

# Inclusion - Why honesty is the best policy for players and parents

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One of the most difficult issues that you will face as a youth football coach is trying to ensure that all of your squad get equal playing time.

When it comes to the selection of your squad, part of your responsibility is to decide at the outset on the number of players that you need and to honestly manage their expectations. Do allow for injuries and absence (holidays or school commitments), however don't sign too many players and ensure you are within league guidelines. It is vitally important that your ethos and plan is made perfectly clear to both players and their parents/guardians from the moment that they become involved. If you intend to select players with the sole intention of winning games and based purely on ability then this must be made perfectly clear.

I read a very interesting article recently in which a "soccer mum" gave an excellent insight into how it can feel to be marginalised and consistently overlooked as a young footballer. Make no mistake, it can have a lasting affect on a player as well as their parent/guardian or whoever regularly accompanies them on a match-day. You can ruin a players enthusiasm for the game (sometimes quite innocently) and damage their confidence from an early age if you don't see the bigger picture. Once you allow a player to register, provide them with a kit and involve them as a member of your squad it becomes your responsibility to fully involve them, especially on a match day.

Having been a youth football coach for many years I fully appreciate that there is a "level" for all players and it is important that this is found so that players are comfortable in their surroundings. Unfortunately, many youth football coaches tend to focus on their more "gifted" players from an early age in the pursuit of winning games. If you take this course of action ask yourself what are you actually achieving as a coach; Is your aim to win games at all costs, or is your priority to develop the players you are working with?

If your aim is to develop players, ensure an inclusive atmosphere, a strong team ethic and equal opportunities for players to progress, then this should remain your priority. It has been proven that one of the main reasons that boys and girls join football teams is that they enjoy playing with their friends and they see this as more important than winning every week. Try not to restrict players from a young age by insisting that they play in a certain position or formation week in week out.

It is important to experiment, give players opportunities to try new roles, new positions, make mistakes and guess what - you may well lose the odd game. What you will gain, which is far more rewarding, is the chance to see your players develop, learn new skills and ultimately you can unlock talent that you may not know existed!

If you are constantly playing the same starting seven or eleven and your substitutes know that they are unlikely to start (even before they arrive at the ground) ask yourself are you really acting in their best interests? The damage to a young footballers self esteem and belief in their ability can be irreversible. Constantly standing on the sidelines in all weathers can be soul destroying and when a young footballer asks on the journey home why they have had minimal game time, it is a difficult and challenging question for both player and parent or guardian to answer. Do your utmost to avoid the need for that conversation to happen.

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