

# **Playing and Training Issues for Goalkeepers**

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October 2001**

All children will develop at different rates, based on their genetic timetable and the influence of adults, siblings and friends. It is also true that two children of the same chronological age can be almost a full year apart in terms of biological and social development. The following developmental outline should therefore be taken as a continuum, rather than an absolute.

## **Five and Six Year-olds**

Goalkeepers should not be a feature of play at this age. However, using the hands to manipulate the ball during individual and partner activities designed to improve body-to-ball awareness should be encouraged.

## **Seven and Eight Year-olds**

By the seventh and eighth year, young children will start to gravitate to the role of goalkeeper and will enjoy playing the position in practices and games. Not all young children are drawn to the goal, however, so care must be taken to accommodate any natural apprehensions. The “skills” of goalkeeping at this age essentially reduce to picking up the ball and basic shot stopping, with most diving associated with falling on balls rolling very close to the body. All the goalkeeping techniques demonstrated will be quite unrefined and distribution skills will be limited to throwing and punting, with both actions unlikely to have any tactical purpose beyond clearing the ball away from the goal. Seven and eight year-olds can be quite brave, but they can also be under-cautious, resulting in a few bumps and bruises. There is no “aerial” game for U-7/8’s, and any communication with teammates will be more supportive than tactically substantive. All seven and eight year-olds should be trained as field players, not goalkeepers.

## **Nine and Ten Year-olds**

By the time a young player approaches nine or ten, their physical qualities will have changed significantly and they will have clearly started to identify with the trappings and mindset of the goalkeeper position. While these players should remain as active field players for at least two-thirds of all team-oriented training sessions and half of games, they should certainly be helped to refine their goalkeeping techniques before or after the regular practice, or during goalkeeper-specific sessions. Goalkeepers at this age can perform all the basic catching techniques and can collapse in control and dive with some power. The basic tactical concepts of getting into the line of shots and closing down shooting angles are also within the capabilities of the U9/10 player. The major coaching emphases during this period should be refining basic techniques, improving footwork and balance, and building hand-eye coordination as a response to the speed, height, and

trajectory of the ball. While dealing with high balls should be part of training, crossing situations, per se, rank low in terms of relevance to game situations.

### **Eleven and Twelve Year-olds**

Eleven and twelve year-old goalkeepers are capable of looking, acting and performing in mature ways, with only physical limitations and game experience constraining their rate of progress. The coaching emphases should continue to refine basic techniques for catching, collecting, smothering and diving, with crossing situations becoming much more relevant. Tactically, eleven and twelve year-olds have much greater range in performing their supporting functions behind the defense and in dealing with crosses, and their willingness to communicate with defenders should be encouraged. The U-11/12 goalkeeper will likely have difficulty with crosses and high balls played into the area, particularly in traffic, and their appreciation of how to organize a defense in crossing situations will prove to be a challenge. The need to circulate the ball across the back of the team to change the point of attack brings the goalkeeper's foot skills into prominence, as does the enforcement of the pass back rule.

As with field players, the skills and abilities of U-11/12 goalkeepers will be highly varied. Specialist trainers are recommended for this group to ensure that a sound balance is maintained between skill refinement and fitness. A major concern with the layman goalkeeper coach is that anaerobic fitness activities are often coated as goalkeeper "development," and that high intensity training activities are often lauded as meeting the long-term needs of this population. While some fitness enhancement is expected from regular goalkeeper training, skill refinement is more likely to be achieved from lower intensity activities.

While technical and physical development will remain staples of the young goalkeeper's practice diet, a key emphasis in training goalkeepers at the U-11/12 level is the expansion of tactical awareness, particularly with the offside rule becoming a challenging new feature of play. The goalkeeping basics of getting into line and cutting down the shooting angle also require constant refinement and reinforcement, especially as field players become more adept at disguising their shots and striking the ball with increased pace and spin. Facing live practice situations in small-sided and large-sided games is important for young goalkeepers as they learn to relate their choice of technique to the tactical demands of the game.