

## Remember, It's Playtime

*excerpted from a  
[brilliant article](#) by  
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Taking the drilling and screaming out of youth soccer will make the game more enjoyable and create better players.

Let's take the approach so many adults bring to youth soccer to other children's activities. Take a bunch of 6-year-olds to the playground, but don't let them scamper off to explore the different structures. Make them all line up and wait patiently to take turns on the monkey bars. If one of them wanders off toward the swings, scream at him. Be sure to tell them exactly how they should climb. Yell at the slow ones to go faster. While they're hanging from a bar, shout at them to "grab the next bar!"

At the sandbox, don't just let them start digging around willy-nilly. No building mounds or castles until we teach them the proper way to hold the shovel. Line them up for the shovel drill and don't forget to yell, "Dig, dig, dig!" After 50 minutes of instructions on the various aspects of proper playground usage, give the kids 10 minutes to play.

Sounds ludicrous, doesn't it? So do these scenarios, but they're real and all too common: A 9-year-old dribbles downfield and comes to a screeching halt because his coach doesn't let defenders past the halfway line. In an 8 v 8 game of 7-year-olds, two players on each team are forced by their coach to remain planted in front of their own goal. Wouldn't want to be vulnerable to a counterattack, would we?

A 6-year-old girl who started playing soccer a couple weeks earlier dribbles the ball toward the goal while her coach moves along the sideline screaming, "Kick it into the goal! Kick it hard! Kick it into the goal! Kick it hard!" And I'm wondering what it would be like to have someone four times as big as I am hollering at me while I try to perform a skill that is barely within my capabilities.

One of my favorites is the "Spread out!" scream. I hear this from coaches, directed at 6-year-olds. Apparently they haven't noticed that these kids can barely kick the ball more than five yards, so it's a bit unlikely that they'll be able to exploit the flanks and whip in a cross.

Perhaps the most puzzling aspect of youth soccer is the

insistence on making young players do drills instead of just letting them play small-sided games, the way Pele, Diego Maradona and Ronaldo did when they were young. In America, children start playing organized soccer three or four years before those guys did. That's the way it is, because in today's world they usually can't just go outside and play pickup soccer for hours on end.

But that doesn't mean they should have to show up at a practice and be instructed as if they haven't left the classroom. Besides the fact that, after obeying adults all day at school while planted in a chair, children deserve and need playtime without overbearing adult interference, children learn soccer from playing and mimicking others, not from instructions. The Brazilian and Argentine players who delight us so much developed their skills playing without adults looking over their shoulders stifling their creative impulses and critiquing their "mistakes".

I imagine a 6-year-old Maradona would have quit the sport if his introduction to it entailed doing the drills we make our kids do instead of letting him run around trying to score. Of all the hundreds of successful American and international players I have interviewed or researched, they have had in common the fact that they played soccer as much as they could outside of their organized leagues - in their backyard, in their house, at the local park. They did so because they had fallen in love with the game.

The chances that children will develop a passion for the game are much greater if they have a good time playing it. And I can't imagine anyone with a soccer background will disagree that the most fun part of soccer is playing a game, with goals to score on. And when children play mini-games they should be allowed to play as they please - explore the game and not be talked to constantly by the coach. Above all, young children shouldn't be discouraged from dribbling.

Expecting an under-8 team to develop a passing game is like forcing little kids to figure out Rubik's Cube instead of letting them play with Legos. Young kids can comprehend the concept of dribbling and they like to do it. So they should be encouraged. After all, a look at higher levels of the game reveals what a precious skill dribbling is. We

have far more good passers than good dribblers.  
Moreover, dribbling develops ball skills that will help  
players become good passers.

Fortunately, the U.S. Soccer Federation is trying to send  
the message to youth coaches that "the game is the best  
teacher."