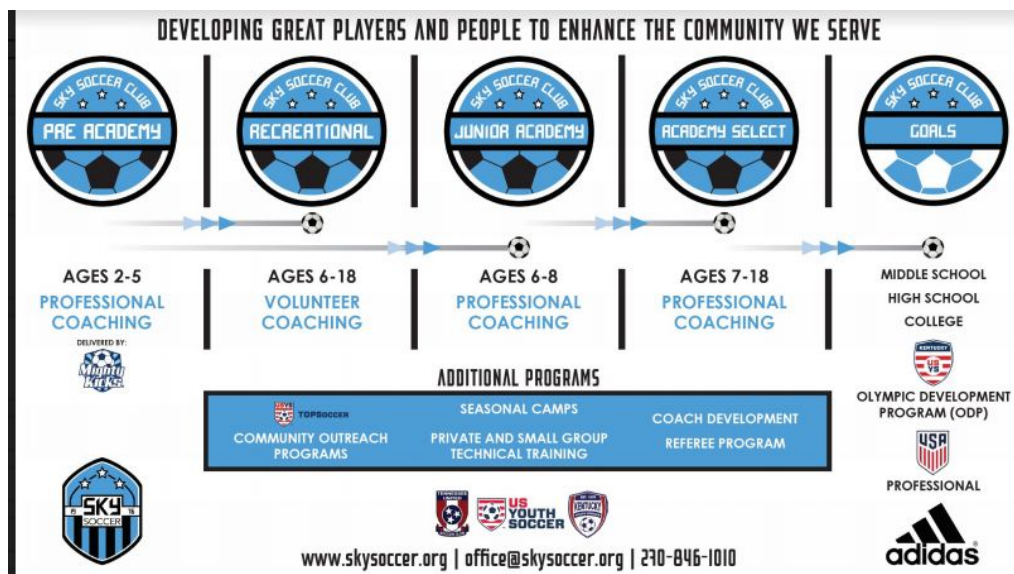
## Rationale

We believe soccer is the world's best introductory sport. It provides an easy access point to physical activity to get kids active and moving. Our goal is to increase the number of children playing soccer, and in order to do so, we believe that providing a safe and accessible entry point to the game is the most important.

This is why we start children in our Parent/Child Introductory Class. This class provides an opportunity for children to engage in the game in a safe environment with their parent's support. It also provides parents support in the best ways to interact with their child for better engagement and learning in a new sport. Whether you grew up playing the game, or you know nothing about it, the Parent/Child Introductory Class will give you the tools to help support your young soccer player as they experience the world's beautiful game for the first time.

## Development Pipeline

SKY Soccer has recently taken a new approach to ensuring a continuum of programming and development opportunities for all children. We are excited to partner with them in this endeavor as the foundational piece for all future programming. As the entry point to the pipeline of development, we want to ensure a positive and safe first soccer experience for all participants. As children age through our Mighty Kicks curriculum, they will learn the skills necessary to enter the Junior Academy Program and into the SKY Academy Select Program as they get older. This pipeline provides a professional coaching environment from age 2 all the way through age 18. SKY Soccer is unique in being one of the only clubs in the entire state that has a development pathway with a professional and licensed coaching staff from age 2 and upward. This is not common, and our community is fortunate to have this growth and development opportunity for aspiring athletes.



## **Session Format**

The Parent/Child Introductory Class operates on a 45 minute time frame. Each session follows a general outline described below:

### **1. Exploratory Time (5-10 Minutes)**

During Exploratory Time, the coaching staff puts out various soccer equipment: goals, ladders, cones, and rings for children to engage in free play. This gives children access to the materials of the day and provides a safe space to play with these materials. Please do not get concerned that your child is using the equipment the wrong way. We put the equipment there for them to explore and use it how they see fit, and then the day's lesson will work on how to use the equipment properly. Over time, children will begin to engage with the equipment in the appropriate manner. So, if they pick up cones or throw rings, please know that it is perfectly fine. That's why they are there!

### **2. Storyboard and Life Skill Lesson (5 Minutes)**

Each week children learn a new life skill value word. This is introduced through an interactive storyboard led by the head coach. Through engaging storytelling, children interact with new vocabulary and learn to apply that new vocabulary to the activities they are doing.

### **3. Gross Motor Time (15 Minutes)**

Children participate in a variety of gross motor movement activities to help them gain control of their bodies, improve their coordination, and learn basic movements for the game of soccer.

### **4. Soccer Skill Lesson (15 Minutes)**

Children are introduced to a soccer skill through a series of activities they will participate with their parents. The coach will speak directly to children about the game with the expectation that the parent will help their child through the activity.

### **5. Closure/Wrap Up (2 Minutes)**

Children come back together with the coach to review the skills learned and do a final team cheer.

## **Skills Learned**

The below is a list of skills acquired through participation in the program. This list is just a small snapshot of all the things children learn through the program!

### *Soccer Skills Taught:*

1. *How to Control the Ball (Dribbling Fast vs. Dribbling for Control)*
2. *How to use the inside of foot to pass a ball*
3. *Proper technique for striking a ball for longer distance*
4. *Movement, agility, and balance*

### *Other Skills Acquired:*

1. *Improved listening abilities*
2. *Ability to follow multi-step directions*
3. *Improved confidence*
4. *All the benefits of physical activity!*

## **Additional Resources**

Additional resources to support the growth and development of your athlete can be found on our website at [www.mightykicks.net](http://www.mightykicks.net).

## **Parent Expectations**

1. Bring a properly inflated size 3 soccer ball for your child.
2. Make sure to have plenty of water for your child.
3. Participate in all activities with your child.
4. Be encouraging and patient with your child!

Required equipment for the program is simply a size 3 soccer ball and comfortable clothing. No additional equipment required. Shin guards and cleats are optional.

Active participation is required by all parents in this program. This program will get you up and moving! Have fun, dance, be silly, and enjoy this time with your child.

## **Uniforms**

All Pre-Academy players are provided a uniform t-shirt as part of registration. You are not required to purchase anything additional. Players may choose their own color of shorts and socks. Shin guards are required for all players aged 4 and up but are also highly recommended for ages 3 and up.

## **Meeting Days**

The Parent/Child Class will meet from 10:00-10:45 AM on Saturday mornings at Lovers Lane Soccer Complex. Please refer to the schedule in TeamSnap for field locations.

## **Communication**

Last season SKY Soccer adopted the TeamSnap application for the Pre-Academy Program. This application enables the Pre-Academy coaches and parents to communicate in real time via instant messaging capabilities as well as share regular updates via instant message and email. The schedule will also be updated in TeamSnap, including field numbers with reminders being emailed. TeamSnap will be free to download from app stores and used by our Pre-Academy participants. You will receive a TeamSnap invite to join the Pre-Academy group. Simply accept your invite, create a login and download the app on your phone and you'll receive all program related information directly.

## **Inclement Weather and Cancellations**

In the event of severe weather or a situation where the park has been closed, you will be notified via TeamSnap. This is one reason it is very important to have the TeamSnap app installed. All schedule notifications will be sent via TeamSnap. This includes all weather-related cancellations.

## SUCCESS THROUGH CHARACTER

Sports provide a great environment for kids to develop character. However, good character is not learned unless it is taught. Research shows that, just like skill, character is malleable (it can be developed and adjusted). Coaches have a great opportunity to be a positive impact on the kids they instruct. They should embrace this opportunity by helping kids develop Grit, Character and the Growth Mindset.

Grit: Resilience, Perseverance, Bravery – getting back up after a fall. Facing and conquering adversity and challenge.

The “Growth Mindset” is the mental attitude that believes that things such as talent and intelligence are developed through effort, repetition and hard work. The “Fixed Mindset” believes that intelligence and skill are something you are born with. Someone with the Fixed Mindset may say “some people are smart while others are not,” or “that kid is a natural at soccer.” Someone with the Growth Mindset may say, “I learned that new skill through practice and hard work,” or “I got better at soccer through the struggle of failing and fixing.”

Find more Character Development information on our Blog, Life Skills Page and Parent’s Resource Page: [www.mightykicks.net](http://www.mightykicks.net)

### The Mighty Kicks Life Skills:

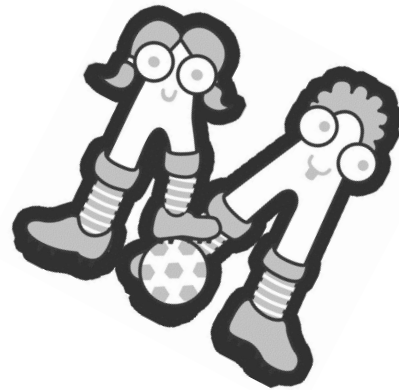
1. **Have Confidence:** Believe in your abilities. YOU CAN DO IT! You can do it well.
2. **Respect Others:** Do to them what you would like them to do to you (GOLDEN RULE). Be polite –considerate-appreciate others. To show regard for a person’s self-esteem.
3. **Positive Attitude:** Seeing the good in a situation.
4. **Share:** Allow someone to use something you own.
5. **Play Fair:** following the rules. Honest behavior.
6. **Be Kind:** Caring, pleasant, friendly, and nice. Showing you care about other people. Doing what is right towards others. (GOLDEN RULE)
7. **Listen:** Follow the instructions of your parents, teachers and coaches. Don’t make them have to tell you twice. Pay attention. Hear and respond to commands. Listen carefully to the instructions.
8. **Be Honest:** Always tell the truth. Truthful way of behaving, speaking and thinking.
9. **Try Hard:** Work until the work is done. Attempt to do it with all your effort. Attempt things that are difficult. Maximum effort.
10. **Have Fun:** Smile, be happy and enjoy what you are doing. Be someone that others want to be around.
11. **Be Brave:** Conquer fear. Try something scary if it is necessary and right. Choose to make an effort even though there is a risk.
12. **Work Together:** Help each other to the goal. Celebrate your teammate’s victory. Cooperate. Cooperation makes the group stronger.

## Benefits of Youth Soccer

- Coordination – Confidence – Character
- Agility – Balance – Strength
- Life Skills – Team Skills – Social Skills
- Basic Soccer Skills – Elementary Techniques – An understanding of the game
- Healthy lifestyle habits – Fitness – Endurance
- Improved Self-Concept and Self-Esteem
- Creativity – Imagination
- Fun – Kids learn best while enjoying themselves
- Educational – encouraging learning and development through experience and repetition of skills
- Exercise – improves memory, attention, immune system, mood, and fights obesity and diabetes

### The Mighty Kicks Mascot:

Meet Emma and Max (the Mighty Kicks Mascots). They are the main characters in the stories and are meant to be an example of Strong Character. When the children see Max and Emma, they should think of Positive Virtues and good Character.



### About the Director

Mighty Kicks is led by Coach Zach Salchli. Coach Zach is the Director of Student-Athlete Development for Women's Soccer at Western Kentucky University and former Head Coach for the Greenwood Lady Gators Soccer Program leading the Lady Gators to a national ranking for the first time in school history in route to two regional championships and state quarterfinal appearances. His time with Greenwood resulted in being named the 2018 Kentucky Girls' Soccer Coach of the Year as well as the 2018 United Soccer Coaches South Region Coach of the Year. In addition, Coach Zach was awarded the 2015 Coach of the Year by the Southern Kentucky Referee Association and the 2016 Greenwood High School Coach of the Year.

Coach Zach holds the USSF National "C" License, United Soccer Coaches National Diploma with Distinguished Pass, and works as a Head Coach with the Kentucky Olympic Development Program. Outside of soccer, Coach Zach is an elementary school assistant principal and holds his M.Ed. degree in Learning and Instruction from Vanderbilt University. Coach Zach's research interests focus on early childhood literacy development and creating environments that support literacy learning, specifically in younger children.

Coach Zach has been married for 11 years to Ashley, and they have one daughter. In their very limited spare time, they enjoy hiking, cooking, and visiting new cities (New York City is their favorite!).

## **What's Best for Kids in Soccer? Developing Programming for Success for All Kids**

It's widely accepted that youth sports participation is great for children. There are numerous health benefits, as well as benefits cognitively, socially, and emotionally for children who participate in a youth sports program regularly. However, a widely misunderstood area of youth sports is the type of environment that is appropriate for a child varies depending on their developmental age and level. Pushing a child into an environment that they are not ready for can create a number of challenges down the road for that child when it comes to active participation in a sports program.

### *Why Do Kids Quit?*

In 2014, George Washington University conducted a study to determine the factors that influence a child to participate in a sports activity. The top reason kids quit: it's no longer fun. Youth sports participation numbers across the board have been dropping substantially in the last few years. When it comes to youth soccer, researchers have found that the age where the substantial drop first occurs is happening earlier and earlier. What once was attributed to kids specializing in a sport by the age of 13 or 14 has now become a peak dropout age of 6. Children are quitting youth soccer in huge numbers beginning at the age of 6. What could be the contributing factors to kids leaving the game in huge numbers by the age of 6? When you look across our youth soccer landscape in the country, it becomes abundantly clear: adults.

That same George Washington University study ranked eighty-one factors that might make sports participation "fun" for a child. It should come as no surprise to those of us actively involved in the game for a number of years that all the way down at #48 is the first time winning comes into play. What did kids rank as their #1? Trying your best. They followed with having a respectful coach and getting lots of time to play.

### *What Environment Best Supports Young Players?*

For the sake of this article, let's take a look at those pivotal years before age 6. What type of environment best supports the proper development of my 2 to 5 year old child? From the George Washington study we know it has to be fun. We also know that plenty of time getting to play and having coaches that treat players respectfully will help keep players in the game. What does science say about the types of activities this environment should support?

According to the Mayo Clinic, young children ages 2 to 5 are just beginning to master many of the basic movements in gross motor development. However, they are also too young for most organized sports settings. Participation in sports in ages 2 to 5 does not tend to show any long-term advantage in terms of future sports performance. What this means is that the environment children participate in is going to be more about instilling a love for the game, more so than their future prowess as an athlete. What this also means is that putting kids in the wrong environment because we think they need to be "more competitive" or in a "more challenging" environment with older children can actually have the reverse effect. Instead of pushing kids to develop quicker, we are actually pushing them into an activity



that is developmentally inappropriate. When we consider this, it makes perfect sense why kids are dropping out of soccer by the age of 6. Adults are getting in the way!

Young children need to be in an environment that supports their physical, cognitive, and social development. Activities that a good youth soccer program should provide physically at this age include: running, hopping, skipping, jumping, kicking, and throwing. A program should be built around opportunities for a child to have a ball at their feet at least 50% of the time. For an hour long session, a child should have the ball at their feet for at least 30 minutes of that time. How is that accomplished if children are forced into playing adult-like games? Well, put simply, it can't. Instead, children should engage in up to 15 minutes of gross motor activity, followed by 30 minutes of work with a ball, and can end with 15 minutes of small-sided play. Small-sided play refers to 3v3 or 4v4 soccer in a smaller space so that children have more opportunities with the ball at their feet. Every child should be involved in the play and not just those that can run faster or kick harder. In your typical recreational program, unfortunately, the early developer tends to run rampant. That player gets to touch the ball more because he/she is more aggressive physically or faster than the other players. Who does that benefit? The early developer. Who does that not benefit? Literally everyone else.

### *Why Won't They Pass the Ball?*

One of my favorite sights on a weeknight is the well-meaning coach trying to put together a wonderful lesson on passing to his/her young athletes. They might work on the technical points (which is great!), and they might even try and get their little guys to string a few passes together while they stand awkwardly out on the practice field. Success! Then comes Saturday. Why won't they pass?!?

They won't pass because their brain tells them not to do it. It's not that they're being defiant. They just can't process time and space like our adult brain can. So, when we see all of that space and that wide open player, their brain is having trouble processing that distance. Too many other stimuli are also getting in the way. Life is tough when you're only 4 and there are so many new things to see, hear, and touch.

Don't believe me? Try this with your child. Give them a set of 4 cones. Without your guidance, ask them to space out those cones equally. If your child is a normally developing 4 year old, you will get a nice line of cones, one touching the other. Now, ask them to spread them out equally over a certain distance. They will have all sorts of trouble trying to visualize those spaces over even 10 yards. It's not their fault. Their brain just works that way.

With that in mind, consider the other challenge with kids playing adult-like soccer games. Why do they bunch up? Well, that's where the ball is and that's their only point of reference. Do they run past that sideline like it's not even there? Their brain is processing ball, ball, ball. It's not their fault. Can you imagine being 4 or 5 and receiving all sorts of new information from your coach who changes his mind every second about what to do? It's exhausting. Now, consider why our soccer environments are a big failure for our youngest kids. Why do kids drop out at age 6? It can't possibly be fun anymore.

### *I Want My Child to be on a Team!*

I hear this one a lot, and I wholeheartedly agree. Even my 2 year old loves the idea of going to soccer practice and seeing her best friend from school. She literally talks about it all week. It is so

important socially for kids to be with other kids. There is nothing wrong with being on a team. In fact, in our programs, we divide kids into groups of kids that they stay with for the whole season. We even give that group a team name, or let the coach decide. All of this is perfectly appropriate.

However, here's where it gets inappropriate. Your 4 or 5 year old has no real concept of winning or losing. They have no real concept of what it means to be on a team supporting their teammates. In fact, they won't actually learn all of those important life lessons that we want to instill in kids just simply from being on a team. These skills actually have to be explicitly taught.

Building friendships through sports is incredibly important, but somewhere along the line our youth recreational programs across the country have become toxic. Well-meaning parents request their child be with a specific group because they see that group being successful. Your child, however, does not even worry about winning or losing. The only one keeping score is you.

If your child's coach is keeping score--run for the hills! Get away from that guy. These small acts by adults can shift the focus on what's really important with the game. What's really important? Well, the kids told us. Having fun, learning new skills, and trying your best. Let's listen to the kids.

### *Putting it Altogether*

Let's put all that we've learned together to develop a youth soccer program that really works for kids. What components do we need? Kids need a chance to grow physically, socially, and cognitively. Programs like Mighty Kicks which have a set curriculum for coaches to follow ensure that everyone is getting access to the same great stuff.

Kids aged 2 to 5 need the chance to have plenty of opportunities at improving their quickly growing set of gross motor skills. An effective youth soccer program at this age will have lots of opportunities for running, jumping, hopping, skipping, kicking, throwing, and maybe a little tumbling as well.

Next, every kid needs to have a ball at their feet. Kids want the ball. They need to spend more time with the ball than anything else and learn the correct technique for controlling, shooting, passing, and receiving. They need ample opportunities to experiment with dribbling the ball. Do you think Ronaldo or Messi spent lots of time standing in lines when they were young? No! They had the ball at their feet making magic.

Another key aspect of a successful program for young children is time for social-emotional development. Ideally, the program will teach life skills with a dedicated curriculum. Children need help sorting through ideas like getting rid of fears, overcoming challenges, and persevering. However, these grown up ideas are too big for our little ones. Instead, we can teach them things like Be Brave, Have Confidence, and Work Hard.

Finally, a youth soccer program should have time for play. However, this play should not be super structured with lots of defined rules. A program centered only on the "game" is detrimental to kids' development. Kids should play in a 3v3 or 4v4 environment and should be matched up with physical ability levels as much as possible to give everyone the opportunity to experience success. Coaches should encourage but not direct. Coaches should be concerned mainly with ensuring the field is safe for all children and that every child gets an opportunity to touch the ball. Remember, young children do not have the same concept for team as we adults have. Lower your expectations when it comes to team concepts

like passing and moving to get open. You might even score in the wrong goal. That's fine! Celebrate it anyway. A great coach at this age celebrates every small victory.

For the sake of kids across the country, I encourage you to consider how your youth soccer program is arranged. Well-meaning adults can sometimes ruin the environment for kids who just want to have fun. A program with a clear curriculum and support from trained coaches works best at this age. Don't be fooled into thinking that children need to play up an age group or in an environment that is primarily game-based just because it looks more like soccer to you. The research is clear. It just doesn't work!



**About the Author:**

Zach Salchli is the Director of Student-Athlete Development for Women's Soccer at Western Kentucky University. Coach Salchli holds the USSF "C" License and United Soccer Coaches National Diploma and is a former recipient of the South Region Coach of the Year award by the United Soccer Coaches, as well as a recipient of the Kentucky Girls' Soccer Coach of the Year. Coach Salchli works closely with the Olympic Development Program in Kentucky, serving each year as the head coach for the youngest age group state team. Coach Salchli holds his M.Ed in Learning and Instruction from Vanderbilt University and is currently completing his principal certification at Western Kentucky University. Coach Salchli specializes in designing and implementing developmentally appropriate learning environments for all children.