



The 7 Guiding Principles of NFL Youth Programs

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1. Make It Fun

This is the primary objective and cornerstone of the entire philosophy. Regardless of whether it's a game or a practice, football at the youth level should always be fun. This requires a little creativity on the part of the parent/coach to offer and adopt fun methods throughout all aspects of their program. Incorporate games and low-key competitions to teach fundamentals rather than running traditional drills.

2. Limit Standing Around

This is a common problem with youth sports that ultimately turns kids off. Whether it's a game, practice, clinic, or camp, we have designed all of our programs to engage every participant consistently. Kids don't attend practice to watch others play. Kids enjoy practices when they have fun and they experience an improvement in their overall skills. Many professional coaches put a major emphasis on fast paced and interactive practices that eliminate downtime. You will see your team's attention and energy levels improve immediately when you engage the entire team in drills of short duration.

3. Everyone Plays

Football at the youth level should be an inclusive experience. It is never fun at any level of play to sit and watch others participate, anticipating the opportunity to play if the situation arises. The youth level of football should be an equal learning experience for everyone, whether it's a game or a practice.

How often have you either experienced or witnessed a practice where several players are being instructed and drilled while a group of teammates stand around and watch, never receiving the same attention? Most often the group standing around has been deemed by their coach to be not as skilled or talented, therefore, the attention is paid to the so-called "stars" of the team.

A coach is a teacher. A teacher/coach's job is to raise the level of learning and skills of not only the most talented, but for everyone on the team, starting with the least talented. The NFL philosophy eliminates first, second, and third strings in both games and at practice.

4. Teach Every Position To Every Participant

Don't pigeonhole kids in one particular position because of their physical size and/or ability. In order to provide each participant a full experience and appreciation for the game that will last a lifetime, we encourage all programs to teach everyone every position.

As we all know, kids grow at various rates. A smaller child may develop late and become much larger than his/her present size indicates and vice versa. How many athletes has football lost throughout the years because of coaches taking the largest kids and making them play the line? These kids often experienced an entire football season without touching the football.

Kids should have the opportunity to experience every position. As Peter Brock, former center for the New England Patriots, explains to youth coaches in the Boston area, "What a tragedy it would've been for New England Patriots football history if Drew Bledsoe had been told as a big kid beginning youth football that he could not play quarterback, and was forced to play the line due to his size. Who knows? He may have dropped out of football like so many other kids in his situation and gone on to play baseball, another sport, or dropped out of athletics completely."

A youth coach's job is to introduce and teach every position to every kid. Never make judgments based on someone's size alone; teach every participant every position and they will naturally find the position they belong in, and you will be in a better position to guide them.

5. Emphasize The Fundamentals

Build a foundation that will never crack by properly teaching the basics. Learning the fundamentals and perfecting the same basics at every level of play is essential to having any chance of success.

Warning: *Do not attempt to replicate plays you see in NFL and college games! Every scheme that is attempted in a college or NFL game is supported by years of training in the fundamentals of the game.*

If one player does not execute the fundamentals of his position correctly, the most sophisticated scheme in the world will not work. It is unfair and not fun to focus on running plays that will fail 9 out of 10 times. Youth programs that focus on scheming plays over executing fundamentals are cheating every participant out of the chance to learn the game properly.

6. Incorporate A Progression Of Skill Development For Every Participant

Regardless of a player's skill level, it is your responsibility as a youth football coach to teach every kid on your team. It is no secret that if kids experience improvement in their skills, no matter what their athletic ability may be, they will continue to participate and return to learn more.

7. Yell Encouragement, Whisper Constructive Criticism

Keep it positive. As a youth football coach you should never tolerate negative comments from your players, parents, coaching staff, and especially yourself. Kids realize when they have made mistakes. What they don't need is to have that mistake compounded by negative feedback and comments. What they do need is feedback on how to correct the mistake supported by positive encouragement.