

Football Development within Age Groups: A guide for Age Group Coordinators (AGC), managers, coaches and parents

We are here to develop children's footballing ability and have fun!

In order to achieve these aims we need to have some guidelines for Age Group Coordinators, managers, coaches and parents which explain how children progress through the age groups at the club. An important part of development is streaming and this can be a contentious issue in any form of education or sport/leisure activity. However, it is necessary because it is important that children can develop at a pace commensurate with their own ability and those they play with and against. One of the consequences of this is that it will only be in exceptional circumstances that a boy will play in a team in an older age group (There will be more flexibility in this regard for girl's football until it becomes fully established)

It is the AGC's role to ensure that the managers carry out this policy fairly and openly. His or her role is critical in the early years at the club as individual managers and even parents may have other priorities. The interests of the child's footballing development are paramount and should be the basis of all our decisions.

Soccer School

This age group should be opened up to Y1 & Reception children, they will train together as one group up to Christmas, unless numbers dictate breaking into two smaller manageable groups running the same activities. After Xmas the Year One & Reception children should train separately (if numbers allow) although all still at the same session. Reception children will stay in S/S for another year and it is expected that Y1 children should be on a faster development track to get them ready for U7s. The ethos at this age group is to introduce children to football, develop basic skills and, above all, allow them to have fun. Coaching will be led by experienced coaches from the other age groups within the club, until such time as enough parents step forward to take on the role (subject to various courses and accreditations being attained). Assistance and continuity will be provided by players from the U17/U18s. In preparation for U7s it is a good idea for those boys/girls who will form the U7 teams to enter some tournaments during the summer in preparation for proper matches.

Under 7

Training within this age group should continue to be conducted as one group. All games at this age group in the EBFA will be played on a friendly / non-competitive basis. Children should be placed in teams on a mixed ability basis from Sept – Dec. Every child should be actively encouraged to try each position on the team. After Christmas teams should again be re-structured, keeping the mixed ability theme, to give players a chance to play with others. Results of games at this level are irrelevant – it is the children's development that is the sole consideration. (Coaches must constantly remind themselves and the parents of this). It is anticipated that there will be a steady stream of new players in this age group and it is the role of the AGC to liaise with managers/coaches and assist in providing football for new players – initially though attending training and then joining/forming a team when the time is deemed right.

Under 8

As with U7s the training of this age group should stay as one group. The EBFA will now have streamed their leagues and teams will be placed in sections based on their performances at U7. However, these performances and outcomes will have been based on a mixed ability structure. It is our belief that this year should transition from mixed ability towards streamed teams. It may not be possible to fully stream at the start of U8s Sept – Dec, but for the start of the Jan – May period the advice of the club is to have teams that are streamed, bearing in mind the level/ability of each player and the section of the league that they will play in. This transition to streamed teams aims to prepare the players for U9s and the move to 7 a side.

Players will develop at different speeds and regular dialogue should take place between coaches/managers and AGC as well as communicating to parents that this is about **the development of children playing football at the right level for them.**

While results are still unimportant at this level by now the children understand the difference between winning and losing and why it has happened.

Under 9 / 10

These age groups play on a non-competitive basis and no results are shown. A transition has taken place from 5 a side to 7 a side as coordinated by the AGC with support of managers. Teams should now be fully streamed. It is understood that players will develop at different rates and the team structures should be reviewed and adjusted accordingly at Christmas each season, as necessary.

Training should still be conducted on the same night at the same time for the whole age group, however, each team should train separately.

Players will have played and trained with a number of different other players over the previous two seasons so should be able to fit in and mix well with whichever team they are placed in. Streaming is understandably a contentious issue and parents may not be happy about their child playing in a different (higher or lower team). However, the fundamental factor involved with this is that the children should be playing at a level that is appropriate for them. If placed in too high a team then they are unlikely to develop and ultimately may cease playing football. If placed in too low a team then their development will not continue and they may become bored and move to another club / stop playing football. **The needs or desires of parents, managers or coaches is superseded by those of the child's development.**

All new players in the close season should be given a trial over a number of weeks run by managers from all teams in the age group to ascertain where the player should fit – this is to ensure that the player is playing at the correct level.

Under 11

These matches will be on a non-competitive basis with results not published. A transition has taken place from 7 a side to 9 a side as coordinated by the AGC with support of managers/coaches and a fresh review of the streamed teams should take place to make sure that each player is playing at an appropriate level for their abilities.

There will be less movement of players between the teams once new teams are established. However, a review process should take place during the season (Christmas) to identify any anomalies. As games will still be non-competitive it is envisaged that the league will have the same approach regarding movements between teams as with the younger age groups (i.e. no issue)

All new players in the close season should be given a trial over a number of weeks run by managers from all teams in the age group to ascertain where the player should fit – this is to ensure that the player is playing at the correct level.

Under 12

This age group is the first year of competitive football and results and league tables are now published, this will also be the last year before the transition to full 11 a side football. A review of the teams should take place at the start of the season and streaming of players as appropriate.

As with U11 a mid year review should take place to make sure the players are in the right team. The AGC should be working towards the move to 11 a side and identifying new players to expand squads and make sure we don't have to combine two teams to make one. Players are now at Secondary School and this is often a very valuable source of new players, through word of mouth of the players.

All new players in the close season should be given a trial over a number of weeks run by managers from all teams in the age group to ascertain where the player should fit – this is to ensure that the player is playing at the correct level.

Under 13

This is the first year of 11 a side. Due to this the season is split in to two with the Sep – Dec part being non-competitive and designed to work through any anomalies with teams being placed at the wrong level. Promotion relegation will take place at Christmas and then the second half of the season is fully competitive. As with previous transitions the AGC will again coordinate the move from 9 to 11 a side, with the priority being to make sure that all children are playing at an appropriate level for their abilities.

Again, all new players in the close season should be given a trial over a number of weeks run by managers from all teams in the age group to ascertain where the player should fit – this is to ensure new players are playing at the correct level.

Communication is key to players and parents as new a structure, full laws of the game applied, all positions utilised and increased squads are implemented. All teams should be used to streaming and getting players into the right positions in the right teams should now become easier.

Under 14 Onwards

For all age groups the practise of pre-season trials should be implemented to make sure all existing and new players are in the correct teams for their ability. Whether a player wants to join at the start or during a season the new player should come through the AGC and **be placed in the most appropriate team for that player's ability**. There must always be clear communication between AGC and managers/coaches as the over-riding factor for all decisions should be the welfare of **all** players

Teams will now tend to be more independent of each other and the concept of an age group which is so important in the early years at the club has slightly less significance from now on. However, there are still a number of important aspects to the role of AGC and the development of football within the age group.

Streaming should now have played a vital part and things do not change much from this age group forward.

In Conclusion

The fundamental ethos of Whitegrove & Warfield FC is for young children to start their football journey in a safe and friendly environment, where the focus from the club, the managers, the coaches and the parents is about the development of their skills and having fun. The result of a match in non-competitive (small-sided) football is irrelevant compared to the performance and development of the players on the pitch. This is why it is so important that players are placed in the team that is appropriate to their skill level such that all the players across the age group are playing at a level where they can develop and grow.

As they move up through the ages they will develop at different rates and it is vital that AGC, managers & coaches are reviewing player development to make sure they are playing at an appropriate standard. Playing with friends is enjoyable and very helpful at the youngest ages but basing a team at older age groups on friendships alone or what parents want will not allow a child to develop their football and can affect those around them.

We are a Youth Football Club and are here to develop the footballing skills of our youth players, whilst providing a safe and enjoyable environment for everyone both on and off the field.