

## Let Them Be Little

It is the belief of the director of coaching and player development that players between the ages of 5-8 years old should only be participating in a recreational setting.

The rationale for this belief is that too much too soon leads to burnout with not only soccer but a loss of interest to participate in sports.

This the beginning stage and age group in which players are just starting to comprehend that there is another person on their team that may be used to play the game. At 5-6, they don't use anyone else on the field. In this age group, they will only pass the ball usually to their best friend or even just think about passing to one teammate. They don't really understand what teamwork is about at this age. This is just one reason why 4v4 and/or less is appropriate for these players. So if we allow these young children to travel if even a little distance it makes no sense from a team aspect because they don't see it that way. They are going to simply play a game and try and score goals. If they happen to pass a ball to one teammate in a game that is a bonus. An average 5-6 year old child doesn't focus on the team that they are playing but just focus on playing, running, laughing, and hopefully smiling.

From a psychomotor standpoint playing quarters and not halves only makes sense for this age group. The reason being is that their temperature regulation is less efficient than an adults. Their core body temperature is the same as an adult yet take longer to cool down because they don't have as much body surface mass to allow the heat to release from their bodies. After a 10 minute period they heat up much quicker than an adult which why quarters are more appropriate than halves for these age groups. So, are we going to allow these players to travel a distance to play what should only be a 40 minute game? For what reason? Even though they have an improvement in pace and coordination it is still very immature and show it through their physical abilities.

In the book "Why Johnny Hates Sports" it documents a study that was performed by the National Youth Sports Coaches Association. They studied a group of 5-8 year old athletes in the Cincinnati, Ohio area. The purpose of the study was to see if they had the skills needed to successfully participate in their chosen sport. Children in the survey were asked to perform the most fundamental tasks of a sport like catching, throwing, running, and kicking. Of the 1,100 children in the survey 49% of the children were found to lack the minimum required skill level to participate successfully in their sport. The book then adds the following quote:

"The idea behind many of the athletic programs at the earliest levels is to provide a setting where children can learn the skills they need when they move on to a more advanced level of the sport. Some parents enroll their kids in these programs to make sure their offspring will have an advantage when the leagues begin for the "real" sport. Children anxious to please their parents, put on their team uniforms and go through the motions of real competition, but in too many cases, the young children haven't developed the athletic skills, physical strength, or motor coordination that their sports demands. The result is that the games are often more frustrating than fun. In our rush to envision our children as successful athletic competitors, we sometimes forget just how limited they are". (Engh, 149)

From a Cognitive position they show a very limited ability to do one task at a time. The simple task of controlling a ball demands most of their attention. This is another reason why playing any more than 3v3 or 4v4 makes no sense at all. Think of how many possible lines of communication there are in a 4v4 match. That alone is too overwhelming for them.

Do teachers of 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> graders have their students read "The Magic School Bus" series one day and then the next week read Steinbeck's "Grapes of Wrath"? No, they develop their reading and vocabulary levels so that someday they will be able to read and appreciate the book. It is no different in youth sport. An environment needs to be in place where the children is not worried about the other team, who they are playing, what the

score is, or where the place is in the league. Even if there is a league where no standings or scores are kept they shouldn't be concerned about who they are playing. They will not be, but the adults might.

Five and six year olds do not understand the concept of time, space, or boundaries. They really do not even pass the ball. It is a dribble that goes to far. Seven and eight year olds, the understanding of time and space is just starting to develop and they only just know realize that they can play with a "buddy" or teammate.

Effort is synonymous with performance. If they tried hard then they did well. Even though a league will not keep results it would not matter if they did. These kids don't care about team results. They care about how they do and their personal achievement. Sort of like a runner in a marathon. Finishing the marathon is quite an accomplishment. How fast you finish or where you place is your own choosing. When I ran the Chicago Marathon last year, my main concern was to just run it without having to walk. That was my goal. The goal of young children is to simply run, kick a ball, and have fun along the way. Soccer is an activity for them at this age, not a game. This begs me to ask the question was this motion player/child driven or adult driven? It is certainly not player driven, because they really don't care. Children want everyone to like them and will do whatever it takes to please an adult. Just give them a ball.

From a psychosocial standpoint they simply like to play soccer or any game for that matter because it is fun not to compete. The typical 5-8 year old really doesn't care as long as they get to play the game.

I recently sent out a survey and asked fellow state Directors of Coaching, National Team coaches, and college coaches. The survey was simply asking them "What age should children start to play competitively"? While the results are still coming in the general consensus is that the age of competitive play should begin no earlier than 10 years old with some even stating that 12 should be the youngest. These are people that live and breath the game. They have given their heart and soul for not only the game but for the development of soccer in our country. They also know children. They are not bankers, executive officers, real estate agents, construction workers, but educators in an athletic setting. Kids pick up competition in kindergarten don't they when they fight for toys? Kids need to learn how to deal with competition though and that comes from the parents or coaches but not necessarily competing against someone else.

Let's get to the issue of burnout. Studies show that 73% of children quit their sport by the age of 13 because it is no longer fun. Even though a league doesn't keep scores or results, children and parents keep score. It is the perspective that is kept which is the bigger issue. I recently heard of a parent that made their daughter do sprints after the team that she played for lost 9-0. According to the testimony her effort was pathetic. If the perspective is the effort and not the outcome then that is great. How often though have we seen good intentions go astray? The pageantry of a tournament, beating the rival town, or coming back from what was seemingly an overwhelming deficit develops into an obsession to seek out more and different competition. If a group of young players want that then why not have the 6 year olds play against the 7 year olds, the 7 year olds against the 8 year olds? Give them something different than competing against their own age. They do it on the playgrounds at recess don't they?

So what does this have to do with the concept of 5-8 year olds traveling to play? The point I am trying to make is that children are put into situations at a young age that if their team loses than they have failed. The excerpt below is from an internet article that is entitled "Pushing Too Hard Too Young":

"Pressure to win and be the best. Painful injuries. Given all these factors, it's not surprising that some athletes simply burn out on their sport. But what is shocking to many in the field are the young ages at which this is increasingly happening -- sometimes as early as 9 or 10.

The scenario often goes something like this: Eager to nurture the next A-Rod or Michelle Kwan, parents enroll their 5-or 6-year-olds in a competitive sports league or program. Over the next few years, training intensifies and expands to the off-season, making practice essentially year-round. Youngsters may join more than one

league or a traveling team. They may have to sacrifice other interests and give up most of the down time that allows them to just be kids.”

We wonder why it seems like older (U14 and up) players simply don't care after a game about the outcome. Could it be because these players have been playing so many games since they were 5 years old that after a game they just tell themselves “Oh well, there will be another game tomorrow”. Complacency sets in. The novelty has worn off. Sooner or later that novelty turns into just dropping out altogether and they find something “new”.

Starting younger doesn't necessarily mean better. There are many examples of professional athletes who started at a later age only to excel in a sport. Cynthia Cooper (WNBA) didn't even start playing until she was 16. Hakeem Olajuwon didn't even play basketball until his later teenage years. Yes, there are the Tiger Woods and Freddy Adu's of the world, but they are the rare exception that every parent chases.

Why can't we just let them be little? They are only this way for a while. Why push them into an environment that they are not quite ready for? Yet the children can get there with a healthy perspective on what this is all about which is developing a love for a sport without the pressure of competing against someone else, but playing for their own satisfaction.

The rationale to allow U6 and U8's to play anything other than recreation and for fun is in my opinion, nothing to consider. If I have to stand face to face with the board of Indiana Youth Soccer I will be more than happy to do so because I feel that strongly about this motion being denied for the children's sake.

Sources:

Engh, Fred. *Why Johnny Hates Sports*. Square One Publishers, 2002.

Stenson, Jacqueline. (2002, April 29). Pushing Too Hard Too Young-Take away the fun factor in sports and kids can burn out. *MSNBC*. Retrieved July 2, 2004 from <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/4556235/>