



## Club sessions guide

*"[The performance playground is a] playful learning space which from the outside looking in without context, may appear messy and chaotic. It's a space owned by the children, driven by the children. An exploratory space where trial and error is encouraged, where the coach doesn't have the answers, the players do. We don't need to worry about or ask for compliance as the environment creates a deep engagement. The kids leave the session having felt like they 'played,' not 'trained.'"*

[Gameplaylearn.net](http://Gameplaylearn.net)



## Our approach

We never forget that we are dealing with children and that youth football is *their* game not ours. **Football should be FUN!**

This document is a guide for new coaches and volunteers. It explains the unique coaching model for our club sessions which are divided into three parts:

1. a free play warm up
2. a coach designed section and
3. free play matches.

Time at every session should be roughly equally split between free play and coaching.<sup>1</sup>



Our focus throughout is the individual needs of players – both in terms of football and personal development. In accordance with the FA's Four Corner Model, the social and personal development of every child who attends our club is as important to us as their football technique/ability. Throughout our work, children's views will be sought and are important to us.

Our coaching practice plans work across the Four Corners and are issued weekly for the Saturday session and coaches should aim to arrive at the pitch at around **9.15** to help set up the club and inspect the pitch etc. A coaching meeting will take place between **9.30 to 9.45** to discuss the session plan and welfare issues.

New coaching volunteers must be **DBS checked** and **complete a volunteer form**. They will shadow a qualified coach for at least a month and will be supported to obtain FA qualifications. Coaches will coach across the age groups and will learn how to adapt practices to meet the needs of the specific children in their group. Particular regard will be paid to encouraging and supporting young coaching volunteers to take on specific coaching tasks to support their development.

<sup>1</sup> Younger children (or older ones preferring to be in a more structured group) may be grouped separately and may focus on different activities to meet their needs.

## FREE PLAY WARM UP



At the start of every session, the children are given a ball each as they arrive and allowed to play as they wish – under adult supervision. New attendees are generally directed to the Club Welfare Officer who will introduce them to existing players of the same age or older. They will be encouraged to look after the new player and play with them.

Children are then called in for a coaches' meet and greet in which they are chatted to about weekly events, Respect issues are discussed, shin pads checked and the plan for the session is explained.

## COACH DESIGNED SECTION



*"We have to give the GAME back to the children for them to own it and develop their God given creativity in, but in a way that is 2016. This experiment ... will be seen as too liberal for this day in age and that children are simply not learning the fundamentals, so it has to be drilled into them. But what if this inspires them to be more confident at school, at home or anywhere that their liberty is taken away from them. What happens if that inspiration, makes them be so grateful to soccer, that they go out and practice on their own, because they now LOVE the game. What happens, if we give something back to players, that they will give their everything to the game and through allowing them to be children, we are in fact becoming "perfect" youth sport coaches..... Just a thought..."* Pete McDonnell, UEFA B licence youth coach

The coach designed session is about fun, ball time and children thinking and exploring for themselves. We want to promote player ownership - all children playing, all children engaged. The coach designed section should look and feel like fun games to children. Children should feel they have played not 'trained'.

We don't 'train' children or play in year-specific groups and our focus is the long-term development of individual skills. We also aim to develop and improve children's fundamental movement skills. Our model is child-centred, evidenced-based and takes on board the advice of expert coaches engaged at every level in the progressive development of the game.

Our job as coaches is to be designers of the environment. Coaching the complexity of football means creating fast-paced, 'chaotic' environments: it does not mean designing complex sessions. Our coaches aim to aid development, not by dictating learning, but by designing an environment where multiple learning opportunities arise, allowing children to make the decisions required for skills development.

Our coaching practices will generally include some element of **ball mastery** and **small-sided games**. Practices should **avoid**:

- queues of children
- children being "out"
- children sitting or watching others
- coaches directing play or offering 'right answers'.

***Children are to be given water breaks throughout the session with a break for oranges before free play matches.***

### ***Ball mastery***



*"You can learn the tactical side of the game later. It's amazing to me that people put so much emphasis on trying to be tactical and worry about winning when it doesn't matter when you're 12 years old. We're going to have big, strong, fast players. We're Americans, we're athletes. But if we never learn at an early age to be good on the ball, then it's just useless."*

Landon Donovan, LA Galaxy/USA

Ball mastery relates to the ability to manipulate the ball comfortably using the surfaces of the feet. Many children do not play football outside club sessions and we aim to maximise their ball contact time. Ball mastery practices involve children having a ball each, and can include time on the ball unopposed or opposed in 1v1, 2v2, 4v4 situations.

Additionally, the use of underloads/overloads can be useful, e.g. 2v1, 3v2, 4v3. These challenges, when framed correctly, can build resilience and create a sense of achievement.

Children should be encouraged to show their ball skills to the group and to practice skills at home.

## Small-sided games (SSGs)



*“Whenever I find a player I like, I ask how he started in football and if he says 'the street', I know he means 5-aside and I instantly know he understands how to defend, keep the ball, pass the ball and finish. If combined with good vision and understanding, he will have all the technical tools to be a top player”*

Arsene Wenger

Small-sided games are games involving small numbers of players, e.g. 4-aside games. SSGs are the accepted developmental pathway for children and provide the best chance for more individual coaching. We can use SSGs to teach the fundamentals of football, i.e. football is a game with:

- a purpose, or way of scoring or winning
- a directional element
- an opponent, or someone trying to stop you doing something (i.e. competition).

Rather than stripping a technical skill out of a game situation, to teach in isolation, SSGs provide scope for exploring every aspect of the game and meeting the needs of the Four Corners model of development: technical, physical, social and psychological.

SSGs should accelerate the development of technical abilities due to increased time on the ball. Studies show that SSGs offer more touches on the ball in all areas of the field and opportunities to get multiple of experiences of basic tactical problems. With more ball contact time, there is more opportunity for fun and engagement.

SSGs also provide opportunities for fun games (e.g. [Teaching Games for Understanding](#), netball, dodgeball). They can be designed to create lots of different challenges, for example by using football scenarios (e.g. last 5 mins of the Champions League final), changing the number and balance of players, number of balls, shape of the pitch and so on.

The role of the coach is to facilitate skill development in SSGs. This can be done by virtue of the game design and by asking relevant questions. The development of the psychological side of the game (decision-making and game intelligence skills) is crucial to a child's development, sense of ownership, resilience and confidence. Coaches should not direct play or decision-making but support, praise and encouragement is important. Children should feel comfortable making their own decisions and we must let them learn from these decisions at their own pace, even if they do not appear to be the "right" decisions, or are different from the decisions the coach would make him/herself. A coach should **never** say to a child 'you should have passed etc'.

Meeting children's needs is paramount and if a child is disengaged, unhappy or asks for help, then it is obviously the coach's job to assist and to try and engage them. Otherwise, if the coach thinks a child needs help after examples of the same issue arising, the coach should ask the child about their decision, and discuss options by way of suggestion not direction (e.g. could you try this....?). Children develop at different rates and should be given the time and space to learn for themselves and not be directed by what an adult perceives as a short-cut or the right answer. Youth sports are not a race.

**Coaches should always question the value of their interventions and whether they are helping or adding to the child's natural decision-making process and development. A child may well discover the answer themselves given time or hit upon an answer the coach has not thought of.**

Coaching reviews should occur during the session and should include player led conversations about the practice.

## FREE PLAY MATCHES



*“Play is a fundamental human right for children. It is even recognised in Article 31 UN Convention of the Rights of the Child. So, why is it that adults feel the need to interfere with this?”*

John Haime, President of New Edge Performance

Free play is vitally important and central to our philosophy. This is when the children run their own matches (which should be fairly balanced and competitive) and coaches stand back.

Free play matches should generally be small sided games (although larger groups and more balls can work well depending on the needs of the children). Matches can be used at any time in the session – beginning, middle or the end.

Free play matches should be kept simple to allow children to play freely as if they were in a park without adults. This means rules are kept to a minimum so:

- there is no offside
- dribble-ins instead of throw-ins are acceptable
- we don't use kick-offs and play is restarted by kicking out from goal after a goal is scored (unless the kids say they prefer otherwise) to keep the ball moving
- coaches do not direct play (positive comment is fine *after* decisions have been made)

- coaches should not generally be on the pitch
- matches should be monitored by adults to ensure safety and to support children who need help engaging but children should be encouraged to referee themselves.

We believe that protecting free play ensures that children retain the sense that this game belongs to them. We think it is also the most effective way of promoting all Four Corners of Development, e.g. through refereeing themselves, children get valuable social opportunities to resolve disagreements.

We don't 'train' footballers – our club is for children who play football. But they are children first and foremost, and youth football is their game.

*Let them play it.*

*“Free play, once rife in our world when children would play safely in our neighbourhood playgrounds and streets, is now so terribly rare and sadly it has been of great detriment to our society. This must change and can quickly do so as we encourage ‘free play’ within welcoming and safe sporting environments.  
Free play, for the children and for our future.”*

*John K. Davies (elite sports coach)*