

How This Document Is Organized

Welcome.

This document is an introduction to youth soccer for players, parents, and coaches. In the first two sections of the document (Laws and Definitions), each subject is organized into two or more parts, separated by color stripes (like the page you are looking at right now). The first part of each subject will be a simple description of what is to follow. Novices can go through these sections reading only the top part of each subject to get a general overview of the sport of soccer. As you become more familiar with the sport, you can move on to the other two parts of the page for progressively more details on each subject.

Really, Really Simplified Laws Of Soccer

"Soccer is played by two opposing teams on a rectangular field. Each team has a goal to attack and a goal to defend. The winning team is the one putting a soccer ball into its opponent's goal the most times, touching the ball with any part of the body except hands and arms."

Simply put, that's all there is to soccer. As you travel through and around this document, you will find that soccer is actually a bit more complicated than the short description above. At the same time, you will find that it is quite simple to understand.

The sections of this document are as follows:

- [The Simplified Laws of Soccer](#) - Actually, I haven't simplified the laws themselves. I have just described them in terms that are more familiar to people who are new to soccer. For purists, I have also included web links to the law book published by FIFA, the international organization that controls soccer laws worldwide.
- [Definitions of Some Soccer Terms](#) - There are some terms that are unique to soccer, some that are shared with other sports, and even a few that are shared with other sports but mean nearly the opposite thing. This section defines those terms.
- [My Soccer Philosophy](#) - A philosophy for youth soccer players, parents, and coaches that I have developed over my many years of involvement with youth soccer.
- [Soccer Parents FAQ](#) - This is a list of questions that youth sports administrators hear a lot, and the responses you should expect to hear from a well run league.
- [Parents Who Go Too Far](#) - Here's a short essay about a force that is having a huge negative effect on youth sports.

Note

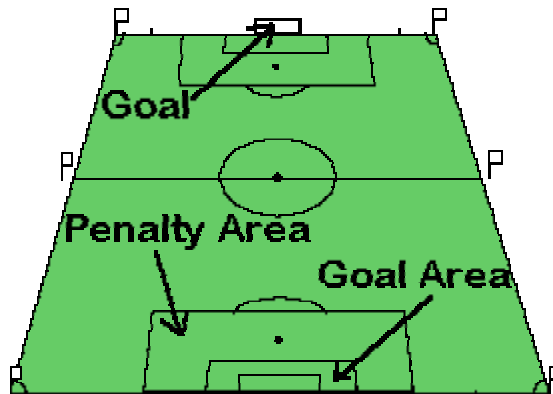
People are often confused over which goal is ours and which is theirs. Since these terms are used throughout this document, it is important that you have them straight. The goal we defend is our goal. Our goalkeeper stays near our goal to keep the opponents from scoring. Our goal is on our goal line, and is surrounded by our penalty area on our half of the field. The goal we attack is their goal.

The Simplified Laws Of Soccer

Laws 1 through 6 describe the game environment. (The field is rectangular, the ball is a sphere, each team has 11 players in jerseys and shinguards, and there is a referee and two assistant referees.)

Law 1. The Field of Play

A typical soccer field is shown here. The rectangle nearest the goal is the goal area. The larger rectangle outside the goal area is the penalty area. The lines on the ends of the field are called goal lines. The lines on the sides of the field are called touch lines.



More About Law 1

The penalty area has three uses.

- The goalkeeper may touch the ball with hands or arms when inside the penalty area.
- Direct free kicks become penalty kicks when a [major foul](#) occurs inside the fouling team's penalty area.
- Free kicks taken by a team inside its own penalty area (including goal kicks) must leave the penalty area before being touched a second time. In addition, all opponents must be outside of the penalty area during these free kicks.

The goal area has four uses.

- All goal kicks are taken from inside the goal area.
- No player may [charge](#) the goalkeeper if the goalkeeper is in the goal area without the ball.
- Free kicks taken by a team inside its own goal area (including goal kicks) may be placed anywhere inside the goal area, not just where the infraction occurred.
- Indirect free kicks awarded to a team inside the opponent's goal area, and all [drop balls](#) inside the goal area, are brought to the top boundary (6-yard line) before being kicked.

The halfway line across the middle of the field has two uses.

- During the kickoff, each team must remain on its own side of the halfway line until the ball is kicked into play.
- A player cannot be offside if on his team's side of the halfway line.

The circle in the center of the field is called the center circle. During the kickoff, every member of the non-kicking team must stay outside of the center circle until the ball is kicked into play.

The partial circles in the corners of the field are called the corner areas. The ball is placed in the nearest corner area when a team is awarded a corner kick.

The partial circle at the top of the penalty area is called the penalty arc. During penalty kicks, all players from both teams, except the kicker, must be outside of the arc until the ball is kicked.

The small spot inside the penalty area is the penalty kick mark. The ball is set on the penalty kick mark for penalty kicks.

Even More About Law 1

The length of a soccer field may vary from 100 to 130 yards. The width may vary from 50 to 100 yards. None of the other field measurements are quite as variable as the width and length. However, all dimensions may be made smaller for younger soccer players.

Lines are not wider than 5 inches.

The goal posts are 8 yards apart and not more than 5 inches thick.

The back of the goal post should line up with the back of the goal line.

The bottom of the crossbar is 8 feet above the ground.

The goal area extends 6 yards out from the goal line, and is 20 yards wide.

The penalty area extends 18 yards out from the goal line, and is 44 yards wide.

The center circle is at the exact center of the field, with a radius of 10 yards.

The corner areas are centered on the corners of the field and each has a radius of 1 yard.

The circular penalty kick mark has its center 12 yards from the goal line and is 9 inches in diameter.

The penalty arcs are centered on the penalty kick marks and each has a radius of 10 yards.

At the higher levels of soccer, the players, coaches, and other team officials are constrained by an area near the sideline known as the [Technical Area](#).

Click [FIFA](#) for the official FIFA version of Law 1.

Law 2. The Ball

Soccer balls come in three sizes. Older children and adults use size 5 soccer balls. Medium children use size 4. Small children use size 3.

More About Law 2

The size of a soccer ball (3, 4, or 5) is usually printed on the ball. Size 3 balls have a circumference of 23 to 24 inches. Size 4 is 25 to 26 inches and size 5 is 27 to 28 inches.

Click [FIFA](#) for the official FIFA version of Law 2.

Law 3. Number of Players

Older children play with eleven players from each team on the field, one of whom is the goalkeeper. Lower ages often use fewer players.

More About Law 3

If a player on the field is tired or injured, the coach may want to substitute a player from the sidelines for the tired or injured player. Most youth leagues use **free substitution**. This means that a team may use as many "subs" as their roster allows, and players leaving the field may return to the game later.

Substitutions are allowed only when the ball is out of play. The usual substitution opportunities in youth soccer leagues are

- before a throw-in by the substituting team
- before a goal kick by either team
- after a goal is scored
- at half-time
- after an injury.

Substitutions are usually not allowed before

- throw-ins by the opponent
- corner kicks by either team
- free kicks due to law violations.

The minimum number of players needed to begin a game is determined by each league. Usually it is 7 or 8 players. The referee should attempt to start the game on schedule, but may wait up to 15 minutes for more players to arrive if either team has too few players.

Opinion on Law 3

Unfortunately, a player shortage is quite likely to occur in the lowest levels of youth soccer. Family vacations, school events, and summer camp are just a few of the reasons for a child being unable to attend a game. Some coaches are willing to put a full squad of eleven on the field against opponents unable to show up with that many. At the lowest, non-competitive levels of soccer this should never be allowed to happen. Using eleven players against eight defies the basic rule of soccer that nobody should gain an advantage except through superior abilities. "Numbers up" is not the same as having superior abilities.

The coach of a team that greatly outnumbers the opponents should volunteer to play fewer players to keep the numbers equal. The short-handed coach is not required to accept the offer, but should at least be given the choice. Similarly, it is not proper for a team with twenty-two players to replace every player on the field with rested players at each substitution opportunity. This slows down the game and reflects poorly on the intentions of the coach.

Click [\[FIFA\]](#) for the official FIFA version of Law 3.

Law 4. Players Equipment

A soccer team must wear matching jerseys, except the goalkeeper, who must wear a contrasting jersey. Shin guards are required for all players.

More About Law 4

Each soccer jersey should have a number on the back. Use of the same jersey number by two players on the same team is prohibited. There are no rules regarding the color of socks, shoes, or shorts. Coaches prefer that each team have matching socks to make teammates easier to find in tight quarters.

Goalkeepers often wear gloves to make catching the ball easier. Because of the large amount of contact with the ground, goalkeepers may also wear small amounts of padding on their knees, hips, elbows, and shoulders. A goalkeeper who occasionally dives near the goal posts may decide to wear a lightweight helmet. All of these should be allowed by youth soccer leagues, but rules may vary.

Even More About Law 4

Most referees disapprove of players wearing hats during a game, except possibly stocking caps on a Minnesota autumn evening. All referees disapprove of all jewelry, including earrings, necklaces, chains, pins, watches, bracelets, rings, and hard hair barrettes. Wire-rimmed glasses, and other glasses without a safety strap are also prohibited. Medical ID bracelets are allowed, but may be covered with tape or a wrist band. Local rules may prohibit boxer shorts or other long shorts sticking out from under a player's soccer shorts.

In all soccer leagues, shin guards should be required for all players. The most common soccer injuries, by far, are to the legs, and a little protection from shin guards goes a long way. If your soccer league does not require shin guards, international soccer law encourages you to ask that it be added as a requirement.

Like shin guards, cleats are strongly recommended and often required.

Click [\[FIFA\]](#) for the official FIFA version of Law 4.

Law 5. Referees

The referee is the person carrying a whistle. Sometimes there are 2 referees on the field, but usually there is 1 referee and 2 assistant referees.

More About Law 5

The referee must be extremely familiar with the laws of soccer, including the variations used by the leagues in which he or she will be working. Anyone interested in becoming a certified referee must attend a class offered by the United States Soccer Federation (USSF) or a similar governing body. Besides discussing the laws and the official referee uniform, these classes cover the special duties and responsibilities taken on by the referee, as follows:

The referee must

- stop play for law violations, unless the violating team gains an [advantage](#) by stopping play
- approve the ball and player's equipment
- signal for start of play after all stoppages
- keep track of time and score
- award [cautions](#) ([yellow cards](#)) and [ejections](#) ([red cards](#)) to any deserving player
- keep everyone off the field except players and assistant referees
- watch for injuries

The referee has the authority to [suspend](#) or [terminate](#) a game for weather, spectator interference, or almost any other cause. Complete control of the game begins at the instant the referee walks onto the field before the game.

Click [\[FIFA\]](#) for the official FIFA version of Law 5.

Law 6. Assistant Referees

The assistant referee is the person carrying a flag, but no whistle. Assistant referees stay on the side of the field and help the referee by signaling with the flag when the ball leaves the field or when they see someone breaking the law.

More About Law 6

Though the assistant referees should wear the officially sanctioned referee uniform (shirt with cuffs and collar, shorts, socks with striped tops, and shoes), their duties and responsibilities are considerably less than those of the referee. The duties of an assistant referee consist of using a flag to indicate to the referee

- when the ball is out of play
- which team is entitled to bring it back into play
- when an offside penalty has occurred
- when a foul has occurred which the ref may have failed to see
- when a substitution is desired.

An assistant referee who is also a sanctioned referee and has been assigned by the league to officiate a game is known as a **neutral assistant referee**. An assistant referee provided by one of the teams involved in the game is called a **club assistant referee**. Though the referee may allow a club assistant referee to have some freedom of expression, it is recommended that club assistant referees be allowed to indicate when the ball is out of play, and leave all other decisions to the referee. Neutral assistant referees are expected to perform all tasks listed above.

In all cases, the referee may choose to ignore or overrule signals given by assistant referees.

Until July of 1996, assistant referees were known as linesmen, or more casually as lines (as in "The ref was okay but the lines were idiots."). It's a sure bet that you will continue to hear the terms "lines" and "linesman" for at least the next few years, until everyone gets used to the change.

FIFA has also recently added a fourth official for high level competitions. This person is known officially as "[The Fourth Official](#)," and gets a whole separate section in the FIFA law book.

Opinion on Law 6

One common problem in youth soccer is the tendency for league organizers to say, "The players are only 7 years old, so an 11-year-old referee will do just fine." Unfortunately, most 11-year-old referees lack the temperament and knowledge of rules necessary to be able to handle a game alone. Soccer for the smallest children must include an overview of the basic laws. A referee who is unsure of the laws of the game will surely confuse the players, making the game more difficult for the children we most want to see enjoying themselves. Teens make great assistant referees, because they understand the concept of "ball out of play" and have the coordination to raise a flag when necessary. But let them have a few years of experience

Introduction to Youth Soccer

A Handbook for Players, Parents, and Coaches



carrying that flag before you expect them to take control of the game as a referee. Give your youngest players the best referees possible.

In many cases, the coaches are also the referees. If at all possible, these coaches should attend an official refereeing class. Even if they don't pay the fees and don't take the final exam, just taking the class may help these coaches when it comes time to apply the laws during a game.

Click [\[FIFA\]](#) for the official FIFA version of Law 6.

Laws 7 through 10 describe the game mechanics. (The game lasts 90 minutes, beginning with a kickoff, the ball is sometimes out of play, and points are scored for goals.)

Law 7. Duration of the Game

Soccer games are played in two equal halves with a 5 to 15 minute rest between halves. Each half lasts 45 minutes for older children. Younger children use shorter halves. The lowest ages often play games in 4 short quarters.

More About Law 7

The most common game times for each age group are

- U18 45 minutes
- U16 40 minutes
- U14 35 minutes
- U12 30 minutes
- U10 25 minutes
- U8 10-12 minute quarters

The rule of thumb for game time is that the entire game lasts 5 times the age level. For example, 5 times 12 equals 60 minutes for a full U12 game, or 30 minutes per half. (And you thought there wasn't going to be any math...)

Even More About Law 7

The two halves of a soccer game should be of equal length. This means that the referee cannot shorten the second half due to impending darkness. Either the game should be continued into the darkness, or it should be [suspended](#) and completed at a later date.

The referee may add time at the end of a half equal to the time lost during substitutions or injuries. Time wasted by either team may also be added at the end of a half. In any case, the time should be added to the half during which time was lost. Time may be extended in either half to permit a penalty kick.

Opinion on Law 7

Time wasting can take several forms. A ball kicked into the street or parking lot may take extra time to retrieve; time which should be added to the end of the half. Players and coaches can intentionally waste time when the ball is out of play, though this is usually only done by a team that is leading in the closing minutes of a game. Time wasting techniques include excessive subbing, walking slowly to retrieve an out-of-play ball, etc. The goalkeeper can waste time simply by standing still and holding the ball. The referee should be able to recognize these tactics as time wasting and must be willing to add extra time at the end of the half. However, the ref should also be aware that, to a team trailing by a goal in the final minute of the game, everything looks like time wasting. As always, the ref's decisions should not be swayed by the opinions of any player, coach, or spectator.

Click [\[FIFA\]](#) for the official FIFA version of Law 7.

Law 8. The Start of Play

At the start of each half and after each goal, play is restarted with a kickoff. The ball is placed in the exact center of the field and a player kicks the ball. A coin toss determines which team will be allowed to kick the ball to start the first half of play. The opposite team will kick off to start the second half.

More About Law 8

At the kickoff, all players on each team must be on their own half of the field. Players on the non-kicking team must be at least 10 yards from the ball. The center circle marks the ten yards. Players on the kicking team may stand anywhere on their half, including inside the center circle.

The ball must be kicked forward, either straight or diagonally, so it rolls off the halfway line and onto the opponent's half of the field. The kicker may touch the ball only once, and a second player may touch the ball only after the ball rolls over once. In the FIFA law book, this is called "traveling a distance equal to its own circumference." Because the kicking team wants to keep possession of the ball, the first kick is usually to a teammate, who then passes backward to another teammate in a safer location, or forward to a teammate running onto the opponent's half of the field.

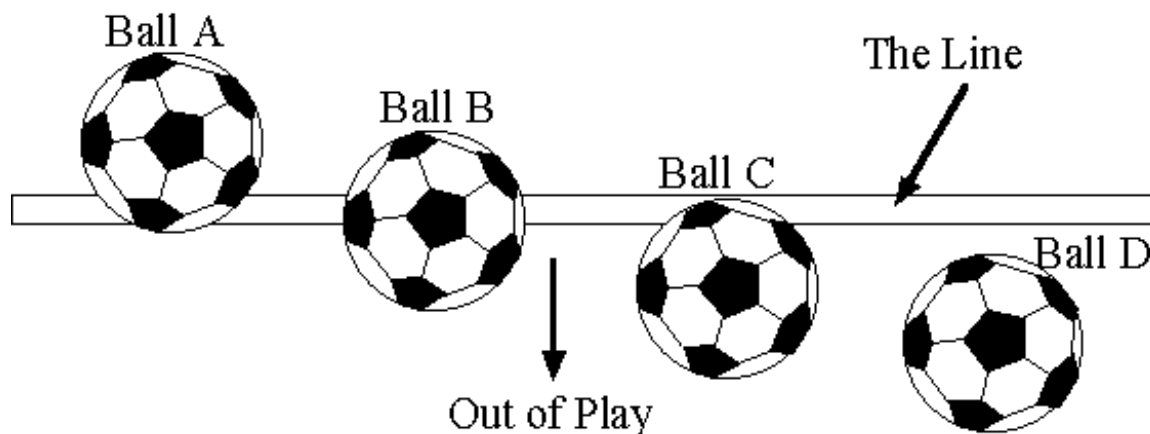
Click [FIFA](#) for the official FIFA version of Law 8.

Law 9. Ball In and Out of Play

The ball is out of play when the referee blows the whistle to stop play, or when the ball goes completely across a goal line or touch line.

More About Law 9

The ball is not out of play until all of the ball has passed over all of the line. In the following picture, balls A, B, and C are still in play because they have not completely crossed the line. Ball D is the only one that is out of play.



Out of play is also known as in touch, because that is when the ball may be touched with the hands. You will often see players using their hands to move the ball before taking a free kick. This is legal because the ball is in touch.

The rule about all of the ball crossing all of the line applies to every line on the field. Each line is considered a part of the area it surrounds. When the rule states that a goal kick must be taken from inside the goal area, this implies that no part of the ball should extend outside of any goal area boundary. Similarly, a free kick taken from inside the penalty area has not left the penalty area until it has completely crossed the penalty area boundary.

Opinion on Law 9

The referee should not sound the whistle every time the ball leaves the field. It is usually obvious to everyone when the ball is out of bounds, and the whistle is unnecessary. The whistle should be used to stop play when the ball is on the field; say, for an injury or foul. Occasionally, a player will continue kicking the ball after it is slightly out of bounds, either because he doesn't know it went out, or because he hopes the officials did not see it. If an assistant referee or referee believes that the ball was out of bounds, the referee should sound the whistle to stop play.

Click [\[FIFA\]](#) for the official FIFA version of Law 9.

Law 10. Method of Scoring

A goal is scored when the ball goes completely across the goal line, between the goal posts and under the crossbar.

More About Law 10

A goal may not be scored directly from a kickoff, goal kick, throw-in, or indirect free kick.

As with the ball going out of bounds, a goal is not scored unless all of the ball crosses all of the goal line. A shot that is stopped on the goal line is not a goal. Also, a goal is not counted if it is scored by a player doing something illegal. If the ball is intentionally propelled by the hand, or shot by a player who was in an offside position when the ball was passed to them, the goal is not counted.

(One of history's most controversial goals was scored by Diego Maradona of Argentina during the 1986 World Cup. Maradona reached his hand up to shoulder height and slapped the ball past England's goalkeeper. The referee, who was either distracted or unwilling to believe Maradona would forsake his incredible dribbling skills for such nonsense, counted it as a goal. Argentina won the match and the World Cup. Though the video replay clearly showed a handball violation, Maradona insisted it never happened. He suggested that maybe it was "the hand of God.")

If the ball goes directly into the goal from a kickoff, throw in, goal kick, or indirect free kick, the goal is not counted in the score. Instead, the ball is brought back into play as if the ball had gone over the goal line but outside the goal posts, with either a goal kick or a corner kick.

Opinion on Law 10

A goal is not counted unless one of the game officials is absolutely certain the ball was across the goal line, between the posts and below the crossbar. This is where a properly secured net is very helpful. With no net, or a loose net, it is often impossible for officials to decide if the ball passed inside or outside the goal post, or above or below the crossbar. All youth soccer should be played with nets whenever possible. Besides making it easier for the officials, the children love to see and hear the ball rip into the strings of the net.

A goal must never be counted because "it would have been a goal if..." For example, it is common for 6-year-old defenders to knock down high shots with their arms or hands. In many cases, it would have been a goal if the defender hadn't done that. But, if the ball did not go into the goal, it should not be counted as a goal. The attacking team may be awarded a penalty kick, but should never be given a non-scored goal which "would have been good if..."

Click [\[FIFA\]](#) for the official FIFA version of Law 10.

Laws 11 through 14 describe fouls and their punishments (offside, major and minor fouls, and the free kicks that result.)

Law 11. Offside

This law discourages attackers from waiting around in front of the goal for teammates to send the ball forward to them. A player on the attacking team is offside if he goes past the second-to-last opponent before the ball does. A poem for remembering the offside rule...

A player who's past the second-to-last
will be offside when the ball is passed.

More About Law 11

A player is in an offside position (perfectly legal) if there are fewer than two opponents between the player and the opponent's goal line. That is, the player is "past the second-to-last" opponent. (The last opponent is usually the goalkeeper.) A player is offside (illegal) if he is in an offside position when the ball is passed forward to him by a teammate.

Five important points to remember about offside:

Offside is judged at the exact instant the ball is passed. Officials often listen for the thud of the foot meeting the ball as it is passed forward. The attacker may move to an offside position after the thud, but not before.

Even is onside. This means that the attacker who is even with the second-to-last defender is not in an offside position.

An attacker is never in an offside position if he is on his own half of the field or if the ball is closer to the opponent's goal line than he is.

An attacker may never be declared offside when receiving the ball from a throw-in, corner kick, goal kick, or an opponent.

A player is not offside unless a teammate releases control of the ball to him. If the teammate dribbles or shoots the ball to the goal line, there should be no offside call.

Even More About Law 11

The offside call is based on one fact and one opinion.

Fact: Is the player in an offside position?

Opinion: Is the player interfering with play or an opponent, or attempting to gain advantage at the moment the ball is kicked by a teammate?

If the referee or assistant referee thinks both questions are answered "yes," then the player is declared offside and the other team is awarded an indirect free kick.

Answering the "fact" question is easy. Observe how near the attacker is to the goal line being attacked. Next, count how many opponents are nearer to that goal line. If there are one or zero opponents nearer,

then the player is in an offside position. When there are two or more opponents, the attacker is not in an offside position.

The "opinion" question is trickier. If the ball is passed directly to an attacker, then that attacker is involved in active play. What if the ball is passed 20 yards away? Referee manuals always have chapters devoted to offside scenarios, and game officials should be trained to correctly evaluate "interfering or attempting to gain advantage." The subject is too complicated for this document.

The assistant referee should stay even with the second-to-last defender for nearly the entire game, leaving that defender only when watching lines during goal kicks. By staying even with the defender, it is easy to determine whether any attacker is in an offside position. With one ear open for the thud of the oncoming pass, the assistant referee will find it much easier to make offside calls.

Click [\[FIFA\]](#) for even more information on Law 11.

Law 12. Fouls and Misconduct

There are 4 levels of punishment for law breakers.

- An indirect free kick will be given to a team whose opponents commit a [minor foul](#).
- A direct free kick will be given to a team whose opponents commit a [major foul](#).
- A [caution](#) will be given to a player who [irritates the referee](#) too much.
- An [ejection](#) will be given to a player who disregards the [spirit of the game](#).

More About Law 12

Most soccer leagues include a fifth level of punishment; the verbal warning. The referee simply tells a team member that one of their players is being irritating or disregarding the spirit of the game, and that the player will be "carded" if it continues. Play need not be stopped for a verbal warning.

Anytime a player is given a [yellow card \(caution\)](#) or [red card \(ejection\)](#), the other team restarts play with an indirect free kick, unless the card is due to a major foul, making it a direct free kick.

Click [\[FIFA\]](#) for the official FIFA version of Law 12.

Law 13. Free Kick

A team taking a free kick is given a single kick of the ball without interference from opponents. On a direct free kick, the kicking team may score a goal directly from the kick. On an indirect free kick, the ball must be touched by at least two players before going into the goal.

More About Law 13

The referee indicates an indirect free kick with an upraised arm, like the letter I in indirect. A direct free kick is indicated by pointing in the direction the kick is to be taken.

Indirect free kicks, direct free kicks, and penalty kicks are the three free kicks used as punishment for fouls and misconduct. Goal kicks, corner kicks, and kickoffs are also free kicks. All six types of free kicks are governed by the [rules of free kicks](#).

The player taking a direct or indirect free kick may decide to kick the ball before the opponents have moved ten yards away. This is called a quick kick. It is considered [ungentlemanly](#) for opponents to stay intentionally closer than ten yards from the ball, and they may be punished with a [caution](#). Nevertheless, it is bound to happen eventually. If the kicker wants the opponents to move farther away, the kicker should ask the referee for "ten yards, please." At this point, it often becomes a ceremonial kick. The referee signals for the kicker to wait, moves the opponents ten yards away, and then signals for the kick to be taken. Usually this wastes time, slows down the game, and takes away any element of surprise gained by the quick kick.

The Rules of Free Kicks

Indirect free kicks, direct free kicks, and penalty kicks are the three free kicks used as punishment for fouls and misconduct. Goal kicks, corner kicks, and kickoffs are also free kicks. All six types of free kicks are governed by the following restrictions.

The ball must be stopped completely before being kicked.

All players on the non-kicking team must be at least ten yards from the ball. If the ball is less than ten yards from the goal, the non-kicking team may stand on its own goal line between the goal posts.

If a free kick is taken from inside the kicking team's penalty area, all opponents must leave the penalty area.

The ball is not in play until it rolls over once. A free kick taken by a team from inside its own penalty area is not in play until the ball leaves the penalty area.

Immediately after the ball is in play, the kicker may not touch it again unless it is first touched by some other player. If the kicker touches the ball a second time, the opponents are awarded an indirect free kick.

Click [\[FIFA\]](#) for the official FIFA version of Law 13.

Law 14. Penalty Kick

Direct free kicks awarded in the fouling team's penalty area become penalty kicks. The ball is set on the penalty kick spot, twelve yards from the goal. Everyone leaves the penalty area except the kicker and the goalkeeper. The kicker tries to score a goal with a single kick, and the goalkeeper tries to prevent that.

More About Law 14

The penalty kick is a direct free kick, and follows all the [rules of free kicks](#) with a few changes. Everyone from both teams, except the kicker and goalkeeper, must be at least 10 yards from the ball and outside the penalty area. The goalkeeper must stand with both feet on the goal line and may not lift either foot off the line until the ball is kicked. Once the ball is in play, everyone may move into the penalty area to try to kick the ball in case it rebounds off the goal post or keeper.

Even More About Law 14

If any player from either team breaks a law before or during a penalty kick, the kick may be retaken, as long as retaking the kick does not give an [advantage](#) to the law breaker. For example, if the goalkeeper lifts one foot before the kick is taken, and the kicker misses, the kicker will be given another try. If the goalkeeper lifts one foot but the kicker scores anyway, the kick will not be retaken. Retaking the kick would be penalizing the kicker, who might miss the next shot.

The decision to allow a second penalty kick is based on whether the law was broken before or during the kick, by the kicking or non-kicking team or both, and whether a goal was scored on the first kick or not. Before the season, referees should analyze all possible situations and decide what should be done in every case. They will then have this knowledge handy when it comes up in a game.

Click [\[FIFA\]](#) for the official FIFA version of Law 14.

Laws 15 through 17 describe what happens when the ball leaves the field (throw-ins when the ball leaves the side of the field, and goal kicks or corner kicks when the ball leaves the end of the field.)

Law 15. Throw-in

If a team sends the ball over a touch line, the opponents bring it back into play with a throw-in. A player holds the ball behind his head, then throws the ball onto the field by bringing it over the top of his head, using both hands. Both feet must be touching the ground on or outside the touch line as the ball is thrown.

More About Law 15

After throwing the ball, the thrower may not touch it a second time until it has been played by another player from either team. If the thrower violates this law, the other team is given an indirect free kick.

The ball is in play as soon as any part of the ball crosses any part of the touch line. If the ball does not go into play during the throw, the throw-in is retaken by the same team.

A player cannot be declared offside if receiving the ball directly from a throw-in, and a goal may not be scored directly from a throw-in.

Even More About Law 15

If a throw-in is declared illegal, the other team is awarded a throw-in from the same location. Things that make a throw-in illegal are:

- Picking up either foot while throwing
- Throwing with only one hand
- Not starting with the ball behind the head
- Throwing from the wrong place on the touch line
- Not bringing the ball forward over the top of the head
- Having one or both feet entirely on the field during the throw.

Less knowledgeable officials sometimes declare a throw-in illegal, even though it was just poorly executed. Examples of undesirable but legal habits include:

- Adding spin to the ball
- Turning the upper body to face a teammate, while the lower body points elsewhere
- Picking up either heel while keeping the toe on the ground.

These actions are legal and often useful. However, there are better ways to execute throw-ins, and the coach should try to correct bad habits as quickly as possible.

Click [\[FIFA\]](#) for the official FIFA version of Law 15.

Law 16. Goal Kick

If a team sends the ball over its opponent's goal line, the opponents bring it back into play with a goal kick. The ball is placed inside the goal area and kicked out of the penalty area.

More About Law 16

The goal kick is just another free kick, and follows all the [rules of free kicks](#) with slight modifications. Before taking the kick, the kicker must wait for all opponents to leave the penalty area. The players on the kicking team may stand where they like, though they usually also leave the penalty area. One player from the kicking team often stays near the goal to help block a shot in case the goal kick goes to an opponent.

A player cannot be offside if receiving the ball directly from a goal kick, and a goal may not be scored directly from a goal kick.

Click [\[FIFA\]](#) for the official FIFA version of Law 16.

Law 17. Corner Kick

If a team sends the ball over its own goal line, the opponents bring it back into play with a corner kick. The kicking team takes a direct free kick from the nearest corner area.

More About Law 17

A corner kick is just another free kick and follows all the [rules of free kicks](#). The kicker is not allowed to move the corner marker. A player cannot be offside if receiving the ball directly from a corner kick and a goal may be scored directly from a corner kick.

The corner kick is one of the best scoring opportunities a team will have. It is a chance to plan ahead on how to get the ball in front of the goal with several attackers ready to score. Coaching manuals cover many options for handling corner kicks. For the youngest players, getting the ball into play may be a sizable task. But as players mature they can practice set plays, making them more comfortable in the high pressure of a corner kick.

Click [FIFA](#) for the official FIFA version of Law 17.

Definitions of Some Soccer Terms

Advantage Clause

The advantage clause says that a referee may choose to ignore a foul if calling it would give an advantage to the offending team.

More About the Advantage Clause

For example, a defender tries to intentionally trip an oncoming dribbler. The dribbler manages to stay upright and dribbles past the defender toward the goal. Even though there was an attempted trip (a [major foul](#)), stopping play by calling the foul would bring the ball away from the goal and stop a possible scoring attack. That would give advantage to the offending team.

Because the advantage clause usually comes up when the game is running at top speed, the referee has only a split second to decide who has the advantage and if calling the foul would change that. When invoking the advantage clause, the referee should say "Play on" and give a hand signal to let the players know that the foul was seen but will not be immediately penalized. If the advantage fails to appear in the two to three seconds after the ref signals to play on, the referee may then call the foul anyway.

Caution

A player who [irritates the referee](#) is given a caution. A second caution to an individual player is usually an [ejection](#). The referee displays a [yellow card](#) to indicate a caution.

More About Cautions

Whereas [major](#) and [minor](#) fouls are called only when the ball is in play, cautions and ejections can be given anytime, including before the game and at half-time. When a player is pushed, play is stopped for a direct free kick. If the pushed player decides to retaliate by pushing back, he cannot be penalized for pushing because the ball was not in play. However, he can be cautioned for [ungentlemanly conduct](#).

Charging

Charging is a soccer term, not at all related to the type of charging done by bulls or shoppers. If one player puts a shoulder against an opponent's shoulder, he may then push against the opponent to try to cause loss of balance. This is called a legal charge.

More About Charging

The initial contact of a shoulder-to-shoulder charge must be gentle. It is as if a player "cozies up" to another, makes solid but gentle contact, and then suddenly leans hard to push the opponent off balance or off the ball. All of this is done while running, and both players must be running in the same direction for a shoulder charge to be possible.

Because the law uses the word "shoulder," it is legal to use any part of the shoulder (front, side, or back) to push against any part of the opponent's shoulder (front, side, or back.) If the push is as far back as the shoulder blade or spine, it becomes a [major foul](#); charging from behind. If the body, hips, arms, or legs make contact during the charge, it becomes another major foul; pushing. If the initial contact is not "cozy" enough, it is a violent charge.

The use of the word "charge" seems to confuse a lot of soccer fans, who usually associate it with running at full speed, possibly ending with a collision. This is not the case in soccer. A soccer charge is a "gentle", controlled push.

Dangerous Play

A player is guilty of dangerous play if he kicks as high as the chest of a nearby opponent or tries to kick the ball out of the goalkeeper's hands.

More About Dangerous Play

Though kicking high is legal, doing so with other players nearby is not. The officials must decide if a high kick was near enough to another player (teammate or opponent) to be dangerous.

In the past, kicking the ball while lying on the ground was considered dangerous play. This was based on the premise that the player on the ground was putting himself in danger of being kicked. However, this would imply that a person standing up and kicking the ball is also putting himself in danger. Since kicking while standing is not called dangerous play, neither should kicking while lying down. However, players falling down in traffic should be taught to curl up and hide as much as possible until the ball leaves the area.

Opinion on Dangerous Play

As players get into higher levels of soccer, some become adept at committing intentional fouls and making them appear accidental. Others can appear to have been intentionally fouled by an opponent, even though they weren't. Though these might be useful skills in the most serious, competitive soccer, such habits should be discouraged at all levels of youth soccer. In addition to being of questionable ethical value, there is a good chance a player will hurt himself or other players while performing these acts on the field. This may be considered dangerous play by the officials.

Drop Ball

The drop ball is most often used to restart play after injuries not caused by fouls. The referee simply drops the ball onto the field and the ball is in play once it hits the ground.

More About the Drop Ball

No law specifies the number of players near the spot where the ball is dropped, or whether there should be anyone there at all. It is up to each team to decide where they want to be during a drop ball. The laws of soccer allow them to be anywhere they like. However, a drop ball is commonly taken with one player from each team standing ready to kick the ball as soon as it hits the ground. If a player kicks a drop ball before it hits the ground, the player should be [cautioned](#) and the drop ball should be retaken.

Like free kicks, drop balls are never taken inside the goal area. Instead, the ball is brought to the top of the goal area, six yards from the goal line, before it is dropped.

Ejection

A player given an ejection is permanently removed from the game. An ejected player is not replaced by a substitute. The team plays shorthanded. The referee displays a [red card](#) to indicate an ejection.

Ejections can be given for:

- Violent conduct or serious foul play
- Use of foul or abusive language
- Persistent misconduct after a [caution](#) ([yellow card](#))

More About Ejections

Whereas [major](#) and [minor](#) fouls are called only when the ball is in play, cautions and ejections can be given anytime, including before the game and at half-time. When a player is pushed, play is stopped for a direct free kick. If the pushed player decides to retaliate by pushing back, he cannot be penalized for pushing because the ball was not in play. However, he can be cautioned for [ungentlemanly conduct](#).

Irritating the Referee

Referees are easily irritated. Here are some of their main irritants.

- Players entering or leaving the field without referee permission
- Players persistently breaking the laws of the game
- Players dissenting (by word or action) referee decisions
- Players displaying [ungentlemanly conduct](#)

More About Irritating the Referee

Players who are too irritating are [cautioned](#) (given a [yellow card](#).)

A team wanting substitution should wait for permission from the referee before sending new players onto the field. Failure to get permission may cause one or more substituting players to be [cautioned](#). Non-players should never enter the field.

A referee who thinks a team is committing too many fouls may become irritated. It does not have to be the same player each time, or even the same law being broken.

Opinion on Irritating the Referee

Dissenting a ref's decision is the most irritating act possible, because it is a direct insult to the skills of the officials. Any player dissenting a decision should be removed from the field by the coach at the earliest possible opportunity, and given a short lecture. Any coach dissenting a decision should be removed from the sidelines by team parents and given a short lecture. Any team parents or fans dissenting should be silenced by other team parents or fans, or the coach. There is no place in youth sports for dissent.

Major Fouls

There were once just nine major fouls. Recently, a tenth (spitting) has been added. They are most easily remembered if broken into groups as shown here.



More About Major Fouls

There are 2 major fouls committed with the feet; tripping and kicking. Moving upward, there are 3 major fouls committed with the body; [charging](#) violently, charging from behind, and jumping at an opponent. At the top, there are 5 major fouls committed with the hands, arms, and mouth; touching the ball (handball), holding, hitting, pushing, and spitting.

Major fouls can only be called when the ball is in play.

Most major fouls can be called if a player simply attempts to commit the foul. For example, attempted tripping is illegal. Attempted kicking, hitting, holding, and pushing are also major fouls. Attempted handball is not a major foul, but may be considered [ungentlemanly](#), for which the player is given a [caution](#). Jumping at an opponent is illegal if contact is made. Without contact, it might still be called [dangerous play](#), which is a [minor foul](#).

Even More About Major Fouls

As described elsewhere, a charge is a legal shoulder-to-shoulder push. Charging from behind means the push has become shoulder-to-spine. Charging violently means the initial contact was violent.

All major fouls must be intentional to be illegal. If a player raises an arm and knocks down the ball, or uses a hand to direct the ball, he is guilty of a major foul. If the ball accidentally hits an arm, the player is not guilty of handball and play should continue.

Opinion on Major Fouls

Committing a major foul while "going for the ball" is illegal. Players often complain to officials by saying, "I pushed (tripped, held, etc.) that opponent, but I was going for the ball," as if going for the ball means no foul was committed. Alternatively, you might hear, "The foul was called because he kicked the opponent before he kicked the ball." This implies that if the ball had been kicked first and the opponent second, there would have been no foul. That is not true. If a player pushes (kicks, trips, etc.) an opponent, then a major foul has been committed and the opponents are given a direct free kick.

Minor Fouls

There are five minor fouls:

- [dangerous play](#)
- [charging](#) fairly when the ball is not nearby
- [obstructing](#)
- charging the goalkeeper
- time wasting by the goalkeeper

More About Minor Fouls

Minor fouls may be called only when the ball is in play.

An opponent may stand directly in front of the goalkeeper who has possession of the ball, forcing the goalkeeper to hold the ball a bit longer before distributing the ball. If the goalkeeper moves away and the opponent moves in the same direction, the opponent is guilty of obstructing.

Even More About Minor Fouls

When the ball is in the goalkeeper's hands, the goalkeeper is allowed to bounce the ball on the ground or throw it into the air and catch it, but is limited to 8 seconds of possession. Once the ball is released from the goalkeeper's hands, it must be touched by another player before the goalkeeper may take the ball back into the hands again. (Technically, it must be touched by a teammate outside the penalty area, or an opponent anywhere.) If the goalkeeper violates either rule, it is considered time wasting, and the opponents take an indirect free kick.

In the past, teams wasted time by repeatedly passing the ball from a field player to the goalkeeper's hands and back again. This has now been outlawed. Goalkeepers may not use their hands on balls that were intentionally kicked to them by teammates. They may still use their feet, but using their hands is considered time wasting.

Similarly, a goalkeeper may not release the ball to the ground, roll it forward with the hand or foot, and then pick it up again without being charged with a minor foul.

Obstructing

A player putting his body between the ball and an opponent to keep the opponent from getting to the ball, while not within playing distance of the ball, is obstructing, which is illegal.

More About Obstructing

Obstructing is the least-called [minor foul](#) in youth soccer. This is because most youth players would rather play the ball than block an opponent. At advanced levels, players realize that it might sometimes be better to let the ball roll to a teammate than to play it. Obstructing may be an obvious -- though illegal -- means of letting the ball roll. Obstructing is legal if the ball is within playing distance, or if a player is chasing the ball and attempting to play it.

Because the obstructing law uses vague phrasing like "playing the ball," there is much debate over which situations require obstruction calls. As with the offside rule, the discussion is not within the scope of this document.

Overtime

In most soccer leagues, a game may end in a tie and then everyone goes home. In certain tournaments and playoffs the tied game goes into overtime. The teams play one or more extra periods, and the winner is the team scoring the most goals during the extra periods.

Opinion on Overtime

There are many different overtime systems currently in use, and creative new systems are being devised all the time. One of the current favorites for youth soccer is described here.

After the end of regulation time, the first overtime period lasts ten minutes. Each team plays with nine players, and they switch ends of the field five minutes into the ten-minute period. If it is still tied after ten minutes, the teams play a five-minute period with seven players per team. This five-minute period is repeated, switching ends of the field after each, until one team wins. The interesting twist to this system is that, except during penalty kicks, nobody on either team may play the ball with hands or arms. That is, there is no goalkeeper. If one team is given a penalty kick, the other team designates one player to act as a goalkeeper until the ball leaves the penalty area, at which time that player goes back to being a regular field player. This system rarely gets past the first overtime period.

One of the basic concepts of soccer is equality of opportunity. This means that each player on the team is given the same chance to perform as every other player. Also, each team in the game is given the same opportunities as the other. That is why the teams switch ends of the field at half-time, and why each half of the game lasts as long as the other and begins with a different team kicking off. For equality of opportunity, soccer overtime should never be played as sudden death (also known as golden goals), in which the game ends as soon as either team scores.

The team taking the kickoff to start overtime has a slight advantage since it has clear possession of the ball. The best way to erase that advantage is to play the full time designated for the overtime period, giving each team ample and equal time to gain possession of the ball.

Red Card

A red card is a card, colored red, that the referee holds in the air to indicate that a player has been [ejected](#).

Shootout

If a game is tied after [overtime](#), it often goes into a shootout. The teams take turns shooting penalty kicks -- one kicker against one goalkeeper -- until one team scores more goals than the other. The FIFA law book has a whole section on [shootout protocol](#).

Opinion on Shootouts

A shootout is widely considered a less-than-optimum way to end a soccer game. After ninety minutes of evenly matched soccer, the game suddenly switches to a contest of twelve-yard stationary shots, which have only a marginal relationship to the game of soccer. Since the game is to be determined by a single skill and an instant's luck, it would be just as logical to determine the winner by kicking for distance, running the fifty-yard dash, or doing throw-ins for accuracy. All are important soccer skills and have more bearing on an actual game than twelve-yard free shots.

Unfortunately, shootouts are a tradition that will not soon disappear. Some leagues have experimented with "moving shootouts," in which a lone attacker has a limited amount of time to dribble some distance toward a lone goalkeeper and try to shoot a goal. This is a good step toward introducing important soccer skills into shootouts, but doesn't go far enough. Modifying the overtime rules to provide more scoring opportunities may be the best way to avoid going into a shootout.

The Spirit of Soccer

All rules of soccer are intended to make for a safe, fair, and enjoyable game. That is the spirit of soccer. Any player who tries to disrupt that spirit can be [ejected](#) from the game (given a [red card](#)).

More About The Spirit of Soccer

Violent conduct may be called against a player whether the ball is in play or not. This includes violent sideline tantrums, and fighting during half-time. Throwing something at a person is considered violent conduct.

Serious foul play occurs when a regular foul (tripping, kicking, etc.) becomes blatant and dangerous.

Foul or abusive language should not be tolerated at any level of youth soccer. It is sometimes ignored at the highest level as long as it is not directed at another person.

Suspended Game

When the referee suspends the game, the clock stops and the game may be restarted later from the point at which it was stopped. A game might be suspended for a sudden cloudburst, and restarted as soon as the rain ends.

Tackling

In soccer, tackling means stealing the ball.

(Unfortunately, years of exposure to American football makes USA soccer fans associate the word tackling with violently knocking an opponent to the ground by holding or tripping them. In addition, announcers on televised soccer in the US have a tendency to only mention the word tackle when a tackle happens to make someone fall down, thus cementing in new viewers minds the relationship between tackling and falling down.)

Terminated Game

A terminated game may not be continued from the point of stoppage. If the league decides the game should be completed, it must be replayed in its entirety. A game may be terminated due to spectator interference, excessive violence, fan riots, etc.

More About Terminated Games

In case of a termination, the referee will submit a report to league officials. The report states the score and time of termination, along with an objective explanation of events leading up to the termination. The league officials will then determine if the game must be replayed, or if the listed score is the official result. In addition, the league will decide if any disciplinary action is to be taken. The referee is not allowed to give opinions or make suggestions on any of these subjects.

Ungentlemanly Conduct

Ungentlemanly conduct takes many forms, including shouting to startle or distract an opponent, attempting to block a throw-in, and playing the ball after the ref signals it out of play. In fact, ungentlemanly conduct is used to cover just about every [irritating](#) activity not covered by the official laws of soccer.

Yellow Card

A yellow card is a card, colored yellow, that the referee holds in the air to indicate that a player has been cautioned.

My Soccer Philosophy

Soccer players are expected to do the following:

- Participate at your own level and pace.
- If you don't understand, ask. It is a great way to improve yourself.
- Tell your coach and parents about any injuries. Be aware of what your body is telling you.
- Appreciate children of all abilities.
- Give your best effort at all times.

Soccer players are expected to believe the following:

- I am important because I am here.
- I have my own reasons for being here.
- I can improve my performance by improving my attitude.
- My teammates and my opponents are children just like me. There are no enemies in youth sports.

Soccer parents are expected to do the following:

- Support your child's goals, but keep them separate from your own.
- Show your child respect and compassion based on who they are, not what they do.
- Listen to your child. I mean really listen. Listen to what they are saying, understand it, and act on it.
- Teach your child that we are all responsible for ourselves. Luck, fate, officials, and teammates have no responsibilities in our outcomes.
- Change negative patterns between you and your child.
- Your actions have an impact on your child. Control yourself.

Soccer parents are expected to believe the following:

- Your child is unique, possessing their own special gifts and developing at their own pace.
- The scoreboard does not measure a child's worth.
- The child's well-being comes before everything.
- Youth sports should enhance a child's life, not dominate it.
- Pressure to excel is wasted energy.
- Each child on both teams is as unique and important as your own, and deserving of the same respect.

Soccer coaches are expected to do the following:

- Teach the children that they are responsible for their own outcomes.
- Help each child to set, work toward, and accomplish their own goals.
- Teach the parents that youth sports is a learning experience for everyone.
- Promote good, honest communication between parent, child, and coach.
- Answer all questions completely and honestly. Askers are just trying to improve themselves.

Soccer coaches are expected to believe the following:

- Each child must set their own goals, separate from the goals of parents, peers, and coaches.
- Everyone is responsible for their own outcome.
- There is power in doing. The child deserves more respect every time they try.
- Mistakes are only lessons that make us better.
- There are no weaknesses, only lessons we have yet to learn.
- Doing your best is a victory itself. Victory without best effort is empty.
- Competence creates cooperation. Cooperation creates confidence.

Soccer Parents FAQ

Coaches and administrators of youth sports are asked a lot of questions by the parents putting children in sports. Several of the most Frequently Asked Questions are listed here, along with the answers you should expect to hear from a good youth sports organization.

- [Should my child be in organized sports?](#)
- [Which sport should I choose?](#)
- [At what level should I get involved in the program?](#)
- [Will my child be around kids of the same age, or size, or what?](#)
- [What should I do to prepare for organized soccer?](#)
- [What should I do during the soccer season?](#)
- [What should I do before each game?](#)
- [What should I do while attending a game?](#)
- [What should I do after attending a game?](#)
- [What should I do after all games, whether I attend or not?](#)
- [What should I do throughout the year?](#)
- [What if my child finds he or she dislikes soccer?](#)

Should my child be in organized sports?

This most basic question about youth sports should be considered carefully. Notice that you are not deciding whether your child should be physically active. I will categorically state, and there is substantial proof, that physical activity is beneficial to everyone. Your child should absolutely, positively be involved in physical activity.

Children love to play. They can easily spend several hours chasing each other in circles, climbing trees, or skipping rope. This is called free play and all children love it. Adults can analyze it to death, claiming it gives kids a better sense of their body, teaches social skills, and makes them better citizens. The kids don't care about all that. They play because it is fun.

In the late 1940s, some adults noticed that children were learning baseball and football skills during free play, by watching older, more skilled players. This was about the time that Americans began believing "Faster is Better", so they decided to streamline the way kids learned sports. They set up local leagues, bought all the proper equipment, and recruited coaches who could teach skills in a short time. These leagues developed into Little League Baseball and Pop Warner Football, and thus began organized play in America.

Originally an enhancement to free play, organized play is now seen as a substitute for it. Social structures have changed considerably since the 1940s. Neighbors no longer recognize each other's names, much less their children. A trip to the park, once a carefree way to spend an afternoon, has become a dangerous undertaking in many areas. Fragmented and over-worked families find they have much less time to devote to the pleasures of playtime. One result of these changes is that it is impossible for a group of kids to put together a full-scale baseball or soccer game on their own, and many rely on

organized sports to do this for them. The main purpose of organized sports is to keep children occupied in a physical activity that is safe, convenient, and fun. If your child or your family can benefit from this, then you should consider registering your child for organized sports.

Which sport should I choose?

Once you have decided to enroll your child in organized sports, you must decide which sport best suits your child. Though soccer seems to have a magical drawing power all its own, it is not inherently "better" than any other sport. Pushing children toward any one activity to the exclusion of others will prevent them from enjoying the large variety of physical experiences they deserve. Conversely, pushing them to try every sport, one after another, will deny them the opportunity to develop above-average skills in any one of them. The best gauge of where your child should be in organized youth athletics (or whether he or she should participate at all) is your child's own feelings. Most children will choose a favorite activity in which they want to succeed, but it should be entirely their choice. If they want to take a year off, or try another sport, then that is probably what they should do. A child who does not want to participate will not be an asset to the team, and may be a constant irritant to the parent and coach. Present the options available and let your child choose the path to be taken.

Of course, you may make suggestions to help with the decision. If the cost of a certain sport exceeds your budget, mention this as one of your concerns. A child who wants to participate may volunteer to pay some or all of the costs from weekly allowance. Obviously, the final decision is up to you, but be sure to include the opinions of your child in your decision.

Some parents try to discourage their children from playing a particular sport by saying, "you are not good enough", "you are too small", or "you will get hurt." Avoid becoming one of those parents! Hearing a low opinion of his or her abilities nearly always causes a child to lose a bit of self-esteem. Besides, you may be wrong. If your child sincerely wants to try a sport, give it more consideration. You may be surprised at how successful someone can be when given the chance to do something they genuinely enjoy.

At what level should I get involved in the program?

This is entirely up to you. You don't have to get involved at all if you don't want to. Some parents feel youth sports should involve the whole family. Others are looking for ways to keep the kids "off the streets" for a couple months. Yet others need time away from their children, and see sports as a supervised activity that allows them this free time. Each of these viewpoints is valid, and each leads to a different level of volunteerism.

Youth sports organizations are usually run by volunteers, and they would be glad to have you help out in any way. But you should not feel any pressure to volunteer, such as reduced fees for volunteers or verbal "hard sell." The way your child is treated should not be based on your participation. If you feel there is pressure to volunteer, whether you choose to volunteer or not, look around for another organization that is more tolerant of non-volunteers.

Will my child be around kids of the same age, or size, or what?

Youth soccer players are assigned by age or grade in school to the various levels of soccer. Common categories include Under-6 (abbreviated U6), U8, U10, U12, etc. Some leagues may use other terms, so that U6 players are called Tikes and U8 is called Bantams, for example.

In age level organizations, the level at which each child participates is usually based on the player's age as of a certain date. In some areas, the cutoff is at midnight on New Year's Eve. If a child is 11 years old as the new year dawns, that child will play U12 soccer for that year, even if the child has a twelfth birthday in January. In most areas, the cutoff is midnight of July 31. This is roughly equivalent to grade level organizations, in which players are grouped according to their grade in school.

In most locales, it is possible for a child to participate in an age group that is higher than normal. An 11-year-old may be allowed to play in U14 games, even though a more natural level would be U12. A recent trend toward decreasing the competitiveness at lower levels has led to the suggestion that no child under 10 years old be allowed to "play up" in higher levels. Other changes caused by this trend include discontinuation of post-season playoffs, and leagues not keeping track of scores and standings. Nearly everyone agrees that this change is having positive effects. The children enjoy the game as much as before, and they never have to leave the field feeling like 8-year-old failures.

What should I do to prepare for organized soccer?

Okay, so you have decided to register your child to play soccer with the local youth athletics organization. What should you do before the season begins? Here are some things you should definitely do, followed by a discussion of each.

- **Take your child to a doctor for a physical exam.**

Many parents find out about their child's weaknesses only after the child is injured. This is sad, because most physical problems can be easily detected and corrected before the season begins, simply by having a thorough physical exam. Have your child see your primary care pediatrician or family physician at least three months before the season begins. This gives the doctor time to work on curing problems. No child wants to miss the first month of the season while attending physical therapy to strengthen weak knees, so the sooner you begin, the better.

A proper physical exam will assess your child's health and fitness, and detect any conditions that may lead to injuries or cause your child to be disqualified from a particular sport. A sports physical is different from a regular annual physical, so if your doctor is not educated in sports medicine, find a doctor who is. A sports medicine exam should begin with a complete medical history. Most children are not able to complete their own medical histories, so you may help your child answer questions during this part of the exam. The exam should continue with the doctor checking joint function, range of motion, muscle strength, areas of pain, and cardiovascular health and endurance. The doctor should note any weaknesses and

problem areas and state clearly whether he or she thinks your child will be able to play youth sports.

There is no reason to have a physical exam more than once each year, so one exam should be suitable for several sports seasons (spring baseball, summer soccer, fall basketball, etc.)

- **Be prepared for registrations.**

Watch the local newspapers, notice boards, and flyers from school for announcements of when and where you can register your child for the sport chosen. Generally this will occur two months before the start of practices, but may vary widely, so keep your eyes open.

When you go to the registration site, take along as much information as you can. Besides the child's name and address, the program organizers may need to know parents' names, work phone numbers, doctor and dentist names, insurance policy numbers, uniform sizes, and the name and phone number of an alternate person to call in an emergency. In addition, some leagues may require you to bring a copy of your child's birth certificate for verification of age, and a small recent photo to be used on an ID card. Take your child with you. There may be uniforms to try on and additional forms to be filled out by the player. Remember your checkbook, because youth athletics will probably cost you something. The fees should be publicized along with the dates and times.

- **Try to sign up your child at the earliest possible registration date.**

Some sports have a limited number of positions available and may be on a first-come first-served basis. Even with unlimited enrollment, league organizers would rather not have to deal with the large crowds that usually show up in the last few minutes before registrations are closed.

- **Put together a folder with information.**

You may be given informational handouts at the registration site, covering details about the program. Read this information carefully, and you will find answers to many of the questions that may pop into your mind later. Throughout the season you will be given a lot of papers to read. These will include schedules, maps, player lists, parent lists, coach names, phone numbers, etc. Keep a folder with all the information you receive. At one time or another you will need to dig up some information, and it helps to have it all in one place.

- **Get quality equipment.**

The spirit of the game of soccer ensures that each participant is kept as safe as possible during the game. Good equipment is necessary for safe soccer.

The first item every child should own is a good soccer ball. The coach may have plenty of soccer balls available at games and practices, but your child needs a personal soccer ball to kick around at home during the rest of the season, and when the season ends. You wouldn't send a child to Little League baseball games without their own glove. A child needs their own soccer ball to thoroughly enjoy the game.

Write their name clearly on the ball with an indelible marker. Good, new soccer balls have a way of going home after games and practices in someone else's car.

(Continuing the baseball analogy, consider that for a child to play catch with mom or dad, it requires two baseball gloves, one for child and one for parent. When buying a soccer ball for your child, get a size 5 for yourself at the same time. There are plenty of little games the coach can teach you which you can play together with two soccer balls. Your interest in kicking a ball around may fan the spark of interest in your child. And you will certainly gain a sense of how incredibly difficult it can be to accurately kick a ball, a skill that seems so simple at first glance.)

The size of a soccer ball (3, 4, or 5) is usually printed on the ball. Size 3 balls have a circumference of 23 to 24 inches. Size 4 is 25 to 26 inches and size 5 is 27 to 28 inches.

The most preferred (and most expensive) soccer balls are made of hand-stitched leather. A close second in quality is hand-stitched synthetic leather, which is more than adequate for most youth players. If you have a ball with glued-on patches, instead of sewn on, be sure all patches are properly secured. Check the ball periodically during the season. If the edges or corners of patches are peeling, re-glue them and watch them closely. If the problem persists, return or replace the ball. Loose patches can leave nasty cuts on a soccer player.

The cheapest balls are molded from a single piece of plastic, and are very stiff. Do not buy one of those. A child will learn to fear the ball the first time it strikes them.

A proper uniform is also important to safe soccer. The soccer uniform consists of

1. comfortable, safe shoes
2. socks
3. shin guards
4. comfortable shorts
5. a jersey with a number on the back.

Anything else is a potential hazard. All jewelry is unsafe. Long hair may be tied with a ribbon, cloth, or rubber band. Never tie hair with clips or pins. Players wearing glasses should have plastic-rimmed or athletic glasses only, and a strap is required to keep the glasses attached to the player.

When buying for children, soccer shoes with replaceable cleats are a waste of money. Children grow out of them long before the cleats need replacing. Also, there is a danger of losing a loose cleat on the field, creating a hazard to other players. Soccer shoes should fit perfectly. Do not buy shoes too large, hoping to get another year of growth out of them. That first year will be so painful that the child will not want to return for another.

The rule of thumb for buying soccer shoes is to spend as little as possible, while providing the child with safe, well-fitting shoes. Used shoes can often be found for cheap or free at second hand stores or equipment exchanges.

All soccer players should wear shin guards at all practices and games. Leg injuries are the most common soccer injuries, and shin guards are the best prevention. Properly fitted shin guards cover the shin, but not the knee. Padded stirrups decrease the pain if a player is kicked in the ankle. The toughest shin guards have plastic inserts in cloth pockets, and often have an added layer of foam. The lightest and least protective are simply a foam layer sewn into a sock. If the shin guards you choose are a great hindrance to the player, consider trying a different style, but never let anyone play soccer without shin guards.

It is recommended that boys of any age wear an athletic supporter with a cup. For the youngest children, this is as much for familiarity as protection. A boy who learns basic soccer skills while wearing a cup will have less trouble adjusting to wearing one in later years when it is more necessary.

What should I do during the soccer season?

Whether you volunteer to be a part of the soccer program or not, there are certain things that are expected of you, the parent. Some of these can be treated as errands, because they can be scheduled and accomplished in a certain amount of time. Others are parenting skills, which will help you in everyday life as much as in youth soccer. Here are some of those expectations, with a discussion of each.

- **Attend the parents' meeting.**

Each team should hold a meeting for parents early in the season, hopefully before the first practice. It is very important that all parents attend if possible. The meeting should make clear what is expected of the players, parents, and coach, and is an opportunity for the coach to find parent volunteers to arrange half-time and post-game treats, car pools, schedules, fund raising, and many other details. Once again, keep track of all handouts by keeping them together in a single folder.

- **Have your child attend practices and games whenever possible.**

School programs, summer camp, family weekends, and many other events may interfere with the schedule set up for the team. However, it is important that you make an effort to have your child attend practices and games as often as possible. If your child must miss a practice or game, be sure the coach is informed well in advance. This will allow time to modify practice drills and game lineups accordingly.

A team member who is sick should not be allowed to attend any game or practice. Besides the obvious problem of transmitting a disease to teammates, a tired or weak player is considerably more susceptible to injury.

- **Be there on time.**

You will be given a schedule of games and practices, including starting times. You will know when you are expected to be at each event, and you should know how long it takes to get from your home to the field. Figuring out when you should leave home in order to be on time is simple arithmetic. In fact, a good rule of thumb is to plan to be at your destination 5 minutes before the coach expects you. If the coach

wants you at the field 20 minutes before the game, be there 25 minutes before the game. That way, a small unforeseen problem is not likely to cause you to be late.

- **Teach your child the difference between playing to win and having to win.**

Everyone plays to win. It is the nature of play. The impulse to compare, compete, and achieve dominance and excellence is part of the human psyche. Accepting challenge aids in establishing a sense of one's self, of pride in success, and a realistic acceptance of strengths and weaknesses. However, the child's self concept still depends to a large extent on coaches' and parents' reactions to the child's efforts. If children are praised for making an effort, their self-esteem will improve faster than if they are praised for winning. This is because they try more often than they win and will therefore be praised more often.

Children who are praised only when they win may focus on the final score beyond healthy limits. A child who receives compliments just for trying is more likely to try again, whatever the outcome. Avoid putting importance on the final score, or the team's position in the standings. These might be suitable measurements for professional athletes, whose livelihoods depend on such comparisons, but they should be of minimal importance to children who play for fun.

The best way to help your child keep a proper perspective is for you to keep one yourself. The final score of a game is simply a comparison of the skill levels of two opposing teams. It should have no bearing on the self worth of any individual on either team. A team of 6-year-olds would probably be outscored by a team of 12-year-olds. That doesn't mean the 6-year-olds are any less special, just that they need skill development.

We always play to win. We never have to win.

- **Keep the importance of the sport where it belongs.**

Soccer is just a game, and does not take precedence over everything else. Do not change the family vacation you have been planning for a year, just because there is a soccer game that week. Missing practice to go to the beach for the weekend is perfectly suitable, provided you inform the coach in advance. On the other hand, soccer should not be at the bottom of your priority list, so that your child misses games and practices on a whim. Each player has a responsibility to teammates, and it is important that all players fulfill that responsibility by attending games and practices.

- **Avoid complaining to your child.**

At some point during the season, you may feel that it is getting to be too much. You are tired of driving, tired of washing dirty uniforms, tired of looking for that other shin guard. If it gets to that point, find someone to complain to other than your child. In surveys, children state that one of the most dreaded parts of youth athletics is when the parent says, "I drive you everywhere..." or "After all I paid to get you into this sport . . ." Do your complaining away from the children. Discuss it with other parents, the coach, the minister, your mother, anybody but the kids.

Your children should also not be exposed to parents cutting down the other players on the team. A parent who complains about the lack of talent among the other kids on the team will cause their own child to see teammates in a bad light, destroying any chance of their child displaying true teamwork. Similarly, there is no purpose served in complaining about players on the opposing team.

- **Exclude soccer from your punishment list.**

When your child breaks your personal rules, you may find it tempting and often useful to take away something enjoyable as a punishment. However, making Johnny miss a soccer game because he didn't clean his room causes hardship for more than one person. First, his teammates are forced to work harder to make up for the loss of a player. Second, the coach is forced to scramble to adjust lineups at the last minute. And third, you may be denying yourself the pleasure of seeing your child doing something pleasant. Everybody loses. Because soccer is a group effort, it is not suitable as an individual punishment. It may take some extra thinking, but try to find something else to use for punishment and discipline.

What should I do before each game?

In the days, hours, and minutes leading up to each game, there are several things you can do to make the whole experience more enjoyable for your youngster.

- **Feed your child properly.**

When and what to feed your child before the game is an important subject. For three days before the game, players should eat as much as they like, as long as it is nutritious. That nutrition is what will keep them going through the game. In the 24 hours leading up to the game, they should eat meals which are lighter, though still high in nutrients. Have them drink plenty of fluids on game days; up to 2 quarts of plain water in one day if the weather is very hot.

A child who eats a healthy diet will not run short of any important nutrient during a soccer game. Athletic drinks that claim to replenish nutrients are of questionable value to children. The main thing they replenish is water, so the child may as well drink water before, during, and after the game. We all assume that professional football players drink a particular brand of sports drink, because the product logo is on the container on the sideline. Actually, those containers were free gifts from the sports drink company as a sly means of getting their product name on television without buying advertisement time. Those containers usually contain water, the drink preferred by professional athletes.

World class athletes make a big fuss about carbo-loading, inviting the media to watch them eat mass quantities of complex carbohydrates. The theory says that these nutrients will help their bodies convert food to energy more efficiently during their upcoming contest. There is no evidence that carbo-loading has any such beneficial effect for youth athletes. It is not a suitable practice for children, and should be avoided.

- **Make them rest.**

Physical activity should be low in the hours leading up to a game. A child who goes into the game already tired has a greater chance of injury. If they insist on being active, suggest that they avoid anything vigorous.

- **Give encouragement.**

To keep professional athletes in the correct frame of mind, their coaches have to come up with an endless string of "pep talks." Youth athletes are somewhat less demanding. There are three simple phrases that generally do the job.

Good luck.

Have fun.

Do your best.

Say one or more of these phrases to your child before each game. Some kids claim the part of youth sports they like best is the encouragement they receive from their parents.

- **Be there on time.**

Pre-game warm-ups and team interaction are very important to making the player comfortable during the game. As stated earlier, try to get to the field 5 minutes before the coach expects you to be there. Plan ahead and leave home with plenty of time to spare.

What should I do while attending a game?

As mentioned earlier, some parents put their children into sports to make it possible to have some time alone, away from the kids. For those parents, watching their child's soccer game is not important, and they should not feel pressured to attend. Other parents schedule their lives around their child's games, and wouldn't consider missing one. There are a few things expected of parents who attend the team's games.

- **Watch for signs of fatigue, stress, and injury.**

A child who is growing tired (either physically or mentally) is more likely to be injured, and should be removed from the field until rested. Children under age 8 are usually not able to pace themselves. They run to exhaustion, stop to rest a minute, then run to exhaustion again. This is not a good way to play soccer, but it is the way little kids play. If they are able to rest on their own, fine. But if they are having trouble with that and continue running while exhausted, they should be taken aside and forced to rest.

Stress and fatigue are displayed in several ways. A child who is accident prone may be too tired to be safe. Similarly, children who are involved in fights or other acts of rage may be trying to alleviate stress, which could better be controlled by the coach on the sideline. Exaggeration of injuries and intentionally getting into dangerous situations are also signs of stress and fatigue. If you believe your child is starting to have problems, mention it to the coach. You probably know your child's signs of fatigue better than anyone. Hopefully, the coach will have noticed it, too, and will be planning to bring your child to the sideline.

Displays of stress do not always call for removal from the game. It may take just an instant for the player to leave the stressful situation, recover, and return to play. Stress management is just one of the useful skills learned in soccer. Keep an eye open for problems that persist.

Even more importantly, watch for signs of injury. The most obvious sign is when the child is lying on the ground. That situation should be handled by a qualified person, hopefully the coach. The other common signs of injury are displayed while the child is in action. A child who limps or rubs a muscle is giving one of two signs. They may be actually injured and should be cared for before aggravating an injury, or they may be faking an injury. This is another sign of stress and fatigue and the player should be brought off the field until rested.

Symptoms that last for several days indicate that the player may be due for a break from the sport, and may need to be checked by a doctor.

- **Cheer from the sidelines, but choose your words carefully.**

Parents watching their children in youth sports are notorious for putting more importance on the game than necessary. Avoid becoming part of the stereotype. One way to keep your perspective on the game is to start every sentence with "good." Children want to hear their parents saying "Good pass", "Good shot", and "Good game." (They would rather not hear "Good grief".)

Youth soccer players make, on the average, one conscious decision every 5 to 10 seconds during the game. To make every decision correctly is virtually impossible, and jeers from the sideline after a bad decision are very demoralizing. After all, it was the player's decision, and the player is as aware of the outcome as anybody. Focusing on bad decisions is a sure way to make a child stop making decisions altogether. Besides, think of all those kids sitting home glued to the television, making no decisions at all. Which kind of child would you rather have?

On the other hand, avoid praising the team for the sake of praise. Compliments should be deserved. Fortunately, it is easy to catch the children doing a lot of things right during a game, and even to make it sound like a mistake is not a total disaster (which it rarely is.) A shot that sails over the crossbar is still a shot, which is probably better than getting no shots at all. Instead of saying, "Suzy, that shot was too high" (as if Suzy doesn't already know that), or "Good shot" (which it wasn't) just say "Good try" or "Nearly." Suzy will be more likely to try again later, possibly remembering what the coach told her in practice about proper shooting technique.

- **Support the coach and officials.**

The coach of your child's team is probably a volunteer, giving time and effort freely to help your child enjoy soccer. That coach deserves your support. As with the players' decisions on the field, no decision the coach makes during the game should be subject to your scrutiny. Any parent who believes they could do better should be coaching the team. If all parents on a team agree that the coach is violating the spirit of soccer (fairness, enjoyment, safety), they should approach the coach with constructive suggestions for improvement (not during a game, of course). If this does

not get results, parents may consider going higher up the chain of command and having the coach removed. This should be a last resort, used only if the parents have already found a coach and staff who can take over and do a better job with the team.

There is no place in youth sports for dissension. The coach and parents should make it clear to everyone before the season starts. Any player dissenting an official's decision will be removed from the game by the coach. Any coach dissenting a decision will be removed from the sidelines by the parents. Any parent dissenting a decision will be removed from the area by other parents or the coach. Any violator can return to their original status after they cool down and admit their error.

What should I do after attending a game?

Parents who attend the game are asked to do each of the following after the game.

- **Applaud the team.**

Each youth soccer game should end with the two teams shaking hands with each other on the field. After handshakes, both teams will come to their respective sides of the field. Give them a big round of applause as they leave the field. They did their best and they deserve your applause.

- **Compliment your child.**

Win, lose, or tie, your child wants to hear that you appreciated every effort they made during the game. All it takes is to touch them on the shoulder and say "Good game." All the pain, fatigue, and stress from the game will vanish. If you do this within earshot of other players on the team, it may give an extra boost to your child's self-esteem. Most of all, be sincere. Regardless of the outcome, the team did have a good game, simply because they participated. To try is better than to not try at all, and your child should be commended for that. Touch your child on the shoulder and be sincere.

"Good game."

- **Avoid criticism.**

Soccer players recognize their own mistakes as soon as they make them, and they remember them for weeks. They don't need parents to point out that they should have passed to Billy instead of losing the ball to a defender. Do not point out any mistakes while the emotions of the game are still present. It may take days to find the proper moment, but if you must mention particular mistakes, you must be willing to wait. Then, make it sound like constructive suggestions, maybe in the form of questions. "What do you think you could have done instead of losing the ball? Let's go to the park and practice doing it a different way." (Note that it is not a "better" way or the "right" way. It's just a different way.)

The best you can do is to avoid criticizing altogether. Most children beat themselves up enough, and can generally work through their soccer mistakes alone. Some will

even go to the coach to ask how they can stop making a particular mistake. Minor problems like these tend to work themselves out.

What should I do after all games, whether I attend or not?

- **Make your child rest, drink fluids, and cool down.**

A soccer game can take a lot out of a child, but the emotions generated can keep a player going in high gear for hours afterward. Try to get your child settled down soon after the game so their body can begin restoring the energy it lost during the game. A good coach will start an emotional cooldown at the same time as the physical cooldown.

Vigorous activity like soccer can deplete the fluids in the body. Drinking plain water is the best way to restore them. Have your child drink water until he or she feels full, then have them drink one more cupful.

- **Avoid celebrating victories while ignoring defeats.**

A parent or coach who promises pizza and ice cream if the team wins is setting up the team for a big disappointment, because a loss becomes a double loss. In fact, the kids need the special treats most after a loss, to show them that they still have your support. If the team wants to plan a party, pick a certain game day and plan the party for after that game. If they win, it becomes a victory celebration. If they lose, it is still a celebration; that they all went onto the field together and did their best. Parents may want to skip these parties entirely, or make themselves as invisible as possible, making it clear that the party is entirely for the players. Besides, it can get pretty messy at the pizza parlor when a dozen 8-year-olds are released in there.

- **Remind your child about playing to win vs. having to win.**

In some cases, a child cannot stop brooding about a loss. It is often acceptable to let a child think about it for a while. But if it goes too far, he or she must be reminded of the difference between playing to win and having to win. If a player puts forth his or her best effort, then that player is a winner, regardless of the final score. Your child is still a special person, and deserves your respect even more for trying.

A child who cannot stop gloating after a win may have a bigger problem. It is nice to remember the victories, when a little decision had a big effect on the outcome of a game. But players must keep a sensible perspective, and not put too much importance on the final score. Remind your child that the final score is just a measure of skills, not of an individual's self worth.

What should I do throughout the year?

On or off the field, in any month of the year, there are things you can do to help your child enjoy soccer more.

- **Set a good example with fairness.**

Your child will notice if you are fair in your everyday dealings with your family and other people with whom you have contact. Their actions will reflect your attitudes. To play fair on the soccer field, children must be taught to play fair off the soccer field, and the best way to teach fair play is by example. Giving equitable attention to all children in the family is a good start.

- **Participate in adult athletics.**

Athletics should be a lifetime activity. Unfortunately, this fact is not completely accepted by some. The 40-year-old who complains of tennis elbow is ridiculed, and the middle aged marathon runner hears suggestions that he should stop doing that and take up something more normal. Fortunately, the trend is swinging toward more people continuing vigorous physical activity for more years.

Once again, this is a valuable lesson your child can learn by your example. Your son or daughter will feel better about being in sports if you enjoy yourself in some physical activity. You may not want to do something as vigorous as soccer, but there are plenty of other options. Briskly walking several blocks each evening may be enough to keep your heart beating for a few extra years. Let your child know that you are expecting healthy benefits from your exercise, and that you are enjoying yourself. If you are not enjoying yourself, change activities until you find one you like.

- **Avoid competing with your child.**

Another annoyance to children in sports is the parent who compares his or her own abilities (real or imagined) to those of the child. The child knows it is going to be a bad conversation when it starts with "When I played sports in high school..." Parents who continue to wear high school letter jackets, twenty years after graduation, are an endless source of embarrassment. There are even parents who play in adult sports leagues and brag to their children about how great the adult team is doing, while the kids are going winless for the season.

Don't be one of these parents. The kids are playing soccer for their own reasons, and those reasons probably don't include "to be better than dad."

What if my child finds he or she dislikes soccer?

As much as we soccer folks try to deny it, soccer is not the best game for all children. Occasionally, a child will announce that they would like to quit the team. However, it is usually not a good idea to let your child quit a sport in mid-season until all other possibilities have been considered. Talk with your child and listen closely to figure out what the real problem is. For example, your child may complain that there is "Too much running." But if you know they love to run, then the real answer lies elsewhere. Examine how they interact with other players, parents, and coaches. Talk with the coach and staff to see if they have noticed any problems. If the problem is that your child's personality does not mesh with the spirit of soccer, then so be it. You should still encourage your child to complete the season, and treat it as just another learning experience. Quitting in the middle of the season is not fair to teammates and coaches.

Parents Who Go Too Far

Since their beginnings in the 1940s, organized youth sports have managed to become a part of life in America. Unfortunately, fun-based youth sports are now showing some signs that they may not last much longer. The most glaring weakness is a growing number of adults putting massive pressure on their children. Anyone who stays around youth athletics for a short time is sure to encounter a parent who seems to push their child too hard, demand too much of the coach and team, and justify their actions by saying they love their kids and want only the best for them. These people will stop at nothing to reach their unrealistic goals. They berate their own children and the rest of the team for not performing at a professional level. They harass coaches and other parents, file lawsuits, and threaten league organizers if their child does not make the first string team. Often they will volunteer to coach the team, then use that position of authority to apply even more pressure. Having to face these sorts of problems is causing players and volunteers to leave youth sports organizations forever.

If you were to suggest to these overbearing adults that they were putting too much importance on a game, they would likely think you were joking. But it's no joke. Families lucky enough to change their habits before reaching a tragic end often express surprise at how easily and imperceptibly they came to be that way. The problem creeps up on the family, and those who aren't careful are quickly swept away. It is possible to avoid the trap if you examine some common sports myths and know some typical warning signs.

Myths of youth sports

Parents who are starting the downward spiral into obsession with their child's athletics invariably believe one or more of the following myths.

Sports make a great career.

This is the main reason that parents give for pushing their children too hard in youth sports. "If Johnny can turn pro, he will make a lot of money and we can all retire young and wealthy." The truth is, sports make a lousy career, and that goes double for soccer in America. Look at a few aspects of professional soccer.

The odds:

Professional soccer leagues have failed several times in this country, and there is no reason to believe that any will succeed in the near future. There are currently about 200 people who can be called professional soccer players in North America, actually making a living wage at it. There are maybe a few dozen non-player jobs that require actual soccer training. Nationally, there are probably fewer than 30 job openings in this sport each year. Since there are several million youth soccer players in the US, with the numbers growing every year, the odds of your child landing one of those jobs are nearly identical to your odds of winning a major lottery.

The commitment:

Entering the lottery is easy. Just hand over the money and you are in. A professional sports career takes a lot more than that. Top level recruiters will not even look at a player who has not taken the high-commitment route. Players must attend special camps, often for several months at a time. Realistically, they must live away from home if they plan to become adequately trained. They must pay for private coaches and private tutors. They must own the best, most expensive equipment, play against the best opponents in the world, suffer huge physical, psychological, and emotional pressures, and shell out thousands of dollars. In addition, they must have total support from their entire family and must be totally dedicated to the sport. Even if a parent is willing to put himself and his child through all of that, he will still find that there are a thousand other parents who have done the same thing. That means another thousand kids are trying for those same 30 job openings in professional soccer.

The job description:

Travel. Play a game. Sit around and wait. That's it. The spare time is unbearable. What is there to do when you spend 20 hours of each day in a hotel room in some nondescript city? No wonder so many professional athletes turn to drugs. The boredom is incredible, and the salaries in American professional soccer are quite low.

As you can easily see, a successful career in soccer is virtually impossible and of questionable value in this country.

Athletic ability will get my child a college scholarship.

Don't bet on it. Parents who say this are confusing big time sports like college football with small time sports like college soccer. Football programs are given multi-million-dollar budgets. Soccer programs are given T-shirts and socks. If all the soccer parents chip in, they might be able to paint lines on the field. Almost nobody gets a free ride through college on a soccer scholarship. The money is just not there. If the kids who base their futures on the dream of soccer scholarships would redirect half of their soccer energy toward their school homework, they would double their chances of receiving some of the billions of dollars available through academic scholarships. In addition, they would have an education to fall back on when they turn 28 and are considered too old for professional soccer.

Sports build character, sportsmanship, and self-esteem.

No serious student of sports still believes this cliché. It seems that the intense spotlight on sports is able to highlight the character that exists in a child, but not alter it. As Heywood Hale Broun said, "Sports do not build character. They reveal it." An athlete may observe how he or she handles victory and defeat after each game, and change some personal habits as a result. But it is not the sport that makes this change. It is the athlete. They could just as well do this by observing

victories and defeats in the classroom or around the dinner table. Any character that is built while participating in athletics would probably have been built just as well outside of athletics.

Similarly, children almost never learn sportsmanship by playing organized sports. If they pout after a loss or get smug after a win, or display good sportsmanship at all times, that is probably something they have learned at home. Occasionally they will meet a coach who guides them in controlling negative emotions, helping them exhibit a more positive attitude about the game. Once again, it is not the sport that caused the change. It is the influence of the coach. It could just as easily have been the influence of the person who hands out the grades at school or the paychecks at work. Any parent who goes into youth sports expecting to find a coach who will be a superb positive influence on their child's personality is heading for disappointment, because such coaches are scarce.

A child gains self-esteem by establishing and reaching realistic goals and by being praised by peers and authority figures like parents, teachers, and coaches. Sports offers many such opportunities, both in winning and in losing. But, if handled properly, most non-athletic experiences can have an equal effect on self-esteem. Self-esteem, like character and sportsmanship, are built internally.

Doing well in sports helps you do well in life.

This myth is being disproved nearly every day by one professional athlete or another. Certainly there are the grand old men and women of sports who have enjoyed additional success after finishing short, successful athletic careers. But for each story of success there is one of failure. For each Joe Dimaggio, there is a Jimmy Foxx. Jimmy hit 58 home runs in a single year, knocked in some hits that won the World Series, held several batting records, and earned \$250,000 per year when that was an incredibly high baseball salary. Jimmy Foxx died a pauper, living in a shack. His only meals for the last years of his life were provided by his son, who had to drop out of high school and take a job to pay for food.

There are similar stories in all walks of life. For each wealthy businessman whose business is flourishing, there is some poor soul whose company failed. For each well-loved politician, there is another who is despised. There is no special magic to sports that keeps athletes from going down the road to failure, or moves them any faster up the road to success. The presence or absence of sports in one's life seems to have no connection to the outcome of that life. This is not to say that physical activity has no effect on longevity, because it certainly adds years to your life. However, the quality of those extra years is not based on whether that exercise was part of a professional athletic career or not.

Warning signs of overbearing parents

Parents who are starting the downward spiral into obsession with their child's athletics invariably exhibit one or more of the following symptoms.

They take seriously any coach who says their child has "potential."

All children have infinite potential, and this potential can be pointed in any direction. No one in the world can accurately tell which child will become a success in soccer. Anyone who claims to have that ability is probably trying to get you to give him a lot of money. Players develop at different speeds. One child may develop a good set of skills by age 8 and then stop improving altogether. Meanwhile, all of his teammates will continue to improve until they pass that level, leaving the early achiever far behind. Even mental toughness, one of the qualities a soccer career requires in abundance, comes in spurts. A player who seems to have the desire and drive at age 10 often loses interest by age 12. The onset of puberty and the sudden and natural discovery of the opposite sex have stopped more than one youth athlete from reaching the levels suggested by early success.

They tell themselves, "I know what is best for my child."

Any parent who uses this as an argument to put an unwilling child into a sport should stop and think. Though they probably can make better decisions than their child (mainly because kids haven't fully developed their decision making skills), neither the parent nor the child can possibly have enough evidence to make a sensible decision about which level of soccer the child should play. Usually, such a choice is made to meet the goals of the parent, not the child. This goes for parents who push their children into music, art, medicine, or law as well. These parents remind me of the revolutionary who preached to the crowd, "Comes the revolution, there will be wine flowing in the streets." A meek voice from the crowd responds, "But I don't like wine." The revolutionary says, "Comes the revolution, you'll like wine." Some parents are willing to shove sports down their child's throat, like it or not.

They tell others, "I want my child to have everything I never had as a child."

Admittedly, this is a characteristic of many parents, both in and outside of youth sports. It may even be a positive attitude in cases where, knowing that parents derive pleasure from his gains, a child develops a drive to succeed. Realistically, it is impossible to gratify more than a tiny fraction of our wishes, so this mechanism becomes abnormal when used to excess. In other words, truly believing it is possible to give a child everything the parents never had is unrealistic. If you stay with youth sports long enough, you will undoubtedly meet parents who never stop trying to reach the limit of this fantasy. Healthy parents know their limits.

They tell their child, "You will thank me later."

Just this morning, hundreds of children got out of bed at three o'clock so they wouldn't miss their five o'clock ice skating lessons. They all have one thing in common; a parent who dreams of the child in a professional hockey or figure skating career. In their mind, this brilliant career will be capped off by the player

thanking their parents for everything. With the full support of highly paid coaches, these parents are willing to deprive their children of sleep and spend thousands of dollars to meet their own unrealistic goals. The truth is that concentrated training at an early age does not produce a better athlete. In fact, the most common result of early intensive training is a child who hangs up his or her skates before becoming a teenager, spending the rest of their life idle. They have seen the pain of athletics, and want no part of it.

Any parent who expects a child to thank them for this cruelty is somewhat out of touch with reality, and more than a little egotistical. Any joy the parent derives from parenting should appear during parenting, not after the child grows up. If the child brings additional joy after the job of parenting is done, that is an extra benefit, but the reasonable parent does not expect it.

They question the decisions of refs and coaches.

The coaches and officials in organized youth sports are both necessary and useful. The program could not exist without them, and their decisions are therefore beyond reproach. To question their choices is to question their very presence in the program. Even if you only do this mentally, without saying a word to anyone, you should feel guilty. A parent who thinks they could consistently make better decisions than the coach or ref, should be out there, volunteering to coach or ref. Parents who are not willing to volunteer should leave the decisions to the people who are.

One common result of parental interference in coaching is that qualified, competent coaches leave the sport forever. Obviously, this is bad for the sport.

There comes a time when parents have to let their kids learn about life, and youth sports is a great start to learning valuable lessons besides how to pass, dribble, and shoot. Among the lessons learned by children in youth sports are:

- **Not all coaches and referees are fair. This may ease the shock when they find out that not all bosses are fair.**
- **Coaches don't always have the time or inclination to worry about whether something they say might bruise a player's feelings. This may prepare them for a world that does not always have the time or inclination to worry about their feelings.**
- **No matter how wonderful mommy and daddy tell them they are, there are plenty of other kids just as wonderful. This will make it easier for their egos to handle the blow of the inevitable day they discover that mommy and daddy were wrong and they are not the center of the universe after all.**

A child can learn lessons from any coach, whether that coach is perfect or not. Questioning that coach's methods and practices is denying the child a valuable learning experience.

How to avoid becoming an overbearing parent

The surest way to avoid becoming one of those parents that make youth sports difficult for other parents, coaches, players, organizers, and officials, is to be aware of the warning signs listed above. Check your attitude every month or so, and if any of the warning signs are detected, stop and think about the purpose of organized youth sports, which is to provide a safe, convenient, fun environment for the physical activity children require. It is equivalent to the swingset at any well-run day care center; a relatively safe place for the kids to play and have fun. Period. If you are expecting anything more from the program, then your expectations are unrealistically high. There is not much you can do about the parents who have already gone off the deep end, believing their 10-year-old Bobby is going to be the scoring leader in the next World Cup. Those people are living in a fantasy world, and unless you are trained in family counseling, you are powerless to change that. The most you can do is save yourself and your own children from this fate by keeping a realistic viewpoint.

*Your children are not your children.
They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself.
They come through you but not from you,
And though they are with you yet they belong not to you.*

*You give them your love but not your thoughts, for they have their own thoughts.
You may house their bodies but not their souls,
For their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow, which you cannot visit, not even in your
dreams.
You may strive to be like them, but seek not to make them like you.
For life goes not backward nor tarries with yesterday.*

*You are the bows from which your children as living arrows are sent forth.
The archer sees the mark upon the path of the infinite,
and He bends you with His might that His arrows may go swift and far.*

*Let your bending in the archer's hand be for gladness:
For even as He loves the arrow that flies so He loves also the bow that is stable.*

-- *Kahlil Gibran*