



## TOPSoccer Information for New Programs

It's all about FUN  
It's all about the KIDS  
It's all about making a DIFFERENCE

**TOPSoccer:** The Outreach Program for Soccer is a community based training and team placement program for young athletes with special needs. The program, designed and administered by US Youth Soccer and its volunteer TOPSoccer Committee, provides meaningful learning, development and physical participation opportunities to these young athletes through the game of soccer. The emphasis of this program is on development, training and meaningful participation rather than on competition.

TOPSoccer was formed to perpetuate the US Youth Soccer mission statement, which is, "to foster the physical, mental and emotional growth and development through the sport of soccer at all levels of age and competition". The goal is to enable the thousands of youth athletes with disabilities to develop their physical fitness, technical skills, courage and self esteem through the joy and excitement of playing soccer. This program accommodates all disabilities whether mental or physical and brings the joy of playing soccer to players who have not traditionally had a place in the youth soccer system.

**This program is designed for children with disabilities. A successful TOPSoccer program should include the following:**

1. Placement of players by ability, not age
2. Emphasis on ability, not disability
3. Player involvement
4. Meaningful experience for players
5. Achievement of individual goals
6. Dependability and stability of coaches
7. FUN!

The key to this program is flexibility. TOPSoccer can offer opportunities such as single day clinics, jamborees, weekly training, individual skills programs and even recreational league play.

### **Coaches/Volunteers/Administrators**

Coaching young athletes with disabilities how to play soccer is rewarding. A coach can make a real and meaningful difference in someone else's life. Volunteers "soccer buddies" are needed to work directly with a child with special needs. Parents of children with disabilities are your best advocates. They may know people (gym teachers, physical therapists, special education teachers) that would be interested in helping out. Older soccer teams (high school/college) may also be available to donate some volunteer time to the program. You may also contact your State Director of Coaching. It is important to have an administrator for organizing paperwork and communicating with the state office.

#### **IDEAS FOR COACHING:**

- No waiting, keep the players active
- Immediate positive reinforcement - Celebrate Success !
- Repetition is key
- Build on success
- Watch & learn
- Simple & concise directions
- Use visual cues (be consistent)
- One skill at a time
- Be flexible
- Use their strengths!
- Challenge positively & enthusiastically
- Ask for parental guidance
- Stretch your boundaries
- **MOST OF ALL: Make a *Personal Connection***

### **Secure a facility or field**

If the program will be indoors, a boarded soccer field is recommended. Facilities may donate time for the TOPSoccer program, or funds may be raised or donated to cover the costs. If the program will be outdoors, it is best to secure a field AWAY from playgrounds, concession stands and high traffic (vehicles and/or people) areas.

### **Set a date/time**

Once the field/facility is secured a core group of coaches and volunteers have been found, set a date and time for the program to begin. Length of time the program will run should also be determined.

### **Draw athletes to the program**

Advertise through Public Service announcements, newspapers and flyers. Target agencies that service children with special needs. Notify school districts and parent groups and provide flyers inviting players as well as volunteers to join. Also, contact local soccer clubs to advertise on their websites.

### **Designing a Special Needs Program**

Develop the program to meet the needs of the children in your group. Attending a US Youth Soccer Youth Module Course, contacting your State Association's TOPSoccer director or visiting the Region1.com website (TOPSoccer program) are tools to help provide coaching skills and ideas that can be adapted for the TOPSoccer program.

See "**Activities for TOPSoccer Training Session**" on the Region 1 TOPSoccer webpage.

### **Soccer Laws**

The special needs program is unique. The governing soccer authority in the United States (US Soccer Federation, USSF) grants liberty to special program administrators to modify laws for increased player safety and enjoyment. Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) states that a child with special needs is considered a "youth" until the age of 21.

### **Integrating TOPSoccer Players**

TOPSoccer players can play in regular recreation soccer teams if some adaptations are made. Most can play on u6 or u8 teams competitively. The following considerations for integrating a TOPSoccer player should be taken:

- Determine the process, goals and issues facing each player and your state association or governing body
- Develop the program
- Determine the procedure necessary for older players on a younger team
- Registration allowances
- Bylaws/Policy changes if necessary

- Communication with club, parents and other players
- "Choosing" the right coach
- Safety considerations
- Size of players "playing down"
- Parental request or involvement in decision from the TOPSoccer players parents as well as the other parents of the typical players on the team.
- Adaptive throw ins, etc
- Referee and opposing coaches should be informed, if necessary
- Field considerations up to referee

### **Safety**

Safety is the most important part of the game. Parents are not permitted to leave their TOPSoccer player at the field. The TOPSoccer program should be fun and pressure free. Coaches should be influencing positive attitudes and eliminating any fears the child may have.

When working with players with disabilities additional safety considerations are required:

1. Identify players with epilepsy, asthma, seizure disorders and have knowledge of how these are managed.
2. Recognize that TOPSoccer players may tire easily and need shorter practice sessions with longer breaks in between activities.
3. Players dehydrate at a faster rate and will need to replace fluid more frequently.
4. Special precautions for specific skills in soccer; i.e. tackles, heading the ball.
5. Recognize players with poor balance and co-ordination. They may be more prone to falling and injuries.
6. Have emergency evacuation plan available and all coaches aware of the procedure.
7. Have a complete first aid kit available at all times.
8. Have signed medical release forms and emergency contact information up to date and on hand at all times.
9. Require that a parent and/or guardian be present at all practices and/or games.
10. Players with Down syndrome should be cleared by their physician for AAI (Atlanto-Axial Instability). Check with your State Association TOPSoccer Chair for your state's procedure.

11. Coaches and volunteers should never let a player go to the bathroom alone. Find the parent and have them take their child to the bathroom.
12. The goal is for the TOPSoccer players to participate to the best of their ability, independently.

### **Language**

Language is very powerful. Our use of words can convey a positive environment. Remember to put the child first. TOPSoccer players with disabilities are not to be pitied, patronized or admired. They need to be supported, encouraged, and praised for what they have accomplished. Refer to the player by name, not their disability. They are players first. They are players with a disability, **not** disabled players. A person is not confined to a wheelchair or by other adaptive equipment. The adaptive equipment and wheelchairs liberates them and allows them to be independent, not confined. **Do not be condescending.** Don't be afraid to make a mistake. Parents will correct you if you misspeak. They will understand if you use the wrong terminology. The language is constantly changing. If you put the player first, you will not make a mistake.

### **Registration**

All programs should have a registration process. Parents need to fill out a TOPSoccer application, Medical Release form (Youth with Down syndrome may have Atlantoaxial Instability (AAI). A lateral neck radiograph is also required for individuals with Down syndrome before they can participate.), Photo Release form, Uniform order form and Parent Questionnaire form (optional).

**(Sample forms can be found on the Region 1 website.)**