

So You've Volunteered.....

Congratulations! You have a whistle, a roster, and a bag full of soccer balls. You're a coach! Now what?

First of all, good for you! Just by stepping up, you've made a commitment that your kids will recognize and value, whether they tell you or not. Second, don't worry. As long as you're not mean or cruel (or late for games), you'll do fine. And remember, what the kids want more than anything else is to **play** in the game. It's your job to make sure this happens.

Here's a 6-step plan for your first season as a soccer coach:

STEP 1: Meet and Greet

Before your first practice, have a meeting with the parents of the kids on your team. You'll get to know them, and they'll get to learn what to expect from you and what you expect from their children.

STEP 2: Be Organized

Few things can throw off a team's balance faster than a coach who acts unorganized. Make up season-long schedules for games and practice times, and make sure that every parent has one. Also distribute a roster with names and phone numbers of everybody on the team.

For each practice, make up a checklist for yourself so that you know what drills you'll be doing in what order. And have a game-day routine that the team follows each time. Keep practices the same amount of times as the games. If the games are 45 minutes, try 30 minutes of practice and 15 minutes of scrimmage at the end. Always try to end practice with a scrimmage, mimicking as much as possible the games the kids play.

STEP 3: Be Flexible

As much as being organized helps, you're dealing with young kids and busy families here. So don't be stubborn with your schedules and rules. Things change, and other activities and family situations can intervene.

STEP 4: **Be Aware**

Watch for kids in trouble-whether with the sport, the schedule, teammates, or equipment. There are 14 or more little hands tugging on your sleeve, and their parents are doing likewise. Lack of attention to a kid who needs it can cause as many problems as aggressive over-attention.

Also, be aware of parents' needs and concerns. Some parents are veterans at sports parenting, having gone through a bunch of seasons, perhaps, with older kids. Other parents need a bit of hand-holding as they enter the exciting world of kids' sports. Depend on the veterans for help, and give the rookies a few extra minutes of time. Get the parents involved in the practice. A good tip is to try to avoid mixing parents with their own kids. The kids won't learn as much, and some parents can be a bit harder on their own young players than on their teammates.

STEP 5: **Be Nice**

This sounds like the simplest piece of advice, but in the heat of battle, it can be the hardest thing to remember. One tip is to try hard never to say anything negative. Look for a positive result in every situation. A player who swings and misses at a kick might get a "Good try, Bobby." A goalie who dives and flubs a save might hear, "Great effort, Lynn."

Be kind with kids, and be positive, upbeat, and confident. These qualities will be mirrored in your players. Act frustrated, sad, or discouraged and they'll feel that way, too. The same is true with parents, of course. Parents, as a rule, take winning and losing harder than the players. Don't let those parents spoil the mood.

One tip might be to always look for one good thing a player did, no matter how trivial, and point it out to the players after each game or during each practice.

Another trick that helps make every kid feel good about the experience is to take turns having co-captains. Change the co-captains from week to week so that each child has a chance to be a captain.

As a coach, always remember to be nice to the referee. Your team's parents and your players will take their cues from you on how to treat the referee. Leave the rules discussions for later, away from the kids.

There's nothing you can do during a game to change the ref's mind, so don't make yelling at the ref part of your team's approach. **DON'T FORGET-COACHES CAN GET YELLOW AND RED CARDS, TOO.**

STEP 6: **Have Fun**

If you have fun, your players will have fun. So no matter what happens, have fun. Soccer like any youth sport is a game. It's for kids to run around, kick a ball with their friends, and then eat snacks. This isn't the World Cup. Winning or losing a game isn't going to make or break a pro career, a college scholarship, or any significant aspect of a child's life. So, relax, enjoy the game, enjoy the kids, goof around, and get silly once in a while.

YOU'LL NOTICE THAT IN ALL OF THESE STEPS, THE IMPORTANCE OF WINNING IS NEVER MENTIONED. WINNING A YOUTH SOCCER GAME SHOULD BE ABOUT TENTH ON YOUR LIST OF COACHING PRIORITIES, RIGHT AFTER "MAKE SURE EVERYONE GETS A POSTGAME SNACK."

It just shouldn't be a part of the equation at the youngest levels. Some parents, and even some kids, may disagree with this. But if your focus as a coach is on participation, fun, learning soccer skills, being with friends and teammates, learning teamwork, and just getting out of the house on a Saturday afternoon, then **everyone will find that winning is the bonus, not the goal.**