

U12-U19 Crash Course

There is obviously a multitude of information that can be covered at the U12 thru U15 level (There are entire books by the dozens available on the subject). This crash course is designed to give you an overview of what we suggest for your practices and games, and to provide you with the information you need to coach 12 thru 15 soccer in our program. You will have a limited number of scheduled practices, so efficiency is the key. Please call or email if you need ideas for practices or if something isn't working well in games. Sometimes an extremely small adjustment in a game can make a world of difference! We enjoy helping coaches out on the "soccer" side of things, as a lot of our time in the program is spent on administrative duties.

GENERAL INFO

Field Size: U12: 75yd x 47yd (with a centerline, center circle, and penalty box area)

Goal Size: U12: 6.5ft x 18.5ft

Ball Size: U12: Size 4

Field Size: U16: 110yd x 70 yd (with a centerline, center circle, and penalty box area)

Goal Size: U16: 8ft x 24ft

Ball Size: U16: Size 5

Players: 9 players (U12); 11 players (U15-U19). For U12, no more than 14 on a roster, preferably 13. For U15, no more than 18 on a roster, preferably 17. All children must play at least half of a game, and no child should play the entire game unless there are only eight/nine players. At this age it is understood that the competitiveness of the game may require you to play players in a certain position, but it should never affect their playing time. Please rotate players to allow them to play every position on the field, including goalkeeper.

Fouls and Handballs: Parks and Recreation will provide referees. Please let your players know to always be respectful of the referee. Your individual behavior towards the referee will go a long way in determining your players' behavior.

Duration of games: U12 games consists of two 30 minute halves. U16 consists of two 35 minute halves.

Substitutions: Both teams may sub on *your* teams throw-ins, either team's goal kick, after goals, or an injury. Always get the referees' attention before subbing.

Throw-Ins: Please stress to the kids they need to keep both feet down and use two hands to bring the ball directly over their head.

Goal Kicks: Taken from the corner of the goal box after the offensive team last touches the ball before it goes over the end line. Encourage whoever is taking the kick to never play the ball up the middle. Always kick to the outside. Have a player in the goal and one at the top of the penalty box, along with the person taking the kick.

Offsides: Offside position is defined as being nearer to the opponents' goal line than both the ball and the second to last defender when the ball is played. This can be a little confusing. Just remember that your offensive player has to either have a defender between him/her and the goalkeeper, or has to be behind the ball. You can't be offside on your own half of the field, or on goal kicks, corner kicks, and throw-ins.

Goalkeeper: A goalkeeper may punt or throw the ball from anywhere within the penalty box. Encourage them to distribute to the outside, not up the middle. A GK is not allowed to touch the ball with their hands if it is intentionally passed back by a team member. This will result in an indirect kick for the opposing team from the spot of the infraction.

Skill-levels: In our program, you will have kids that have played for many years and you will have kids who have never played before. And sometimes, a kid who has never played before might be the best athlete on your team! One of the challenges of coaching this age is doing your best to make practices and games fun for kids on both ends of the talent and experience spectrum. You will need to devote practice time to skill development.

Practice: A normal youth soccer practice consists of the following structure. 1. A warm-up, 2. An introduction and demonstration of the skill to be worked on that practice (passing, shooting, etc.), 3. Individual or pairs work on that skill in noncompetitive exercises, 4. Introduce competition (or opposition) to the exercise, 5. A game or scrimmage focusing on the skill for the day. Avoid any type of lines if at all possible. Instead of having 13 kids taking turns shooting on one goal, make six goals (with cones) and have kids try to score on their partner. You can call extra practices for your team, but please make sure that the parents know they are optional and do not affect a child's playing time.

THE PLAN !!!

In an ideal soccer world you would have weeks (or months) of practice to build up to your first game. You could structure individual practices around shooting, passing, dribbling, defending, attacking, etc. In recreational soccer you have three practices (with kids you have yet to meet) before your first game. So FPR suggests this plan for your first three practices. When you talk to your parents in preseason let them know that the first three practices will be 80-90 minutes to start the season. Also inform them that every player needs to bring a ball to every practice and game.

This practice outline is just suggestions based on observing the best way to get your kids ready to play the first game. FYI: If your practices start on time with a specific activity, then people will make a much greater effort to get their on time so their child doesn't miss anything. If kids just kick the ball around (or shoot at the goal) for the first 20 minutes of practice, everyone will begin arriving later and later.

PRACTICE 1

A. I suggest starting out with some type of "name" game. I usually put the players in a circle and have them look at another player, say their (own) name then make a pass. After you have done this a few times, then have them say the name of the person they are passing to. You can eventually make it into a game where if they mess up, they're out. You should be participating in the whole process, that way you can learn their names, and they can learn yours. Let the kids know if you want to be called "coach ____" or "mister/miss ____" or whatever you prefer. If you need to make this game harder, you can also put a defender in the middle of the circle to speed things up. After 20 or so minutes I would give them a water break.

B. During the water break, set up two 3v3 fields with cones approximately 30 x 20 yards. One of the first things you will need to do is to see who can play well, who needs work, who is fast, who passes well, etc. There is nowhere to hide in a 3v3 game so you will learn a lot about your players in a hurry. Limit these games to 8-10 minutes as you stand between the two fields offering encouragement and suggestions to the players. One of the main goals is to get the kids talking to each other. They should know everyone's name by this point, so have them talk (regardless of what they are saying). When the game ends, switch the players around so they aren't with the exact same team. Try to play at least four different games. Have the kids keep score and standings for themselves, but don't overemphasize winning at this point.

C. You will have half of a field for practice, so split the kids into two teams as evenly as possible and let them scrimmage the last 15-20 minutes. I don't recommend scrimmaging the team at the opposite end at the first practice, just stay within your team. After the scrimmage, invite all of the parents in at the end of practice and discuss with them your expectations of them and their child for the season, and let them know exactly what they can expect of you. (This is a good time to let them know that every kid needs to bring a ball and water bottle to every practice and game). The more organized you are at the first practice, the better your season will go. Try to make a good first impression on your team and parents!

PRACTICE 2

I call this a utility practice because you are going to cover dribbling passing, and defending in 90 minutes. Why not shooting? Because most kids will be lucky if they get more than one or two shots a game, while they will constantly be passing, dribbling, and defending. (shooting can come later).

A. Start out with a warm-up game like “stop, go, turn” where every kid has a ball at their feet. (This is why it is so important they each bring a ball). Offer suggestions and constructive criticism, before moving into “knockout” or some other game where every kid has a ball at their feet the whole game. During this game they will have fun while using the dribbling skills they just worked on in stop, go, turn. Play at least three or four games of knockout and have a winner each time. This should last about 20-25 minutes, then do a water break.

B. During the water break set up 6 grids, about two yards wide by six yards long each. Call the kids in and have them sit in a semi-circle around you while you (or one of the kids if necessary) demonstrate the proper way to pass and receive the ball using the inside of the foot. Then have the kids partner up with one ball for each pair, one pair per grid with the kids on opposite ends of the grid. (See below: player = X, cone = ^)

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The players will pass back and forth using proper technique, as you go around correcting their mistakes. They should lock their ankle, and use the inside of their foot. Emphasize the pace and direction of the ball, and that their partner should not have to move to receive the pass. It also needs to have enough speed that it won't be intercepted. Have them move their cones back one big step (so the grid is now 8-10 yds long) and repeat the same process. Once everyone is passing correctly, you can move into playing 3v1 or 4v1 keep away in a 15x15 grid. Make the grid large so the offensive team has a lot of room to pass and receive the ball. If they are struggling, make the grid bigger. If they still struggle, you can remove the defender, and just make a rule the players can't stop moving. Play a few times, then water break.

C. Have the players come out and sit in a semi-circle again, while you introduce the concept of defending. Stress that defending does not mean taking the ball from the other team, it means preventing them from scoring. The easiest way to do this is by staying between the attacker and your goal at all times. Introduce the concept of “closing down” an attacker by getting gradually closer to them as they get closer to your goal. Also stress that we defend with one foot forward and one foot dropped, and always try to force the attacker towards the sidelines, not up the middle. Have the players partner up with no ball and have them do shadow runs (toward the goal) where the defender just tries to stay in between the forward and the goal. Do this a few times where you work with them on their footwork, and make sure they don't spin or turn their back. Then set up two lines (offense lined up about 30 yds from goal, defense lined up on a goalpost). You will be in goal and will play a pass to the forward, who will attack and try to get around the defender and take a shot. If the defense gets the ball they win. We are focusing on defense, so don't worry about what the forward is doing at this time. Have the kids switch lines after every turn. *If you have an assistant set up another offense vs defense with a small goal, so the kids get more reps.*

D. If you have time, play 4v2 going toward the goal to end practice. Emphasize passing and keeping possession with the four attacking players, and emphasize defensive positioning with the two defenders. The dribbling will take care of itself. Have the players switch lines so everyone plays both offense and defense.

PRACTICE 3

By this time your kids should know each other's names and know the right way to pass, defend, and dribble. Now for the hard part - where they are supposed to be on the field and how to stop your kids from bunching up around the ball. Your entire third practice should be devoted to this. If you have a dry-erase board it can be a huge help for this practice as well.

Before their first game they need to learn the names of all of the positions on the field, along with what type of formation you plan on running. I recommend a 2-3-2 (2 defenders, 3 mids, 2 forwards), or a 3-1-2-1 (with three defenders, and the front four playing in a diamond shape). The 2-3-2 is a little easier for your kids to comprehend as long as your three midfielders are dropping back and defending. If you start out in the 2-3-2 and you're giving up 8 or 10 goals a game, you probably need to go with three defenders.

FYI: Defenders are sometimes referred to as backs or fullbacks, outside mids or forwards are sometimes called wingers, and forwards are often referred to as strikers. To avoid confusion with your kids (especially the first-timers) do not change back and forth with different terms for the same position. Pick a term and stick with it!

A. I would do a brief, intense 10 minute warm-up at this practice just to get their blood flowing, and then I'd get right to the tactics.

B. Call all of the kids in and explain to them what they're going to work on all practice. Go over all the position names, and let them know your formation. Then go right into what I call shadowing. This is going to be a bit boring at first for the kids, but it will prove invaluable to your team down the road. You start by putting seven kids into the seven different positions on the field, along with someone as a goalkeeper. (4 or 5 kids will be "subs" at this point). Make them say the name of their position, and have them spread out over your entire half of the field in those respective positions. Then you introduce a ball, which is slowly passed around as the kids adjust their position on the field according to where the ball is. Repetition is the key to this exercise being successful. Do this over and over and over. Bring in different kids in different positions. Move kids around and make them play at different spots on the field. Tell a sub to go in at right midfield and see if he/she gets it right. You should be in the center of the field directing traffic for the whole exercise.

C. After 20 or 30 minutes of this you become a defender trying to steal the ball, and the kids see how many passes they can complete while maintaining their positions. Once they get the hang of that, bring in a couple of the subs to defend with you. The end of this practice would be a good time to scrimmage (8v8) the team on the opposite end of your field.

D. Save ten minutes at the end of practice to go over goal kicks, corner kicks, and throw-ins. Set plays are way overrated, so just make sure they know the right technique for a throw-in and see goal kick advice earlier in this novel. If they are on offense for a corner kick they should move around and try to get open, on defense, find a player to mark and don't let them get open. One defender should stand on the inside of each post.

I cannot emphasize enough how important repetition is for this practice. They basically have about an hour to learn all the position names and where they are on the field. Emphasize that they need to maintain their formation and move as a group at all times. **DEFENDERS SHOULD NOT BE ON THEIR OWN END WHEN THEIR TEAM IS ABOUT TO SCORE, THEY SHOULD AT LEAST BE AT THE HALFWAY LINE.**

Forwards need to come back and help on defense as well. The kids will have so much more fun if they are always engaged in what is going on, regardless of their position.

FURTHER SUGGESTIONS

If one of the first three practices gets rained out, then I would suggest trying to make it up Wednesday or Friday before the first game. If that's not possible, PRACTICE 2 is the one that should be left out. You will have two more scheduled practices during the season, and after getting a few more games under your belt, you'll probably have a hundred things to work on for those. If you need ideas, please let me know. I'd love to help. One option is to set up a shooting practice using the same set-up I used for passing in PRACTICE 2.

I recommend having your team get to games 15-20 minutes early, and use that time to do a mini practice that focuses on something your team is struggling with. Based on what I've seen over the years, I would have a 15 minute pre-game practice that focuses on passing, positioning, and moving without the ball. This is the main thing that our teams struggle with, and once they start to "get it" the on-field results are amazing!

The main thing is for you to have a good time coaching (after all, I want you to volunteer next year). If you are having fun, the kids are going to have fun. Don't ever hesitate to call or email me if you need help with practice or games, or are having difficulty with a kid or a parent. Thanks again for volunteering.