

Small-sided matches

Small-sided games are extremely beneficial for young children. Anecdotal evidence and research studies show that youngsters derive greater pleasure from playing football in smaller teams and with adapted rules. As well as getting involved in the game more often, players learn more quickly and take more decisions during the course of a match. And as the ball is never far away, greater concentration is required on their part.

This all means that they gain a better understanding of the game than they would in playing on big pitches. The fact there are less players on the pitch and on each team also means that they receive more attention and have more chances to score goals, which is what children play the game for. Goalkeepers, who are not used in four-a-side football and smaller formats, are also more involved, while outfield players are exposed to more attack and defence situations, increasing their enjoyment and the pace at which they learn.

Below are just some of the statistics that underline the benefits that small-sided games offer in comparison to 11-a-side football:

- Players touch the ball five times more in four-a-side football and twice as much in seven-sided games.
- Players are involved in three times as many one-on-one situations in four-a-side football and twice as many in seven-sided games.
- On average, in four-a-side football goals are scored every two minutes and every four minutes in seven-sided games.
- Goalkeepers make two to four times as many saves in seven-a-side football than they do in 11-a-side.
- The ball is out of play for eight per cent of the playing time in four-a-side football, 14 per cent of the playing time in seven-sided games and 34 per cent in 11-a-side football.

In small-sided games each player:

- Plays the whole game
- Receives the ball on a regular basis
- Tries to score all the time
- Has the freedom to play
- Receives encouragement at all times from instructors
- Receives support from parents and instructors

The joy of playing

More than anything else children play the game for fun. Playing matches is also an essential facet of the learning process and helps speed that process up. It allows them to acquire skills and a sense of independence. It also develops their creativity, initiative and the ability to take decisions and helps them build relationships with other people and to respect them.

From a tactical point of view small-sided games are designed to enhance players' vision of the game and their understanding of defensive and attacking aspects. Sessions should also include free play, however, with the instructor withdrawing at some point from the action and allowing youngsters to play without rules and restrictions and to put into practice what they have learned.

The playing area

The size of the pitch is also very important and must be adapted to the age and the skill of the players and the size of the teams. It is difficult, for example, for a large number of players to play on a small pitch. They would need to be very skilful and have excellent vision, qualities that not every child aged between six and 12 can be expected to possess.

In physical and technical terms children develop in different ways and at different speeds, which means that some small-sided games are better suited for some age groups than others. It is important, therefore, to pursue a logical process of development in which youngsters start by playing four-a-side matches (with no goalkeepers) and progress to nine-a-side games.

Small-sided games	Age	6-8	9-10	11-12
4-a-side		X	X	X
5-a-side		X	X	X
7-a-side			X	X
9-a-side				X

Goals and equipment

The size of the goals should reflect the age of the children, with small goals for young children and larger goals for older children. To increase their enjoyment, nets should be attached to the goals. If only seven-a-side goals are available, these should be reduced in size using some form of marker. Failing this, goals can easily be formed using marker domes, cones or stakes. The two teams should also be easily distinguishable and a sufficient number of different-coloured bibs should be provided for this purpose.

Technical aspects of the game

Technical skills such as possession of the ball, shooting on goal, passing, controlling the ball, running with the ball and heading are all used in the game. Thanks to the pressure exerted by opposing players, these skills can all be taught and enhanced. During training sessions instructors should ensure that each aspect of the game is worked on. If, for example, the focus of a specific session is on dribbling, a game format that develops this skill should be selected.

Small-sided exercises and game formats

Grassroots football is founded on two basic concepts: scoring goals and preventing the opposing team from scoring. The best way to achieve these objectives is to use game formats adapted to and applied to different exercises.

The smallest game format is one against one.

This is an exercise that focuses on dribbling and shielding the ball.

Children should also learn how use their body correctly and impose themselves.

Another aspect of this format is "the ball and I".

The situation changes when another player joins the game (two against one). The two players on the same side now have the option of passing the ball or keeping it and must decide for themselves which option to take.

The next level, involving several team-mates and opponents, requires more vision and involves more concepts of team-play and creativity. The more players there are in a game, the more complex it is. For this reason it is important to bear in mind the age of the players and to let them progress from small-sided games to games on larger pitches.

Another important aspect to consider is that young players touch the ball a lot in small-sided games and are unable to shield it from their opponents. This forces them to go in search of the ball, which helps make these games very intense.

Furthermore, no aspect of the game should be overlooked and matches should not be allowed to run on for too long. Substitutions, with replacements players lining up on the edge of the pitch, are necessary and help maintain the pace of the game/exercise.

Game formats not involving goalkeepers should also be used, depending on the skill level and the age group. To begin with instructors should ensure that scoring goals is easy as this encourages players to shoot, something that also aids the teaching of technical aspects. Before long, more skilful players will require more of a challenge and should learn how to score goals when under more pressure.

Such situations represent a more advanced level of play and require the use of greater amounts of skill. It is at this point that goalkeepers should be introduced.

It is also important that goalkeepers learn about the tactical aspects of the game (shooting, pressing, opportunities for attacking or counter-attacking, etc). Small-sided games provide an ideal opportunity to do this.

To sum up, young players touch the ball a lot more often in small-sided games. They play more passes and find themselves in one-on-one situations. The repetition of situations in which they have to make decisions helps them to

learn and view the game positively. Active participation also increases their enjoyment, making it easier for them to understand the game and, above all, giving them the freedom to express themselves on the ball.