



**Pre-Academy/Mighty Kicks Spring 2021
Parent Handbook**

(Updated 2/1/2021)

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

The Mighty Kicks Life Skills:

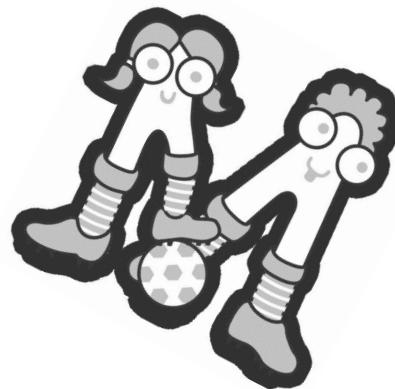
1. **Have Confidence:** Believe in your abilities. YOU CAN DO IT! You can do it well.
2. **Respect Others:** Do to them what you would like them to do to you (GOLDEN RULE). Be polite –considerate-appreciate others. To show regard for a person’s self-esteem.
3. **Positive Attitude:** Seeing the good in 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.



SESSION FORMAT

1. Guided Free Play (10-15 Minutes)

As players arrive, coaches begin putting players in a “street soccer” style play. Street soccer simply refers to a free play environment with no coaching. Coaches are there to guide play and make sure players stay safe. Street soccer provides an opportunity for players to just play without adult intervention. The first two players who arrive begin playing 1v1 and new players are added until it is a 4v4 game. Once all players have arrived, the coach may choose to begin practice or allow children to play a little longer.

2. Coach Welcome and Life Skill Review (5 Minutes)

Coach greets all players and welcomes them to practice. Coach goes over the objective for the day and tells a life skill story lesson with the Mighty Kicks value word for the day.

3. Warmup and Introduction to Skill Work (5-7 Minutes)

Players participate in a gross motor warmup focused on balance, agility, and coordination. During this warmup, the ball is introduced and a new skill with the ball is taught.

4. Skill Application (5-7 Minutes)

Players participate in an age and developmentally appropriate activity to work on the skill being taught. Players are given ample opportunities to practice their new skill before applying it to the game.

5. Scrimmage (10-15 Minutes)

All practice sessions should end in a 10 minute scrimmage where players have the opportunity to practice the skills they learned during the day's lesson.

6. Team Cheer and High Fives (2 Minutes)

Coach brings the team back together to review the soccer skill, life skill, and provide an opportunity for a final team cheer before leaving the field.

The Goals of Mighty Kicks:

- 1) FUN: enjoy the playing of the game of soccer.
- 2) Improve motor skills, coordination, and health.
- 3) Generate interest in soccer (and sports).
- 4) Teach the basic skills and rules.
- 5) Character development.

Expectations of the Parents

1. Have your child properly equipped (shin guards, proper apparel and size 3 soccer ball).
Two year old Parent/Child Class is not required to have shin guards.
2. Bring water and/or drink for your child.
3. Bring a size 3 soccer ball for your child.
4. Communicate effectively (make sure you are receiving the emails and the coach has your updated contact info). All parents should download the **TeamSnap App** and utilize it for all communication.
5. Respect the Coach and Officials (report any issues to the Pre-Academy Director)
6. Abide by the rules outlined with registration (ex. children stay with team during the game; parents comments are positive and encouraging; assist the coach when necessary)

7. Encourage your children (stay positive).
8. Review the resources on the “Parent’s Corner” Page at MightyKicks.net and utilize character development activities, handouts and more.
9. Abide by all COVID-related protocols and procedures. Failure to do so may result in removal from the facility.

The Purpose

The Pre-Academy Program exists to provide an early soccer experience that is fun, developmentally appropriate, and teaches the fundamentals of the game of soccer to all children. The Pre-Academy is for all levels of players and teaches the foundational skills of the game while also incorporating a curriculum that teaches important life skills.

The Pre-Academy Program is provided by Mighty Kicks Southern Kentucky. To learn more about the Mighty Kicks methodology and curriculum, please visit mightykicks.net.

Why Mighty Kicks?

Mighty Kicks offers a format appropriate for the early development of soccer skills with our youngest athletes. Mighty Kicks also offers explicit teaching of life skill development. These important concepts we hope for kids to learn from sports participation must be actively taught. The Mighty Kicks curriculum specifically teaches these life skill lessons through a developmentally appropriate format.

People often think that in order for a child to progress in a sport, they must face higher and higher levels of competition physically. Research does not support this. In fact, college coaches are often dismayed at the lack of technical ability of even their top athletes. Our rush to put kids in a “higher” league is often at the detriment of their technical ability. It is not uncommon in recreational programs to find a few kids that stand out above the rest. They often developed earlier and can use their speed or increased strength to “win” in these early years. What happens to that child when they rely on size, speed, or athletic ability and then everyone else catches up? That child then hits a development plateau that many times cannot be overcome because it is too late.

Mighty Kicks believes in developing every child and developing every child’s proficiency with the ball at their feet. That’s why we emphasize “Every kid with a ball, every time.” Mighty Kicks is NOT a “beginner” program. Mighty Kicks is an EVERYONE program. We believe in challenging every child through differentiated instruction to meet the developing needs of everyone. How do we do that? Through a specially designed curriculum that focuses on individual skill development before team concepts.

The Curriculum

The Mighty Kicks Curriculum outlines 8 weeks of soccer specific skills that we believe are the most important to establishing the foundation of later soccer development. Every child is given the opportunity to hone these new skills in a variety of ways and at a variety of levels. At the end of every session (“the game”), children have the opportunity to practice these specific skills in an appropriately competitive environment.

The skills taught each week include the following:

1. Dribbling for Control (Using all surfaces of the foot: inside, outside, in-step, and sole)
2. Stopping and Moving (Using all surfaces of the foot to stop, turn, and move)
3. Striking a Ball with the Inside of the Foot
4. Striking a Ball with the In-Step (Laces) of the Foot
5. 1v1 Attacking
6. Turns
7. Shielding the Ball
8. Review of Skills

Previously learned skills are reinforced each week and there is an ongoing focus on specific foot skill development. Every week players are focused on getting touches on the ball through a series of footwork exercises and juggling patterns. All players are taught proper juggling technique, even in our youngest ages, in order to develop the habit later on.

All sessions follow the outline above under “Session Format”. All Mighty Kicks coaches and volunteers have been given a specific curriculum to follow. This curriculum outlines a specific Life Skill as well as specific soccer focus for the week. Each week your child will learn one of the Life Skills from above and will participate in a soccer lesson that emphasizes individual player growth.

How are teams formed?

Players are randomly assigned to teams by age. Each team has a volunteer head and assistant coach. Our professional staff coaches, led by Coach Zach Salchli, are part of every team’s session as they lead all children through a series of activities with the support of the volunteer coaching staff.

As a commitment to ensuring a high level experience for all participants, all of our professional staff coaches must hold a minimum USSF “D” License. All of our volunteer head and assistant coaches undergo professional development with the Kentucky Youth Soccer Association to complete their US Soccer Grassroots License. Additional training is provided by Director Zach Salchli, the United Soccer Coaches Association, and other SKY Soccer Program Directors. We

provide this training for free to all coaches. If you are interested in taking part in our coaching program, please contact Zach Salchli at zsalchli@skysoccer.org.

Game Format

Players will participate in a game each week. This game varies depending on the age and developmental stage of the players. The coaches are responsible for ensuring that children stay active and engaged during the course of the game. They are also responsible for player safety. If your child is not practicing safe play, they may be asked to sit out of a game. Please ensure that your child understands how to participate appropriately.

Please understand that children at this age do not “see” the game the same way adults do. They do not process or think about space in the same way. Do not expect them to see the things you do. Let them have fun! Encourage them!

We do not emphasize team concepts at this age. We will teach proper technique of striking a ball for a pass; however, we do not expect kids to pass at this age. Neither should you. They are not going to pass. We want them to fall in love with the ball, and if we’re successful, they’re obviously going to want the ball at their feet!

Games will be played in a 3v3 or 4v4 format depending on age. At times, coaches may choose to utilize a 2v2 format. This is the new player development initiative utilized by the FA in Belgium and has become very popular throughout Europe. The goal of the game should be to provide children an age and developmentally appropriate environment to practice skills. Over the course of the season stamina will allow children to play longer amounts of time. We will also introduce a new rule each week that makes the game look more and more like “real” soccer. Be patient with your child as they learn the rules of the game.

Parent Rules During the Game

1. Under no circumstances should parents be on the field during the game. The only time parents should be on a field is during the 2 Year Old Parent/Child Class. All parents must stay behind the white lines of the field.
2. Coaches have been instructed to try and keep the ball in play, but please do not kick the ball if it comes to you. This is a safety issue. Please stop the ball at your feet and allow a coach to come and redirect play. At times, a coach will just tap the ball to keep it in play. Please understand that this is fine. We’ve had parents get upset about this practice in the past. There are no championship trophies being handed out. We want kids actively engaged and keeping the ball in play limits down time.
3. Encourage positively. Some examples of appropriately positive phrases that help kids do better: “Keep working hard!” “You’re doing great, keep it up!”. Giving specific directions is not helpful. They don’t understand what you are talking about anyway.

4. Please know, your child will fall down. No, that other child did not do that on purpose. They are little kids, and they have very little control over their bodies. Please be patient.
5. Encourage your child to sit with their team when they are not in the game. If your child is struggling to do so, they may sit with you, but we encourage that children sit with their team in the appropriate team space.

Game Rules for 5U and 6U

- Game begins with a kick-off. This kick may go in any direction but may not be “double-touched” by a player. This means the player kicking may not touch the ball again until it is touched by another player.
- Games are to be played in a 4v4 format.
- All out of bounds play results in a kick-in by the opposing team.
- A kick-in is placed on the boundary line and follows the same rules as the kick-off.
- All balls that go over the goal line will be awarded a goal kick for the defending team. There will be no corner kicks.
- On a goal kick, players must place the ball on the goal line and kick the ball into a teammate. The opposing team must retreat behind the midfield line until the ball is in play.
- Coaches should always encourage players to retreat back to provide space for opposing team to kick the ball in during any restart.
- One coach per team should be on the field to help manage the game.
- A kick-off should occur following any goal scored.
- No scores are to be kept for ANY game!
- All players should get to play in at least 50% of every game.

Game Rules for 4U

- Same as above except the game should be played in a 3v3 format.
- Only players and coaches may be on the field during a game. There should be no parents on the field.

How can I help make this a great experience for my child?

1. Be unbelievably positive about everything. Kids respond to your reactions. Make every reaction positive.
2. Support the coach with the objectives of the program. We want to give every child opportunities to grow. This is not the World Cup. We do not care about the score.
3. Get involved! Volunteer to help coach, bring snacks, or be the team mom or team dad. There are so many ways to help out. Please reach out to Coach Zach if you are interested in being involved in any way.
4. Don’t compare your kid to others. It’s tough not to do, but please remember that every child grows and develops differently. If your child is a little physically behind, don’t worry. If your child is athletically superior, don’t get too excited. Let your child have fun and be a kid.

Parent Participation Program (Parent/Child Class)

Our youngest participants (2018 for the spring 2021 season) take part in a Parent Participation Program, sometimes called a “Mommy and Me” program. Parents are expected to participate with their child in this introductory program. All children who are 2 Years Old at the time of the season must participate as part of the Parent Participation Program. This program focuses on gross motor development, listening skills, and the ability to follow directions. This introductory program provides children with the foundation needed to successfully join the Pre-Academy in their next season.

You will receive a separate Handbook for the Parent Program to help you familiarize yourself with the format of the program.

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.

Practice and Game Schedules

All practices and games are being held at Lovers Lane Soccer Complex. Practices will be held at the following times

2015 and 2016 Boys: Practice will be held at 5:30 PM on Tuesdays

2015 and 2016 Girls: Practice will be held at 6:30 PM on Tuesdays

Our 2017 and 2018 age groups meet just once a week on Saturday mornings at 10:00 AM.

On game days, players will participate in a 30 minute practice session prior to their game. Game lengths vary depending on the age group. **2015 and 2016 Girls meet at 9:00 AM on Saturdays, and 2015/2016 Boys meet at 11:00 AM on Saturdays.**

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.

Coaching Format

The Pre-Academy Program relies on a team of professional staff coaches and trained volunteers to implement our program each season. With more than 400 participants per season, it is no small task to organize and prepare all coaches to implement our program. Staff coaches work in tandem with volunteer coaches to ensure that all players have access to high quality instruction and support.

Every team in Pre-Academy will have one parent volunteer as a head coach and one parent volunteer as an assistant coach. These volunteers will be your primary point of contact for the season. Each volunteer is trained by the Kentucky Youth Soccer Association and completes the US Soccer 4v4 Grassroots License, as well as in-house training led by the Pre-Academy Director. All volunteer coaches must undergo a background check and complete Risk Management training where they learn proper protocol to follow in keeping players safe.

Every team will also have access to one of our Pre-Academy Staff Coaches. These coaches hold a minimum of the US Soccer "D" License which requires the completion of many hours of coaching instruction and testing. Pre-Academy Staff Coaches will be assigned to work with a "pod" of teams who will follow the Pre-Academy Staff Coach for their practice sessions. This Staff Coach will serve as the "Lead" Coach for practice sessions with the volunteer coaches assisting the implementation of the curriculum. On "game days", the volunteer coaches will lead their teams during the game. This model provides opportunities for coaching development for all coaches in the program and ensures that all of our players have access to the same curriculum and teaching across the program.

If you are interested in serving as a volunteer head or assistant coach, please reach out to Zach Salchli at zsalchli@skysoccer.org. If you hold a minimum of a US Soccer "D" License and would like to join the Pre-Academy Staff, please also reach out to Coach Zach at the above email address.

COVID-19 ADDITIONS TO THE HANDBOOK (UPDATED AUGUST 2020)

In consideration of COVID-19 and other infectious diseases, Mighty Kicks will be taking a proactive step toward mitigating risk. Please note that there is always an inherent risk involved in any sport or physical activity, and it is impossible to get rid of all risks. However, we believe a proactive stance is always best and want to be prepared to keep all kids and families safe. In accordance with this, please practice good social etiquette in maintaining social distancing and keeping those around you safe.

Steps Mighty Kicks Southern Kentucky will be taking:

- *Response and Reporting:* If any case or symptoms of COVID-19 are reported or detected, the Mighty Kicks coach, if not Zach Salchli (Director), will report this information immediately to Zach Salchli the Director of Mighty Kicks Southern Kentucky. Program Director and all Staff Coaches will take advice and adhere to guidelines set forth by the Barren River Health Department for Return to Play of affected families. Coach Zach will also relay information to all families that came into contact with the individual as required by any local authorities.
- *Social/Physical Distancing:* Each of our sessions will maintain physical distancing as much as possible. The coach will maintain physical distancing throughout each session. All family members that are in attendance are required to maintain 6 feet of physical distance between participants and other families. Coaches will consider social distancing in the design of all sessions to limit the amount of potential contact within a session.
- *Facemasks:* Facemasks will not be required for participants to wear during the session, but it is suggested that all participants and family members wear facemasks when arriving and leaving the park. Coaches will wear face masks before and after each session in case there are any conversations with families that need to occur as well as if a kid happens to run up to a coach to speak with them. During the sessions, the coaches will retain a strict physical distance from participants but will not be wearing their mask in order for all of the children to hear their instructions and guidance through the activities. Coaches will however keep their facemasks on them to quickly put on if any instance should occur where a child gets near the coach or the coach needs to assist the child.
- *Coaches hygiene:* Coaches will have their own hand sanitizer and will be using it before, throughout, and after each session. Coaches will not attend any sessions if they display any signs or symptoms of COVID-19 and will immediately go and receive a test.

Steps Families need to take when attending a session:

- If your child or any member of their household is or has displayed any signs or symptoms of COVID-19 they must remain at home and not attend a session. Please inform Zach Salchli (Owner/Director) if this occurs with your child or any member of your

household. Parents should take their child's temperature prior to arrival at the park. No participant should arrive at the park with a fever of 100.4 or higher.

- Family units must maintain 6 feet of distance from other participants and their family members throughout the session. Due to restrictions regarding the size of groups, parents will be required to stay outside of the field during a session. Ample space will be provided outside the designated field space in order for groups to socially distance from one another. Families should plan to wear a mask while watching games if they cannot maintain 6 feet of distance with other families.
- When arriving to the fields and departing each family unit should maintain 6 feet of physical distance between other families leaving and arriving at the fields at the same time.

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. To learn more visit coachzach.net