

Teaching **leadership** to youth soccer players

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Think back on your favorite coach. How did his or her leadership style and traits transfer over to you? How about a coach you didn't care for so much? Do you purposely avoid those traits and styles? Keep the answers to these questions in mind when modeling your own leadership and providing feedback to your players. Just as you picked up on things from your coaches, your players will pick them up from you.

When teaching leadership development, try to make a conscious effort to include all players, not just the team captains. Leadership is very specific to the individual and everyone has something to offer. Look at each player individually and try to figure out what that quality is. While giving your attention to everyone and knowing that everyone has leadership potential, keep in mind that not everyone is motivated to take a leadership role.

Allow capable players to demonstrate skills/techniques for the rest of the team. While making points during practice, ask questions. Let the players think of answers in their own words.

Listed below are a few of the most common leadership qualities coaches may look for in young soccer players. Below each one are concrete exercises you can incorporate in practices to give your players the opportunity to lead. During these exercises, kids may not understand at first and may make mistakes, just like they do when trying new technical skills. Help by being a facilitator and modeling leadership appropriate to the situation. Remember, that leadership development is an ongoing process.

VISION/TEAM GOALS

Set team goals for the season, games and practices. Encourage input from all players.

COMMUNICATION

- 1) Allow different players to lead warm-ups.
- 2) Have different players supervise in picking up equipment after practice.
- 3) In possession games and scrimmages, allow only one person per team to talk.

MODELING

Allow capable players to demonstrate skills/techniques for the rest of the team.

DECISION-MAKING

Prepare two practice plans. Present a player with the options and allow him or her to choose based on what they think will help the team more.

PROBLEM-SOLVING

While making points during practice, ask questions. Let the players think of answers in their own words.

HARD WORK

Give positive praise for hard work more than negative attention for laziness.



APPROPRIATE RISKS

In practices, encourage players to try new moves and skills. Also encourage them to speak up and be assertive.

As you can see, each of the examples given above involves giving the power to the players. This is what we as coaches ideally want: Players who step up to challenges on their own, especially during matches. The more ownership a player feels about the performance or success of his or her team, the better. Using exercises like these can give players a chance to learn, acquire and improve on leadership skills through experience. At the same time, these exercises are not the end-all be-all of teaching leadership. Use them as a guideline and be creative, catering to your own style.

In the end, we are coaching not only to make better soccer players, but better people. Leadership development is a useful tool for creating leaders on the field and in life. To teach leadership, you must:

- Know your own leadership and be fully conscious of it
- Bring leadership and the importance of it to your players' attention
- Model appropriate leadership
- Provide positive feedback to your players
- Give your players opportunities to lead by incorporating leadership exercises into your practices.

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