



Here's an interesting question from a youth coach and the follow up comments on the advantages and disadvantages to separating genders for skill sessions.

First some background: I am preparing for a presentation to an east Texas soccer association who have asked me to help them form an Academy program. I am trying to convince them that an "academy" model that does not form teams, that does not add games to the players' schedules, that does not exclude those who cannot afford it or those who cannot "compete," that is financially accessible to everyone, and that is focused on both players and coach development is the way forward. As such, I am proposing a plan that will offer once weekly skill and athletic development sessions to each of the Association's players in the U-6 through U-10 age groups (coaching education will accompany the sessions). I have been toying with the idea of offering these sessions as coed sessions, and have been trying to find some sources that would argue against this, but I have been unsuccessful so far. Thus far, I have determined the following from my reading:

- Because there are so few cognitive differences between the sexes, keeping both genders together would not necessarily pose any sort of comprehension issues for the players;
- Because the girls will probably be more mature than the boys at this age, but because the boys will probably be a bit more naturally athletic, it would pose each group with some nice physical challenges when they compete against each other (on equally mixed teams in games ranging from 3 v 3 for the youngest ones to 8 v 8 for the oldest group);
- Each gender, but specifically the boys, might be able to glean some ideas on gender issues from the sessions, particularly that the girls can do many, many things just as well or better than they can;
- Because the boys would probably be a bit more naturally athletic and a bit more technical, they might be able to provide the girls with a peer model from whom they can copy and learn technical and physical things;
- I think that mixing the groups would start to provide some unity and some community to the youth soccer scene, the absences of which I think can negatively impact the youth soccer experience;
- The information in the "Y," "Youth Modules," and "E" courses would suggest that mixing genders for U-6 and U-8 is fine, and would probably be beneficial for both groups, but that U-10 might be a stretch.

The consensus, then, would seem to be that there are many benefits and few negatives to coed groups in the U-6 and U-8 age groups, but that this might not hold true in the U-10 age group.

What would be your suggestions on this issue?

1. *Would you recommend offering coed soccer and athletic skills sessions for the U-6 and U-8 age groups?*
2. *Would you think that coed sessions would necessarily be better than single gender sessions in terms of what is right for the players and in terms of what is right for the Association?*
3. *Do you think that coed sessions are a practical solution?*

Well you've done some good research on the matter and you have found, as we have, that having boys and girls train together on movement education and ball skills in the U-6 and U-8 age groups works just fine. Indeed, based on the mixed gender U-12 training session I witnessed recently in Indianapolis as done by Ian Mulliner, the Technical Director for Illinois, it is not a problem at that age either.

You are correct though that some separation of the genders for soccer training has psychosocial reasons to be gender specific beginning with the U-10 age group. Still, having the genders in joint training sessions in the U-10 and U-12 age groups from time to time is beneficial.

Several years ago I attended a seminar for National Youth License instructors and had to answer a question, among others, on this topic. Here's the question and my answer.

Are there gender differences in fundamental motor skills apparent in children under the age of 10?

There is little difference in the athletic abilities of children ten-years-old and younger other than the normal differences between children in maturation rates. In fact it is often a good idea to have boys and girls on the same team, even perhaps through puberty.

"What are the differences between a boy and a girl before the onset of puberty? Obviously there are some, but not as many as some people believe. More dissimilarities, other than the basic sex characteristics, can be found within each sex rather than between the two.

At birth, girls tend to be slightly shorter and lighter than their male counterparts, but these differences soon disappear. During their childhood years there are no significant differences in their heights and weights. Girls mature faster; at age six their body cells are about a year nearer maturity than those of boys at that age, and at age 12 or 13 they are two biological years ahead.

Even though there are relatively few biological differences, boys generally score higher on many performance tests. ...it has been found that three through six-year-old boys are better at selected throwing, jumping and running skills than are girls of the same age. It is not known whether these differences are based entirely on developmental characteristics, or whether social pressures and expectations for girls have limited their activity, resulting in lower scores. There is no reason, on the basis of being female, why girls cannot participate in sports and develop a high degree of skill.

Boys and girls can play with or against one another; the primary concern is that the group be performance-matched and size-matched.

Research has shown that girls who play mostly with boys or in coed groups are more likely to be sports participants when they become women. When girls have the same expectations and experiences that boys do, the performance gap will narrow." 1

Socially, cognitively and emotionally, children all develop at different rates. There can be as many differences here within a gender as between the genders. Physiologically and anatomically there is little difference between children under the age of 10.

"As a general rule, children are able to participate in vigorous exercise training with little risk to health. Nonetheless, sports medicine specialists have advised that certain precautions be taken in conducting sports and exercise programs for children. Most of the concern derives from the fact that the child's skeleton is immature and undergoing rapid growth. During this period the skeleton is vulnerable to injuries that if not properly diagnosed and treated can cause permanent damage.

...Many sports medicine authorities believe that the physical well being of young athletes is most likely to be threatened in sports programs that involve a high level of psychological stress. Of particular concern is parental pressure. In the absence of excessive pressure, children are unlikely to harm themselves in an athletic training situation. Consequently, efforts should be made to educate parents and other adults regarding the potential risks and benefits of sports participation for children. Youngsters may benefit from the discipline involved in athletic conditioning and from a modest level of competitive stress. But there is little to gain and much to lose when overzealous adults pressure young children to train and compete in an excessively stressful environment. Youth sports should always be conducted with the young athlete's long-term well-being as the first priority." 2

1 Billie Jones, et al., Guide To Effective Coaching, second edition, Dubuque, Wm. C. Brown Publishers, 1989, pp. 72-73

2 Russell Pate, et al., Scientific Foundations of Coaching, New York, CBS College Publishing, 1984, pp. 326-327