

Coaching Kids' Soccer: Observations from the Sidelines



Food for Thought for Rec and Parent Coaches

Why These Guides Exist

These guides exist because many rec soccer teams are coached by parents who step up so their child and their child's friends can play.

Most parent coaches care deeply. They want kids to enjoy the game, feel confident, and have a positive experience. At the same time, youth soccer can quickly become confusing, emotional, and louder than it needs to be. Mixed messages, pressure, and a focus on results often creep in without anyone meaning for it to happen.

Over the years, I have seen the same situations appear repeatedly at rec level. Not because people do not care, but because there is very little simple guidance that supports parent coaches in the day to day reality of the role.

These guides are not about fixing anyone. They are simply food for thought.

Who These Guides Are For

These guides are written for:

- Rec and parent coaches
- Volunteer coaches working with mixed ability teams
- Coaches who care more about the experience than the score
- Adults who want kids to enjoy training and games

They are written with ages **4 to 8** in mind, where adult behavior, tone, and environment have the biggest impact on how children experience soccer. Within each topic, ideas naturally evolve from U5 through to U9.

They are not written for elite teams, competitive pathways, or coaches chasing licenses.

If you are coaching so kids can enjoy playing soccer, you are in the right place.

What These Guides Are and Are Not

These guides are:

- Observations
- Personal opinions
- Supportive ideas
- Language you can use or adapt

They are not:

- Rules
- Club policy
- Official advice
- A checklist of things you must do

Take what fits your environment and leave the rest.

Where These Observations Come From

The thoughts in these guides are shaped by more than thirty-five years around youth soccer.

That includes watching my own children and grandchildren play, being coached by many different coaches, and competing against teams with very different approaches and values. Some environments felt positive and supportive. Others felt pressured and uncomfortable.

In my experience, the same patterns tend to repeat themselves. These guides reflect those real-life observations, nothing more.

The Principles That Shape Everything

These principles guide everything in this series. They are not rules. They are values.

- Kids play better when they feel safe
- Enjoyment comes before improvement

- Improvement happens naturally when kids enjoy the environment
- Mistakes are part of learning
- Adults set the emotional tone
- How we behave matters more than the score

A coach does not need to agree with all of these to be effective. But shared understanding helps everyone relax.

A Quiet Reminder

When the environment is right, the soccer takes care of itself. When it is not, even the best intentions can fall flat.

What Success Looks Like at Rec Level

At rec level, success is often misunderstood.

Success is not the league table.

Success is not who scores the most goals.

Success is not winning every weekend.

Success looks like:

- Kids wanting to come back next week
- Players feeling comfortable trying things
- Parents feeling welcome and informed
- Coaches driving home feeling good about the experience

If players, coaches, and parents all enjoy the experience, everyone wins.

Communication, Transparency, and Support

Most problems in rec soccer are not soccer problems. They are communication problems.

Clear and honest communication protects everyone involved.

Good habits include:

- Explaining your approach early
- Setting expectations calmly
- Offering a private way for parents to talk
- Listening before reacting

Disagreements should be handled respectfully and early. When issues involve player welfare, discipline, or ongoing conflict, the coach should always involve the club.

Most clubs have a Director of Rec Soccer or a similar role. This person is there to support coaches and families. Parent coaches should never feel they have to manage difficult situations on their own.

What to Say to Parents

- “I am focused on creating a positive experience for every child.”
- “If you have concerns, please talk to me privately.”
- “If something goes beyond the team, the club is there to support us.”

Situations I Keep Seeing in Youth Soccer

Over the years, these are some of the situations that keep coming up at rec level. They are not problems to fix, just moments where a little perspective can help.

- Match results versus performance at young ages
- Sideline behavior and adult reactions
- How mistakes support learning
- Pressure and confidence

- Playing time and fairness
- What kids actually remember after games
- The car ride to the game and the car ride home
- When effort matters more than outcomes
- How adult language shapes a child's experience
- Letting kids solve problems on their own

Each of these topics will be explored in future short guides, with advice that evolves from ages 4 to 8.

How to Use These Guides

These guides are designed to be used like an assistant coach.

You might read them before a season starts.

You might return to one during a challenging week.

You might borrow language for a parent email or a private conversation.

Adapt the wording. Use your own voice. Skip what does not fit.

There is no right or wrong way to use them.

Summary and What Comes Next

Key Takeaways

- Enjoyment comes before improvement at young ages
- The environment adults create matters more than results
- Clear communication prevents most problems
- Calm behavior builds confidence
- There is no single right way to coach

How to Use This Going Forward

You do not need to apply everything in this guide at once. Choose one or two ideas that feel right for your team and start there. Small changes in tone and communication often make the biggest difference.

A Look Ahead

The next guide in this series focuses on **Good Practice**. Not rules or discipline, but the simple habits that teach respect, sportsmanship, and empathy through the game.

A Final Thought

These guides are not here to tell anyone how to coach. They exist to offer perspective, reassurance, and calm language when things feel loud or confusing. If the kids enjoy training and games, you are doing something right.

A Thought to Pause On

Enjoyment comes first. Improvement follows naturally.