

# The equal playing time debate

According to Colleen Hacker, NSCAA National Academy staff coach and professor of sports psychology at Pacific Lutheran University, children play soccer:

- To have fun.
- To be with friends.
- To experience the excitement of competition.
- To enhance their physical fitness.
- To demonstrate their competence

Sadly, however, about 75% of children who play soccer stop playing the game before they get to the age of 13. A recent study found the top five reasons for this high drop out rate were:

1. Lack of playing time.
2. Overemphasis on winning.
3. Other activities are more interesting.
4. Lack of fun.
5. Coaching/adult behaviors [1].

There's nothing we can do about reason 3 but we can do something about all the rest, especially the number 1 reason why children stop playing: lack of playing time. In fact, if we make sure all our players get a fair amount of playing time, we will go a long way to removing reasons 2, 4 and 5 too.

Logically, there is no good reason to keep a child on the bench for longer than absolutely necessary. Children learn new skills and practise what they've learned in training sessions on the pitch. They won't learn anything sitting on the bench, except that their coach obviously thinks they aren't good enough to play for the team.

As Jim Thompson, executive director for the Positive Coaching Alliance says:

*"Kids love to play. They don't like to sit on the bench. Moreover, most of the benefits of playing a sport are tied to competing in games. Kids who sit benefit less from sports than kids who play. I don't see how anyone can argue with this."*

So why do some coaches persist in playing their "best" players all the time and ignoring the needs of their new or not-so-skilled players?

There is only one answer: they want to win matches so much that they dare not take a risk with a player who might make a mistake and cost the team a goal.

When I put this to "coach A" – an U10s coach who unashamedly picks teams to win matches – he defended his policy by saying that if he gave more playing time to his weaker players his team would lose matches they could have won. And if that happened he would be in danger of losing his best players – they would move to a team that did play to win every week.

But even if that is true (and I'm not sure it is) what does it matter? A team that puts player development ahead of results will certainly attract more children and, if the coach is good at his job, he will develop them into proficient players.

Coach A also said that part of his job was to help his players understand that the team is "bigger" than the individual and the interests of the team should always take precedence.

He followed that by saying his players had to earn the right to make the starting line-up, it wasn't going to be given to them, but if his team was winning easily he would give his subs a few minutes at the end of the game "to prove themselves".

At this point I took a deep breath. For a start, nine year olds need "meaningful minutes" on the pitch, not five minutes at the end of a game that is already won. And children earn the right to play by coming to training sessions and trying their best, not by being the most talented.

Effort, for a young child, equals success and to deny a hard-working child the chance to play in a match with their friends seems to me to be heartless in the extreme.

It is also counter productive. Eventually the bench warmers will quit and only the "stars" will be left. What if one or two of them decide to leave with their benched friends or a couple of players pick up injuries?

Where will the team be then?

And rather than teach his players that the team is more important than the individual, this coach would be better making sure his players know that he values effort over achievement and every player, no matter what their level of expertise, are important to him and the team.

As players get older or move up to a higher level of competition, it may be acceptable to give skilled players more playing time than the less skilled. But even if 12 or 13 year olds don't get equal playing time any more, the allocation of playing time still has to be fair.

Giving the same players five or six minutes at the end of a match is not sufficient. Playing time needs to be meaningful. When the subs go on, the game needs to be in the balance, the result still uncertain.

Whatever your policy is on playing time, it needs to be communicated effectively and in a timely manner. So before the season begins make sure your players and parents know how you will decide who is in the starting line-up and how you will manage your substitutions.

Whether you coach kindergarten soccer, rec, travel, college, high school, academy, mini soccer or eleven-a-side on Saturday mornings please remember one thing: your players want to play, not sit on the bench.

So give them – all of them – fair, meaningful playing time.

References:

1. Vince Ganzberg, Director of Education for Indiana Youth Soccer, [Why They Stop](#), US Youth Soccer, 2008

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**QUOTE OF THE DAY:** *"A hundred years from now it will not matter how much was in my bank account, the sort of house I lived in, or the kind of car I drove... but the world may be different because I was important in the life of a c*