



U.S. SOCCER COACHING EDUCATION

PLAY-PRACTICE-PLAY OVERVIEW

INTRODUCTION



U.S. Soccer developed and implemented the Play-Practice-Play methodology at the Grassroots level. Researched and developed by technical leaders, this player-centered approach allows coaches of all levels to help create training environments to fulfill the two basic needs of players of all ages: to have fun and to develop!

The game of soccer is very unpredictable and free-flowing. It's constantly changing between the moments of attacking, defending, and both transitional moments in between. Each of the three phases of Play-Practice-Play replicates those moments and are easy for the coach to implement. The environment provides players with what they like and with what they need to analyze the game, make decisions, be creative with their own solutions, and to ultimately become independent, critical thinkers.

U.S. SOCCER GRASSROOTS PLAYER DEVELOPMENT PHILOSOPHY

At the grassroots level, children learn and develop to their full potential through game-like experiences in an enjoyable environment which supports individual growth



THE 1ST PLAY PHASE



As children arrive at practice, they immediately start playing small games (2v2, 3v3, or 4v4, or a game with unequal numbers based on the available number of players). The coach's priorities during the first play phase are to welcome the players, ensure safety, and observe/monitor their behaviors while PLAYING.

There is an intention within this first phase based on the training session goal that the coach has selected prior to the session; the coach has an influence by using teaching actions, such as positive specific praise, key words, and asking guided questions.

These teaching actions help plant seeds for players to think about the goal while experiencing the fun of a small-sided game and to learn by making decisions, creating their own solutions, and solving the problems that the game presents. Empirical data has shown that children learn best when they experience periods of play in a safe environment where they can experiment and make decisions. The goal of this phase is to get players excited about training and primed to learn about today's training-session goal based on a real context that they have just experienced.

ATTACKING TRAINING SESSION GOALS	DEFENDING TRAINING SESSION GOALS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Building up from own half to move the ball to the opponent's half • Building up in opponent's half to create chances • Score goals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prevent the opponent from building up in their own half • Prevent the opponent from building up and creating chances in our half • Prevent the opponent from scoring

FAQ- When do the players warm up and stretch?

It's important to prepare their bodies for the motor skills and movements that they will use while playing. Improving flexibility is important to prepare them for practice or the game and also to help prevent injury. We see a decrease in flexibility as growth accelerates. Specific flexibility training through tag games or moving games are appropriate from the age of 11-12 (prior to puberty). It is also best carried out when players are warm after some movement. Coaches should consider the first break in play 1 as a potential time for stretching.



THE PRACTICE PHASE



The Practice Phase is where the players will actively learn through continued guidance from the coach. This phase uses game-like activities - directional, located in the corresponding area of the field for the training objective, and free-flowing with attacking, defending, and both transition moments. The activities set up meaningful repetitions of today's goal.

There are three options (or challenge levels) in the Practice Phase: Core, Less Challenging, and More Challenging. Coaches start with the core activity and then decide to move to the less or more challenging activity to find the appropriate level of challenge for the players. Players build on their previous experiences from the 1st Play Phase and apply their own solutions with the coach's guidance.

Along the way, players will make mistakes and the coach continues to help by not only using positive reinforcement, guided questions, and key words, but also other teaching actions such as demonstrations, feedback, or directions. The coach also interacts with the players about the "why" of the desired behaviors. The goal of the practice phase is to help players further develop their solutions to the challenges presented in the 1st Play Phase.

5 ELEMENTS OF A TRAINING ACTIVITY

- 1. Organized:** is the activity organized in the right way? (is it safe and the ball stays in play?)
- 2. Game-like:** is the activity game-like? (attacking, defending, & transition)
- 3. Repetition:** is there repetition when looking at the overall goal of the session?
- 4. Challenging:** are the players being challenged? (is there the right balance between being successful and unsuccessful?)
- 5. Coaching:** is there effective coaching, based on the age and level of the players?

	4 v 4	7 v 7	9 v 9	11 v 11
	U-6, U-7, U-8	U-9, U-10	U-11, U-12	U-13+
ATTACKING	U-6 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shoot Pass or dribble forward U-7/U-8 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Spread out Create passing options Support the attack 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shoot Pass or dribble forward Spread out Create passing options Support the attack Create a 2v1 or 1v1 Change the point of attack 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shoot Pass or dribble forward Spread out Create passing options Support the attack Create a 2v1 or 1v1 Change the point of attack Change the pace/rhythm Switch positions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shoot Pass or dribble forward Spread out Create passing options Support the attack Create a 2v1 or 1v1 Change the point of attack Change the pace/rhythm Switch positions
A>D	DEFEND AS QUICKLY AS POSSIBLE			
DEFENDING	U-6 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Protect the goal Steal the ball U-7/U-8 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Make it compact Keep it compact 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Protect the goal Steal the ball Make it compact Keep it compact Pressure, cover, balance Outnumber the opponent 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Protect the goal Steal the ball Make it compact Keep it compact Pressure, cover, balance Outnumber the opponent Stay involved Mark the player/mark the area 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Protect the goal Steal the ball Make it compact Keep it compact Pressure, cover, balance Outnumber the opponent Stay involved Mark the player/mark the area
D>A	ATTACK AS QUICKLY AS POSSIBLE			

FAQ- What about technique?

Technique is the isolated execution of a soccer action, whereas skill is the execution of the technique in a context with decision-making. Within a game-like context, players learn fundamental skills (techniques performed in the context of the game) through playing. U.S. Soccer has developed a list of developmentally appropriate Player Actions (see figure 3) which coaches select as part of the training session goal. They are integrated with the Key Qualities which are also needed for the player to perform the action.

THE 2ND PLAY PHASE



The final phase offers players the opportunity to scrimmage now with larger numbers involved and with minimal interruptions; this is why the players came to training. The coach still has an influence through specific teaching actions such as key words and checking for understanding through guided questions.

It is also an opportunity to learn the Laws of the Game/Rules, as it mimics a game with using the max roster size for the age group. For instance, 7v7 has a max roster size of 12, so the final game is 6v6 and all players are encouraged to play and apply what they have learned in the previous two phases. In this final phase, the main priority for the coach is to check the effectiveness of his/her teaching actions from the 1st Play and Practice Phases. A half-time is built in to this phase, so that the coach can help players reflect on their first-half performance and look for solutions to challenges in the game related to today's training session goal. The coach now can use all previously used key words and guided questions, and help the player get organized for the second half of play.

Following the conclusion of the session, coaches should take a moment to check on the players' well-being, review the objectives of the training session, check for players' understanding of today's training session goal, and inform or remind them about the next training or game.

FAQ- When do they learn the rules (throw-ins, corner kicks, etc.)?

Within the holistic approach, players learn the rules of the game through playing and experiencing the moments when/where the rule occurs. The 2nd Play Phase provides many of these moments within a context that most closely resembles the game.

Conclusion

The Play-Practice-Play methodology helps coaches create enjoyable environments, with the ultimate goal of developing players to their full potential. The methodology has three main objectives:

1. Play-Practice-Play helps coaches create a player-centered environment. This means having a holistic approach to coaching that places the needs and motivations of all players at the forefront.
2. In order to help players transfer what they have learned in practice to games, this methodology provides players with multiple opportunities to experience realistic game moments and make decisions.
3. When using this methodology, coaching becomes much easier and training is more enjoyable for both the players and coaches.

All of these factors have been proven to increase motivation to make playing soccer a lifetime activity. Play-Practice-Play promotes fun, inclusion, and development. All the best on your soccer journey!

