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# How adults can 'teach' kids by playing along

By Mike Woitalla

One of the best ways for adults to coach children is to play along with them.

It's certainly no secret that children learn more from what they see than from what they are told. Just try explaining how to strike a ball without demonstrating.

Whether it's at a practice scrimmage or a casual kickaround, children playing with and against adults pick up all sorts of soccer skill and knowledge.

But, of course, there are risks when children play a sport with persons three times as big, and the adults must play without causing injuries or invading on the children's playtime.

From my own experiences and a survey of several longtime youth coaches on the subject, here are some key points to consider when taking part in children's soccer-playing:

\* **DON'T JUMP.** Leaving your feet – whether to head the ball or lunge for a loose ball – means you're going to land, and coming down on a little one can hurt them.

\* **BE CAREFUL WITH HIGH BALLS.** It's tempting to chip the ball across the field to an open player, but when you're on the field with a 4-foot-5 players, a mis-hit can strike a face. Obviously, an adult playing with little kids shouldn't be blasting the ball at full force.

\* **USE A 'SOFTER' BALL.** With young children, play with a ball that is slightly less than fully inflated. This will reduce pain if an adult's shot does smack a kid.

\* **CONSIDER YOUR SKILL LEVEL.** Adults who aren't experienced players must be especially careful when playing with children. It's very easy to kick a foot instead of the ball if you're not a skilled player. Besides, if you're not a good player, there's not much the children will learn from you.

But the inexperienced adult can learn the game *with* the kids by playing pass-back or juggling together. If adult soccer-novices play in games, they should avoid one-on-one battles or getting into the middle of the action.

\* **DEFEND JUST A LITTLE.** If a youngster is trying to dribble past you, create one obstacle. Preventing them from dribbling to the left of you, for example, and if they try to beat you to the right, let them go past you. Against more mature players, it's OK to make the challenge more difficult. A kid who easily dribbles past all his peers needs the challenge. But you're not out there to win anything.

\* **DON'T BE A 'GOALKEEPER.'** For some reason, adults in pickup games often park themselves in front of the goal. That serves no purpose but to frustrate the children.

\* **BE A TEAMMATE.** Don't micromanage the play and positioning of young children. Speak to the players as a teammate would, not a coach. With older children during a practice session, playing along does provide a good opportunity to make quick concise comments.

\* **PASS, PASS, PASS.** One of the biggest benefits of playing along with young children is that the adult can deliver passes to the players who haven't seen much of the ball and get them involved in the play.

Young children simply don't comprehend a passing game. They aren't inclined to sharing the ball and they shouldn't be forced to while they're exploring the game in their introductory stages.

When coaches play along with their teams at practice, they can constantly demonstrate passing. And when coaches pass the ball back to the player they got it from, they send the message that sharing pays off.

\* **BE A NEUTRAL PLAYER.** A great option for a coach, or an older player invited to take part in practice, is to play a neutral role in games. The neutral player doesn't defend or score, but provides a passing option and helps his or her team keep possession.

\* **DON'T BE THE STAR.** It's OK to show off a flashy move now and then, because the kids learn by seeing good skills, but they're the ones who should be scoring the goals and preventing them.

\* **ADJUST TO THE AGE.** As always, appreciate the stage of development the children are in. The younger and smaller they are, the more cautious the adult must be, while adults can play a more active role in a game with older, bigger players.

*(Mike Voitalla, the executive editor of Soccer America, coaches youth soccer for Rockridge SC in Oakland, Calif. His youth soccer articles are archived at [YouthSoccerFun.com](http://YouthSoccerFun.com).)*