



# COACHING YOUNG AND INEXPERIENCED PLAYERS





## Acknowledgements

IPEC would like to express its gratitude to Mr Steve Watson of Footy4Kids for agreeing to the adaptation of materials for this resource kit. Footy4Kids is a high-quality, internet-based resource for children's and youth football coaches. The web site, [www.footy4kids.co.uk](http://www.footy4kids.co.uk), is highly recommended for coaches working with young children and inexperienced players and is bursting with ideas, drills, hints, advice, tools and games.

## Basic aim of coaching

It is important that football coaches:

- **encourage their players to recognize and solve challenges on their own, in other words, encourage their problem-solving skills;**
- **are as concerned with developing their players' life skills as their football abilities.**

Throughout an IPEC football project, this approach should help in forming teams of capable and confident players who can eventually do well in football matches without being told what to do and, more importantly, will enjoy playing football regardless of whether they win or lose.



## Attributes of a good football coach

Among the most important attributes of any children's football coach are personality and character. Working with children requires patience, kindness and respect. These attributes are even more important in IPEC football projects, which seek to help vulnerable children who may have suffered traumatic experiences in their short lives. Coaches need to think about the way in which they communicate with the children, particularly their tone of voice. You should avoid talking down to the children or treating them unkindly or unfairly.

You should treat them firmly but fairly and, above all, be consistent in what you say, do and expect of each of them. Take time to be with those who are more introverted or less confident than their peers and give them extra support. You need to be observant and react accordingly, adapting your expectations accordingly and use "positive reinforcement" to build their confidence.

### What is positive reinforcement?

Positive reinforcement is observing one of your players doing something you want them to do and rewarding it. The child gets attention and reward as positive reinforcement for doing the right thing and will focus on repeating that behaviour. So, for example, if you praise a child for passing accurately in a football match or training session, he/she will try to repeat the action because of the approval it attracts. Similarly, other players will also try to replicate the

behaviour because they want to be rewarded in a similar way.

Children really do want to be “good”, you just need to make sure you reward them for doing so. This could be through a simple clapping of your hands and calling out “Well done!”, or drawing attention to the action of the child so that the other children observe it and learn. In some cases, you might decide to set up a small tangible reward or prize for children as they perform well in matches and in training sessions. However, this should be done in such a way that everybody eventually benefits from a reward or prize and no one is excluded. Positive reinforcement works because it gives children positive goals to work towards instead of only focusing on negative consequences to avoid. Positive reinforcement fulfils strong basic psychological needs of every child.

And it is worth keeping in mind that positive reinforcement works best when it is not something that a coach does once in a while. The more it happens, the more effective it is.

## How to go about coaching football

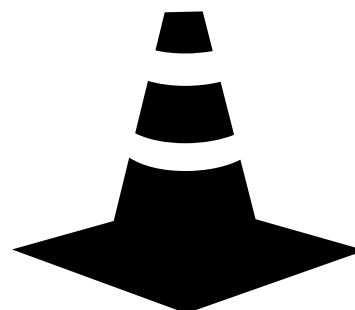
The most fundamental skill in football is individual mastery of the ball, its control, and the creativity that comes with it. This should be a priority in training and games, especially in the early years. As the children learn to master this particular skill, the rest of the game becomes easier both to teach and to learn. Coaching sessions should be built around facilitating the development of the skills necessary to move and control the ball well. As these individual skills are developed to a level of competence, the finer points, first of passing skills and later of team organization, can be taught. Putting together a coaching plan is a key part of this process.

### Coaching tips

- Set up situations where the players can learn by playing the game.
- Avoid the “three Ls” – Lines, Laps and Lectures – in other words, constantly running different line drills, making children run around marked-out areas and making them either sit or stand and listen to you delivering long lectures about football. Remember that the game is the best teacher for young and inexperienced players.
- Coaches can often be more helpful to a player’s development by organizing less, saying less and allowing the players to do more. Set up a game and let the children play. Keep most of your comments for before and after practice sessions and during breaks. Comments should be kept short and simple.
- Teaching and learning the game of football is a process. Therefore, you should make your coaching objectives on a daily, weekly, monthly and possibly annual basis. Often, at younger ages, the developmental efforts of one football season are not noticeable in children until sometime in the next football season, i.e. from one year to the next.



- Set age-appropriate goals for each child knowing what the child is able to do at that age.
- From a developmental standpoint, the young ages are the best ones for learning football skills. Spend that time encouraging this growth in the children. By the age of 17, the capacity to pick up new motor skills begins to wane, while the ability to conceptualize team organization, tactics and strategy increases. As a coach, work with these strengths, not against them.
- Do not expect games and coaching sessions to look like professional football. Give your players opportunities to see what older, more skilled players can do with the ball by occasionally inviting some of these players to participate in your coaching sessions. These can be adults, older children or even professional or semi-professional players. Use them to show good football qualities and let your players learn by experiencing the game alongside or against these better players. Older players can also be used as “neutral players” in a coaching session or game. For example, the neutral player helps whichever team has the ball, in other words he/she never defends. You might want to introduce other limitations, for example that the neutral player has a limited number of touches of the ball and/or cannot score, but he/she gives the team with the ball a better chance of keeping the ball. By helping to maintain possession, the neutral player helps the game maintain some rhythm and gives the younger children a better idea of the game’s possibilities.
- Recognize and understand how the skills learned at each age are connected to preparing the player to move into the next phase of his/her development. Know what the next level of play is, and the general tools that your players should carry with them as they move on. Help them to be prepared.
- Allow your players to develop the requisite skills in an environment where the main goal is to have fun with the ball.
- The value of matches is that they provide young and inexperienced players with an opportunity to show off their newly acquired skills and creativity. And remember, while it is always nice to win, that should not be your focus nor that of your players for younger age groups.
- Have a clear idea of what you want to accomplish at a coaching session. Create exercises and games that replicate and repeat the movements and situations that are found in football and that allow the players to grow comfortable and confident with the ball at their feet. Encourage players to move with the ball at their feet and deal with boundaries, opponents, team mates and goals. Keep in mind that football is a pretty simple game. When you have been involved with football long enough, you begin to realize that all the many little tricks and tips that work are really just variations on the same basic concepts. As long as the parameters that you have established in your exercises and small-sided games are true to football (for example goals for scoring and defending), create the problems that you want the children to solve (for example protecting the ball while dribbling), and allow your players to be challenged and find some success, then you are on the right track.
- Do not be afraid to experiment to find what works best for the team and the individual players.
- Remember that the game is the best teacher for the players. Coaches should think of themselves more as facilitators, monitors, guides or even participants, to provide a rich environment for the children to learn from and enjoy. Your coaching style is important.



## Planning age-appropriate football training sessions

Football coaches for young and inexperienced players should bear in mind the physical and mental age of their players when planning their training sessions. This might seem like stating the obvious, but many coaches experience discipline problems simply because their plans are either too ambitious or too easy for their players. Also, some coaches expect their players to master skills or techniques that they are simply not capable of at their age. For example, children up to the age of about ten may lack the physical ability to lock their ankle – a skill that is necessary to accurately strike a ball. With this in mind, there is no point in getting frustrated with an eight-year-old who cannot kick the ball from one end of the pitch to the other! Keep in mind how old they are and how physically immature they are and plan and implement your coaching sessions accordingly.

Coaches whose players are aged up to six or seven should also bear in mind that young children are very egocentric – they see the world only from their perspective. As a result, they are not going to want to pass the ball to their team mates as they will be worried they might never get it back. So, do not be surprised that it is difficult to get six-year-olds to stop swarming around the ball. Also, young children lack the ability to “look ahead” and see what is about to happen. This is a limiting factor that coaches need to bear in mind when teaching certain skills, for example how to attack the ball at corner kicks.

Therefore, when planning practice sessions, coaches need to take into consideration the age characteristics of their players. Activities should be picked that fit the developmental needs of the children, rather than trying to make the children participate in activities that are developmentally inappropriate for them.

### What are “developmentally appropriate” exercises?

When choosing training activities, coaches should try to keep in mind what the game of football is like: players are moving around constantly. Because everyone is moving, the environment is constantly changing, which requires players to be constantly making decisions. It is because of this that some coaches prefer to use practice games than coaching drills when teaching children how to play football. However, there is good and bad in every approach and much of this comes down to personal preferences and approach. Some coaches like to use coaching drills to teach the children the techniques and then get them to practise these techniques in playing friendly mini-games. There is no “right” or “wrong” approach to coaching football. Ultimately, what matters is that the children are playing and learning new skills in doing so. You need to decide what is more comfortable and natural for you and your players and then adapt accordingly. Always be prepared to change your style if it does not suit the group with which you are working.

### Football for fun

Enjoyment is the unifying motive. Some children do not want to learn and some do not care about winning. A few have no interest in hard work and one or two probably cannot remember which goal they are supposed to be attacking. In spite of all of their different agendas, they all want to have fun and play a game and that is what will continue to bring them to your coaching sessions.

They also want to be children. Sometimes, a coach might see them as an extension of his/her vision and the children run the risk of becoming slaves to what he/she wants. The time spent at football practice and at games is a part of the children’s childhood and it should not reflect the adult world. Sometimes adults can forget this and their expectations take the fun out of the experience. Take time to consider your coaching style and understand that your



expectations and hopes may not be shared by the children you are coaching.

## Key messages for young football players

The key messages below have been assembled on the basis of experiences of children's football coaches worldwide. They can be used as a message for the children to remember and be delivered either during a coaching session or in pre-match or half-time team talks.

- Always play fairly, according to the spirit and letter of the rules.
- Stay calm under difficult conditions. It is easy to maintain composure when things go right, but difficult when they go wrong and these are the marks of good football players.
- Support and encourage your team mates at all times. All of us make mistakes and they are not done on purpose. Encourage your team mates to be the best they can be.
- Play as hard as you can in football practice and in games. You should never be beaten because of lack of effort. Even opponents who are bigger or more skilled than you can be beaten if you work harder than they do.
- Show respect to your coaches, referees and opponents, whether you win or lose.
- A good football player must have conditioning (fitness), skills and tactical knowledge. A player must work on all three to be the best he/she can be.
- When your team has the football, everyone is an attacker – when your opponents have the ball everyone is a defender.
- No matter what position you play in, you are first and foremost a football player and you will have to be able to receive a pass, shoot the ball, give a pass, dribble, head the ball, make space, and so on regardless of your position.
- Do not just “kick” the ball unless it is in a dangerous position in front of your goal. Instead, look up and “see” the situation around you before you get the ball. In this way, you can perceive the situation, determine the best solution, and act accordingly when the ball arrives. Develop “field vision” and always pass or head the ball to a particular place or team mate.
- Always maintain your position. Do not run following the movement of the ball. Know where you are on the field in relation to where the other players and positions are on the field.
- Do not always just run forward when your team has the ball, unless you are willing to run back when the other team has the ball.
- If you lose the ball to an opponent, you should be the first person to defend. Giving immediate chase is the first rule of defence.
- When changing from attack to defence, sprint to get between your opponent and the goal you are defending.
- When defending close to your goal, the player closest to the ball should attack the ball. The other defenders should “mark” other opponents who could receive and shoot the ball. In “marking” your opponent, you should position yourself between the ball and your opponent and prevent him/her from receiving the ball. A common error in defence is to have too many defenders move towards the ball, leaving opponents open and unmarked to receive a pass and score an unopposed goal.



- On the defensive side of the field (in your own half), always move the ball towards the touchlines and away from the middle of the field. On the attacking side of the field (in the opponent's half), move the ball towards the centre, where your team mates can take a good shot at goal. This is called "centring" the ball.
- Good football players pass the ball before they get into trouble, not after they are in trouble.
- Make no small strikes on the ball – in other words, when you kick it, kick it firmly. Whether clearing, passing or shooting, move the ball firmly. Proper technique on striking the ball will enable even small players to effectively move the ball a good distance.
- Take your shot at goal! Do not hesitate to fire a shot at goal if you feel the opportunity is there. Shoot into the back of the net so that you kick the ball hard and aim to kick where the goalkeeper is not.
- Do not limit yourself to taking shots at goal taken only near the goal line. Good opportunities for goals are hard shots taken further out from the goal. Keep your head down, strike and follow through the ball for the goal.
- Most players are right-footed; therefore, when playing defence against an opponent with the ball especially watch and attack against the right foot.
- When attacking and in possession of the ball, anticipate your defender attacking your right foot and learn how to use your left foot. It is imperative that you develop your passing, dribbling and shooting skills with both your left and right foot.
- Always be aware of protecting possession of the ball. Resist kicking the ball directly into the legs of the defender in front of you. Passing or dribbling the ball laterally or even backwards can be a better choice if it maintains possession of the ball.
- When on attack, always "support" your team mate with the ball. Supporting your team mate means being in a position where he/she can pass the ball

to you. Stay far enough away so the pass effectively neutralizes the defender, but stay close enough so he/she can make a good pass. If you are too far to make a good pass to your team mate, then you are too far for your team mate to make a good pass to you, and you are not supporting.

- Win, lose or draw, if you have given 100 per cent effort then when you walk off the field you have nothing to regret and no reason to be ashamed.

## Effective communication for a football coach

In your role as a football coach, you need to communicate effectively with a lot of different people: players, parents, family members, officials, other coaches, and so on. All of them have different agendas and you need to learn how to communicate with them in different ways.

### The players

Communication with your players goes far beyond simply giving them instructions. More than 50 per cent of human communication is non-verbal. For example, facial expressions and tone of voice also convey a great deal to other people. Do not be sarcastic with children. Players may place a great deal of importance on anything you say or do, possibly more than what their parents say or do. Also, although it can be difficult with a large group of small children all wanting to talk at the same time, try to listen to each one, allowing each one to talk in turn. Here are a few tips:

- Talk to the players on their level, both physical and emotional. This may mean getting down on one knee and looking into their eyes as you communicate. Use simple, direct statements that will be less likely to be misinterpreted.



- Do not wear sunglasses when you are coaching as players need to make eye contact with you to fully understand the communication.
- Be positive, honest and sincere with your players. When trying to correct a particular skill, it can be advantageous to make the mistake yourself, and then point out your own shortcomings. Players will respect a coach that is honest. Be positive as constant “nagging” will only put your players off.
- Tell them what you want to tell them, tell them again, and then tell them once more. Try to reword your communication each time. This will give you a much better chance of getting the message across to all the players.
- Be loud enough that all players can hear you, but do not scream at them. Clearly understood voice communication will get their attention and your respect. However, in one-on-one communication, a whisper may serve the purpose and be much more effective than a normal or loud voice.
- Avoid inconsistent or confusing body language. For example, do not turn your back on a player talking to you or shake your head while telling the player “nice try”.

### The parents

After your initial meeting with parents, you may or may not have a great deal of contact with them subsequently. However, if parents contact you, you should: listen, listen, listen. They may be concerned about their child’s development and you should always be positive about this, unless you have a concern that there may be a medical or physical condition that needs attention.

They may think you are a bad coach or you just haven’t developed a relationship with their child. If they are wrong, you should try to rectify this misunderstanding, but not at the expense of the team. It may be that the problem is either with the parent or the child and you might not be able to do anything about it.

Lastly, if you need to talk to a parent, do it after a coaching session or game, when you can speak to them without children being present. Sometimes a phone call will work just as well.

### The officials

Shouting at or disagreeing with the officials will not help at all during a football match. What it will do is show your players that you are disrespectful of the officials, and they will tend to do the same and copy you on the field. If something happens during a game that you feel might have been a bad decision, then bring it up after the game with the official alone or later at a meeting that has been called especially. It is vital that you act as a good role model for your players. You cannot expect them to show respect to referees and touch judges if you do not do the same. The spirit of fair play must be embraced by everyone in the team, including the coach.

### The other coaches

Make an effort to seek out and greet the other team’s coach before the game, especially if you are the host team. You should welcome the team and the coach and you should encourage your team captain to be with you when you welcome them so that he/she learns



the importance of respect for the opposing side. By establishing an acquaintance with another coach, you may be able to accomplish more together than alone, and it is important that you associate with your peers to share information, ideas, problems, and so on. This is particularly important in IPEC football projects where coaches are working with groups of vulnerable, marginalized and at-risk children.

Establishing contact with the other coaches also allows you both to discuss any potential challenges you might have within the team that may need to be addressed before or during the game. For example, in the first game of the season, you may have some new players that cannot play an entire half and the other coach might be in the same situation. Therefore, you might agree with the referee to have unlimited or free substitutions throughout the game. It might also be possible that one or two of your players are particularly sensitive or fragile physically and you might inform the other coach so that he/she can make his team aware of this to avoid any situations in which someone might either get hurt or upset. The main objective is to ensure that any issues in either team are discussed and sorted out before the game and that you establish good relations and communication with other coaches which will also help your own professional and personal development.

## Coaching the “swarm”

### A basic guide to teaching football formations and positional sense to children

The initial focus of a new football coach should be on long-term skills development. If young children are put onto a field with a football, divided into teams, and just told to use their feet to kick the ball into the goal of the opponent, they will instinctively play what is called “swarm ball”, “magnet ball” or the “beehive approach to football”. They do this

because they all like to be together and to stay where the action is.

“Swarming” is not a bad thing as it is the way all children and inexperienced players play football all over the world. The “swarm” actually tends to be very effective at shutting down attacks by an opponent – at least until the opponent has learned to spread out on its attacks and has developed the skill to accurately pass the ball to open players wider out on the football pitch. Children adjust automatically as the “swarm” becomes less effective, so the size of the “swarm” becomes smaller over time, even without coaching intervention. In the meantime, there is no harm whatsoever in children “swarming” each other, particularly with young age groups. Eventually, they will learn to use the available field space to move the ball around the players.

The objective, therefore, is as soon as possible to teach your players to spread out on attack, and to learn to make quick passes to get rid of the ball before they can be “swarmed”. Simple “keep-away” games (see *Football Coaching Manual*) are one of the best tools available to show players that it is easier to keep the ball away from the other team if you spread out. But before players can be successful at keep-away, they will need to be introduced to basic passing and basic ball shielding and control. Obviously, a player cannot hope to move the ball around successfully until:

- he/she has basic ball control skills, including the ability to stop, slow down or redirect a ball passed to him/her;
- shield the ball with his/her body and feet to keep from being dispossessed;
- get his/her head up long enough to find an open target;
- have the skill to pass it with reasonable accuracy.

Thus, the very first job of the football coach is to develop these essential building blocks as players need them in order to be successful in football. Coaches should refer to the *Football Coaching Manual* for practice sessions, which will help develop these skills.

## Avoid putting young children into positions too early

There is a temptation for coaches to deal with the “swarming” concept by assigning children fixed positions on the field in order to increase scoring chances and minimize the risks of counter-attacks, and then to keep reminding players to stay in those positions. Most underage football coaches would advise resisting the temptation to put children into fixed positions and would prefer to rotate them to play in all positions so that, over time, they can find what the best position is for them. Therefore, rather than put young players into positions and try and keep them there, many underage coaches set “positional rules” to help children understand the game better and to understand what should be done in defence and attack and what role different positions have in football. The ultimate goal of a good football coach is to develop players with enough knowledge, skill and flexibility to play “positionless” football, in other words, with the ability to play everywhere.

As the age and skill of players increase, it will become clear that some players are better ball-winners than others, while others are better scorers, passers of the ball, and so on. As a result, by their early teenage years, it is likely that players will “specialize” in one or two particular areas of the field which best suit their talents.

## Understanding the principles of support and positioning

### *Basic defensive principles and positioning*

The basic duties of a defender on a football pitch are: **“No Get – No Turn – No Pass – No Shoot”**. This means that the first job of a defender is to stop the player he/she is marking from getting the ball; to stop the player he/she is marking from turning if he/she gets the ball; to try and stop the player he/she is marking from passing the ball off to another attacker; and lastly, to prevent any shots at goal.

There are three basic positions in defence. The person closest to the ball is called the

“first defender”, and his/her job is to provide pressure on the ball. The second closest person, who should be closer to his/her own goal than the opponent, is called the “second defender”. His/her job is to provide cover for the first defender, in other words to immediately become the pressure person if the attacker gets around the first defender. The second defender frequently will have the additional job of marking another attacker to whom the ball might be passed.

The defender who is in the deepest position, closest to his/her own goal, is called the “third defender” and his/her job is to provide balance to the defence. In essence, he/she is providing additional cover for the two primary defenders, and also watching out for additional incoming attackers making runs towards the centre or far post areas of the goal.

Regardless of the different approaches coaches may take, all young and inexperienced players should be taught these basic defensive principles and how to apply them in a game setting. Players need to understand their supporting duties to their team mates immediately around them as sometimes young players mistakenly believe that unless they have the job title of “defender”, they do not have defensive duties. Thus, it is very important that they clearly understand that these concepts apply to everyone, including those who are in the midfield and forwards.



### *Basic attacking principles and positioning*

In attack, there are also three basic positions. The player with the ball is called the “first attacker”. His/her job is to retain possession while getting the ball as close to the goal as possible through dribbling, passing or shooting. The player(s) within easy passing range of the first attacker are called “second attackers”. Up until the time when the ball is advanced to within scoring range of the goal, the primary role of the second attacker(s) is to prevent loss of possession, while still allowing the ball to be advanced forward if at all possible, in other words through passing. Prior to getting into scoring range, a second attacker typically will position him/herself so as to allow short relay passes between him/herself and the first attacker in order to move the ball around the defenders. Of course, the ultimate goal of the attackers is to get the ball past all of the defenders and into unobstructed space within scoring range of the goal. Thus, as the ball moves within scoring range, the role of the second attacker switches from a “safety-first” objective of keeping possession to the more active role of setting up a shot at goal by him/herself or the first attacker.

At this point, the second attacker’s objective is to move into a position which will allow the first attacker to pass the ball into a scoring space behind or to the side of the defenders, in other words, space from which an immediate shot at goal can be taken. The positioning of the second attacker will depend on the number of defenders to be beaten. Normally, however, a second attacker will position him/herself on the far side of the defenders and set up within scoring range of the far goal post area, which allows him/her to distract and/or pull one defender away from the central goal area and clear more space for the first attacker. Where there are two second attackers available, they should position themselves to form a moving triangle with the first attacker, by moving into space between or to the side of the defenders so that the ball always has a clear path to their feet. As the ball is moved

into scoring range, one of these players often will abandon his/her close support role and will become a “third attacker”. The third attacker, however, may also be taken up by any other team mate in an appropriate attacking position.

The third attacker’s job is to pull the defence into different directions by making deep runs, usually to the far side of the goal. By doing this, the third attacker pulls defenders away from the goal mouth, distracts the goalkeeper and defenders in front of the goal and opens up space in front of the goal which can be exploited by the first and second attackers.

All players need to be taught these basic principles of attacking support. In particular, they need to learn the concepts of setting support triangles, using keep-away techniques (see *Football Coaching Manual*) and how to move to create basic two- or three-player attacking support. These tools are essential weapons used by all football players to maintain possession in tight spaces and create scoring chances.





## Incorporating these principles into training

### *Basic defensive tactics for under-10s*

With just a little help, your players will be able to understand that if their team sends everyone to the opposing goal, then their own goal will be wide open and vulnerable to a counter-attack. But, of course, if everyone stays back to guard their own goal, then they won't ever score and, besides, the game would be very boring. Ask the children for their solutions to this defensive problem – as not everyone can always attack. One of the first suggestions you probably will get is to leave somebody by the goal. However, when you ask for volunteers, you are likely to find that everyone will want to be in the attacking group. If nobody wants to stay to guard the goal, then what other solutions are available?

One defensive solution is to ask each of your players to choose one of the players on the other team who they will “mark” when the other team has the ball. Through this suggestion, you will have immediately introduced the concept of “marking” and the need for players to follow their mark. But, what happens if somebody loses his/her mark either because he/she gets distracted or is slower than his/her mark? Then, the nearest available player on the team needs to come along and cover for him/her. This is the second basic element of defensive support and needs to be learned and relearned constantly. Players should learn how to cover for each other if one of their team mates loses the player they are supposed to be marking.

Another defensive solution is available which may be easier for younger players (players under 10 years of age) to execute is where one player can have the responsibility of trying to slow down the attacker with the ball with another team mate to back him/her up. The aim is to give enough time for everyone else on the team to get back and make a “swarm” in front of the goal area. This is called “low-pressure defence” and is an approach which can work well with younger players, providing all the players understand their

roles and the need to slow down attackers while everyone else gets back.

### *How to deal with fast attackers*

Your team will also need to know how to deal with really fast players on the other team. If you also have some really fast players who are good defensively, one easy solution is to make sure that your fast players are marking their fast players. Keep in mind, however, that even a slow defender can be quite effective in stopping a fast attacker once he/she learns basic defensive footwork and positioning. Essentially, the job of the initial pressuring defender is to slow the attacker down by getting in his/her way, steadily dropping back as slowly as possible and not making any attempt to win the ball until cover has arrived to support him/her. This is a job which anyone can do with practice, so do not allow your slower players to avoid learning these vital skills because of their lack of speed. Football is a game for all children and they should all learn the fundamental skills and principles.

### *How to organize attack*

Once you and your team have decided on how you will defend your own goal, then it is time to think about the best way to attack the goal of the opposing team. Initially for young players, probably the best solution is to allow most of the players to “swarm” and choose one or two to stay outside and a bit ahead of the swarm, “forwards”, and one or two to follow behind the swarm, “defenders”. Because the players in the swarm tend to do the most running, you should give them the right to switch positions with the front and rear players if they get tired.

Additionally, you need to give the front and rear players the right to ask for a switch if they notice that somebody is getting tired in the swarm. By adopting these rules, you introduce the idea of automatic observation and support for team mates, which is always a good idea. Of course, as the coach, you also need to make sure that you do not create a situation where one particularly player is always trying to be a front or rear player.

You might try and overcome this possibility by making it a team rule that everyone else must get a turn at playing in the front or rear before a child can return to that position, or you could devise some other limitations that will ensure that children spend most of their time playing in the midfield with the swarm.

Initially, until you develop good passers in your team, most of the goals are likely to come from individual efforts or a simple short lateral pass to a player in a position to score. Therefore, when a forward gets the ball, it is usually best to simply allow him/her to try to dribble it up the pitch or to pass it one of the other forwards in front of him/her. Once a forward has gone ahead

of the swarm, you need to have someone else take that position until he/she can get back. Often, the best approach is to identify a reliable, observant player to keep a lookout for when someone else needs to take a job as a forward and by doing it him/herself. This person could act as the captain of your team as he/she will begin to become accustomed to organizing the players in the team.

In order to prepare the children to play football matches, you should introduce the players to keep-away games as soon as possible (see *Football Coaching Manual*). Once they can achieve five to six consecutive passes in 4 or 5 against 1 keep-away, you should initiate 3 against 3 games where everyone on the team must touch the ball before they can score. Once your players can play these games competently – meaning that they can pass, receive and shield the ball – they are ready for training on 2-person attacking patterns. In the meantime, they should be spending considerable time perfecting their individual dribbling skills and learning how to take on and beat defenders.

### Note for coaches

Whenever there is a question of choosing players to assume particular roles, for example to be the ones ahead of the swarm or to slow down attackers, it would be important in IPEC football projects to do so as a team. In other words, try and avoid situations in which you decide who does what and plays where. Try and develop an approach with your team in which such decisions are shared and the children participate in the decision-making process. This fits in with the principles of child participation and empowerment embraced by IPEC.

Obviously, children need to be guided in decisions by you and other coaches and adults involved with the team, but it will reinforce the team spirit and the project if children feel as though they are involved in everything. This does not mean that all decision-making is taken out of your hands – after all, these are young children who need help and support and are only learning how to play football for the first time. They cannot be expected to make informed decisions of this nature. Rather, what is being suggested is that the children are with you as you discuss the issues of positions on the field and you might suggest players to assume certain roles, seeking approval from the rest of the team. It is about attitudes, behaviour and respect and the children will support these decisions more willingly and strongly if they feel as though they have been part of the process.

