

Hoffenheim's Philosophy of Youth Development

Age-appropriate guidelines and principles for cultivating independence, creativity and motivation are the cornerstones of their approach.

The ultimate object of Hoffenheim's holistic concept, which treats soccer, school, career and social relations as a single entity, is to provide general principles and precise instructions for coaches at each age and ability level.

The stated goal of our training and development work is to comprehensively transform athletically gifted children into creative players with excellent game action speed and professional potential.

Youth players should emerge from our training program as resilient team players with great strength of character. We also want to inspire them to be lifelong learners and to prepare them for life.

At the core of our effectiveness as educators is the example we set as coaches: the way we talk, the way we move, the way we act. Our players observe our attitude toward common values such as loyalty, discipline and fairness, as well as our conduct around referees, fellow coaches and players, and they copy what we do.

What we expect of players

Within the framework of our philosophy, we formulate clear expectations about the personal development of our players. We support our players but we also expect them to be proactive in conscientiously implementing our standards. Our players should be conscious of their privileges and show by the way they act that they value them accordingly.

We demand players with an honest, authentic attitude. Our players are expected to manage their weekly training time intelligently and be generally organized enough to move energetically forward in all areas of life (school, work and soccer). We want genuine individuals who are smart, creative and independent – bold enough to step out of line from time to time, but generally team players who subscribe to the team's objectives.

We also expect and encourage our players to have an "English" mentality: hard on themselves and tough enough to handle practice, matches and any other kind of challenge. We definitely don't want players being dishonest or disrespecting their opponents and teammates.

The building blocks of developmentally appropriate training

Our training philosophy begins with an understanding of youth players' age-specific psychological characteristics, which are broken down by age group. These determine how we think and act in relation to our players. From these general principles come specific guidelines, which are developed in consultation with educational professionals. They are intended as recommended procedures for running practice sessions, interacting with players and dealing with conflict situations.

One basic principle that shapes our actions at all age levels has to do with helping players become progressively more independent. The object of our solution-oriented, open-ended and inductive approach is to teach our youth players how to act on their own initiative and grapple with problems. At the basic and intermediate levels of training, the coach's role is to give the players the opportunity to play an active role and refine their thinking. He is not the mastermind who tells everyone what to do – he is a communicator and dialogue-oriented facilitator and friend. His job is to support the players and build up their courage so they can face challenges, make decisions and develop solutions.

Another important principle is that practice activities and matches should be age-appropriate. This means adapting activities and teaching methods to players' physical and intellectual capacities. Every level has its own characteristics, objectives and methods. Little children, whose sense of self-worth is still quite fragile, need consistent support, encouragement and validation. Treat the teenagers with respect, accept their opinions and engage in dialogue with them.

In the end, however, personal development rests on a set of attitudes and values that are binding for all involved. Therefore, in our dealings with our young player, we practice and encourage values like fairness, discipline, dependability and solidarity - an approach that is reflected in our target player profile.

The 11 points of the target player profile

1. Open and honest
2. Ready to learn
3. Independent
4. Critical
5. Self-aware
6. Fair
7. Team-minded
8. Respectful
9. Proactive
10. Passionate
11. Principled

Youth Training Level By Level

Basic Training Early childhood (ages 4 – 11)
Intermediate Training .. Early adolescence (ages 11 – 15)
Advanced Training Transition to adulthood (ages 15 – 18)

Basic Training

Children between these ages are dependent in all areas of life on adults, who provide the protected space necessary for optimal development. The kids are open and loyal, but can be overwhelmed by emotions without warning. They live in the present and accept their world as self-evident. This is an exceptionally sensitive period for cultivating values and attitudes, and for the learning process in general. In today's world, young children need both security and support for their independence. They need love, security, praise and validation. They want to be understood, encouraged and praised. They also need the freedom to solve problems and gain experience on their own. The primary objective of basic training is to help the players become resilient, self-aware and responsible individuals. In the end, only those who believe in themselves can take on responsibilities and support their teammates.

First taste of the game

Basic training should be age-appropriate and a fun introduction to a long-term training program. All activities must be suited to their biological development and mental level. A great deal of practice time should be devoted to general movement training, with a variety of fun activities to improve coordination as well as speed and mobility. A further objective is to teach the basic elements of technique and how to use them in simple tactical situations. You do this with lots of simple games on small fields, with multiple goals and varying team size.

Everything depends on trust

On the inter-personal level, what's important initially is to build a relationship of mutual trust with our players. Above all, this means always being an attentive and dependable partner who listens patiently to players and is also interested in their lives outside of soccer. All players are equally important. The coach sets the tone when it comes to courtesy and respect, always trying to create a friendly atmosphere. In conflict situations, he gets all the facts before making a decision, and he shares his reasons.

Organize it right

Basic training must be enjoyable and fun. Provide your players with a diverse assortment of training activities, always pick challenges that your players can handle. Be sure your language is clear and age-appropriate, and don't get long-winded – keep it short and to the point. Also, it is important to stay in contact with the parents – understand their expectations and explain yours. Always be sure to make it clear that you, the coach, is in charge and that certain behaviors (verbal attacks and consumption of alcohol) are not compatible with our values and must be addressed.

Check in with yourself

The coach should frequently ask himself: What am I trying to achieve with my players? Are the activities and matches age-appropriate? Are my language and behavior suitable for children? Am I 100 % satisfied with my work? If not, what can I change?
To help the young players become more self-reliant, assign them small duties before, during and after training. In this way, the players sense that we trust them and are encouraged to take on more responsibility. Cultivate feelings of joy, self-confidence and security and avoid fear, insecurity and stress.

Intermediate Training

The intermediate training phase consists of players between the ages of 11 and 15. This often difficult phase is marked by the onset of puberty. During this period, children increasingly break away from their parents and demonstrate this in their behavior. They begin to form their own identities and enter into a new, more independent relationship with adults.

Kids this age also go through a series of fundamental physical, emotional and mental changes. This affects their entire behavior, which often becomes unpredictable, erratic, emotional, defiant, dogmatic and disinterested.

They fluctuate between an exaggerated sense of self-worth and extreme self-criticism. They seek new models to emulate. They attach great importance to a group of friends, to which they desperately want to belong. It is important to them to get attention. Adolescence is a challenging phase in which kids want to try out new behavior patterns -- as they should.

Developing positive personality traits

The transition from basic to intermediate training is fluid. All the previous concepts must be kept going. At this age, however, we face significant demands which we as coaches and educators must live up to in the way we speak to and work with our players.

Our objective is to produce self-aware, responsible, cooperative young people who embody both individuality and community spirit. We want our players to be strong and resilient. We need to reinforce their faith in themselves. Encourage realistic self-assessment and provide support and understanding as they create their identities.

For their part, players need to handle their freedoms and boundaries responsibly and learn how to conduct themselves within these parameters.

Stabilizing the fundamentals

For 12 to 15 year olds, the focus is on consolidating the technique they've learned in basic training. By age 14 or so, they should have internalized all basic techniques and be able to use them in play. Additional concepts for U13s are individual tactics in 1 v 1 situations, group tactics on attack and defense and an understanding of more complex tactical relationships.

The emphasis for U15 players shifts to stabilizing basic techniques under increasing time and opposition pressure. It is also important to improve difficult techniques and apply them under match conditions. Group tactics in defense, midfield and offense must be refined, and team tactics and formations must be learned. Building up general and soccer-specific muscle groups help to continue to develop basic athletic ability.

Cooperation, not competition

All coaching begins with a process of self-diagnosis, thus two questions:

What am I trying to achieve?

Are my methods age-appropriate?

At the intermediate level, "age-appropriate" means treating players with respect, giving them progressively more responsibility and not taking yourself too seriously. At the same time, you must make clear to the players when you expect absolute discipline, what the boundaries are, and what consequences they can expect to face when they break the rules. These consequences should be appropriate and directed at the misconduct, not the person.

When planning a practice session, cooperation should take precedence over competition. We want to develop creative, self-confident players who learn from their mistakes, and are not afraid to experiment.

It is especially important to remind overzealous parents that players at this age level are still children. Their job is to provide solid, emotional support.

Advanced Training

Between the ages of 15 and 19, the personality traits developed during early puberty are consolidated. The self-image becomes more well-defined and they are less easily upset by outside influences. Lifestyle and value structures are still determined by group attitudes. At this age, the necessity of career training demands a forward-looking attitude in thought and action. Along with this also comes an increase in anxieties and fears, which must be taken into account.

Individualized attention

The holistic training of body, mind and spirit has become more and more complex and now includes a greater emphasis on mental, social and occupational aspects. Practical, age-appropriate psychological training now plays an increasingly important role as well. It includes an analysis of personal standards and values, focused attempts to build self-confidence, and optimal regulation of motivation and aggressiveness. Mental training, self-talk and long-term goals help the players respond in optimal ways to the physical and psychological challenges they face.

Personal specialization

To find optimal solutions to complex problems, 14 to 18 year old players need to build the biggest repertoire of techniques and moves they can. Advanced training focuses on versatility in using techniques under time, space and opposition pressure.

One of the most important objectives is to get all players in optimum physical condition. Endurance, strength and speed training should be appropriate to the demands of soccer while counterbalancing the effects of overexertion. A combination of torso stability, cyclic and acyclic speed, maneuverability, mobility and aerobic training will prepare the players for the physically intense play that they will encounter.

Support for young adults

As players become increasingly independent, the relationship between coach and player takes on a new aspect. The thin line between intimacy and distance must be kept in view and always respected.

Training must be purposeful yet variable, with a sensible mix of independence and leadership, autonomy and solidarity, individuality and team spirit.

Mistakes should still be regarded as opportunities for learning and must be corrected. The point is to learn from errors, not to intercept every single one. The coach calls attention to the mistake, asks the player his opinion, and explains the proper solution in easily understood language. Valid critiques and opinions are valuable and desirable – unfair comments, insults, abusive language and singling a player out for criticism are not. Try to put yourself in the player's position and actively listen to them. In many cases, the players have personal problems that require our understanding and support.

Privileges and responsibilities

Knowing as we do how many factors influence an athlete's personal development and future success, we give our players the best athletic, academic, occupational, social and mental support possible. However, we also have very high expectations. We require a great deal of initiative, organizational skills and responsibility, among other qualities. Players are expected to mentally engage with every activity offered, to always bring a professional attitude and to make steady progress at school at work and on the soccer field.