

Skills Acquisition Phase (SAP) Summary

for u10 and u11s

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Under 10s – u12/13s enter into the “Skills Acquisition Phase” of the Building Blocks of the National Football Curriculum. At these ages children are physically and mentally ready for a more structured approach to training. Thus a coach’s role progresses from being a Discovery Phase ‘organiser of fun football exercises’ to that of a ‘skills teacher’. This is not to say that prospective coaches need to be ex-players or particularly technically competent themselves but every training session will be a ‘theme based session’ focusing on one of the core skills for the session.

Coaches will find that the children at u10 – u13 ages are:

- highly motivated and enthusiastic
- competitive, like challenges and want to show they’re the best
- well balanced and coordinated
- very adaptive to learning motor skills
- sensitive to criticism and failure (praise is important)
- although still self-centred, they start to learn how to work together.

4 core technical skills

In this 9 to 12 year old age period, before entering the growth spurt that goes hand in hand with puberty, children are becoming well balanced and coordinated. This is one of the brain's key development periods and has been described as the 'golden age of motor learning' i.e. in no other development phase in life will motor learning happen faster than here.

Therefore in the Skill Acquisition Phase (SAP) the coach must focus exclusively on providing a solid foundation of technical skill (as opposed to team tactics and un-functional "tricks" - which may be fun to see and do but useless during the game).

The FFA Skill Acquisition training program focuses upon developing four core technical skills when in possession of the ball:

1. **Striking the ball**

This includes all forms of striking the ball such as short/long passing, shooting and crossing

2. **First Touch**

Controlling the ball with all allowed body parts

3. **1v1**

All moves, feints and accelerations to get past and away from an opponent

4. **Running with the ball**

At speed (with a lot of space) or 'dribbling' (in tight areas), this includes techniques for protecting the ball and changing direction

These four core skills cover 95% of the actions of any outfield player when in possession of the ball during a game of football. So, herein lies the focus for anyone working with players in this important age bracket: **your primary role is that of a 'skills teacher' focused on individual technical development** as opposed to being a 'team coach'.

Your mission is to 'automate' the core skills through lots of repetition of "purposeful practice". Through many hours of purposeful practice players will eventually be able to execute the core skill 'unconsciously' with the ball 'glued' to their feet while they look around and check for options.

Purposeful practice develops technical skills (execution) and perception skills (decision-making) simultaneously. Therefore there is limited time spent with 'drill' practices (running around cones or passing back and forth with no opposition) and with more time in each training session spent performing game realistic scenarios for skills training as well as small sided games.

As far as heading is concerned, the advice is to start developing this specific skill at the next stage of development (the Game Training phase for u13 – u17 year olds). If heading is practised during the Skills Acquisition Phase it is recommended that so-called super light balls (specially devised for youth football) are used to minimise the risk of injury to players.

Training Components

For u10s and u11s, 2-3 weekly training sessions of 60-75 minutes plus one game over the weekend is a safe weekly workload. At our club we are not training a high performance representative team and therefore training will be generally limited to once a week (but there should be a commitment that once per week training is held and attended). If a coach, players and parents want to train twice per week then ensure that the training schedule rests the players the day before as well as the day after the game. Limit active training time to 75 minutes duration with the following session planning guidelines:

- Welcome: 5 minutes
- Skill Introduction: 15-20 minutes
- Skill Training: 25-30 minutes
- Skill Game: 20-25 minutes
- Wrap up: 5 minutes

At this age the children are ready for a more structured approach to training. In every session the focus is on one of the core skills, from the beginning until the end of the session (“theme based sessions”). The Skill Acquisition Phase sessions consist of 3 components:

1. **Skill introduction**, this is the warm-up as well as an introduction to the designated core skill for this session. This is the only part of the session where drill-type exercises should be used, but the creative coach can include elements of decision-making.
 - Flow, no ‘stop-start coaching’.
2. **Skill training**, this is the part of the session where conscious teaching and learning of the designated core skill takes place.
 - Lots of repetition in game realistic scenarios!
 - Task-based coaching
 - Effective feedback
 - Use of questioning (ask players ‘why did you choose that option?’, ‘where do you think there might be more space?’, etc)
3. **Skill game**, a game where as much as possible all the elements of the real game are present but organised in a way that the designated core skill has to be used regularly.
 - Skill games are preferably small sided games to stimulate the number of repetitions/touches!
 - The players play, the coach observes if learning has taken place.

It is also advisable to ‘wrap-up’ the session at the end, summarising the main points of the session to enhance learning.

Note that whilst the emphasis of the technical skills is on attacking skills, it goes without saying that the defensive 1 v 1 skills are equally important and must be properly developed too. Thus coaching tips will need to be provided in equal measure for both attackers and defenders. Likewise equal amount of time should be spent with developing skills favouring both the left and right foot.

Suggested Training Schedule

My suggested training schedule for a season utilises the “model sessions” provided by:

<http://www.ffacoachingresource.com.au/the-building-blocks/the-skill-acquisition-phase/session-listing/?cid=>

Week 1	First touch - Session 1
Week 2	Striking the ball - Session 1 (short passing)
Week 3	Running with the ball - Session 1
Week 4	1 v 1 – Session 1
Week 5	First touch - Session 2
Week 6	Striking the ball - Session 2 (the killer pass)
Week 7	Running with the ball - Session 2
Week 8	1 v 1 - Session 2
Week 9	First touch - Session 3
Week 10	Striking the ball - Session 3 (shooting)
Week 11	Running with the ball - Session 3
Week 12	1 v 1 - Session 3
Week 13 & 17	First touch - Coaches pick of elements from prior FT Sessions
Week 14 & 18	Striking the ball – Coaches pick of elements from prior STB Sessions
Week 15 & 19	Running with the ball- Coaches pick of elements from prior RWTB Sessions
Week 16 & 20	1 v 1 - Coaches pick of elements from prior 1 v 1 Sessions

At this age I'd suggest that the “Coaches Pick” should be a mixture of elements that the kids enjoyed the most with elements that most challenged the players (but were still achievable) to execute the core skill of the day e.g. skills intro from session 2 might have been challenging, skills training from session 3 was lots of fun, and skill game from session 1 was a long time ago and is new again.

Training should be undertaken with size 4 balls only.

Game day

For the under 10s the beginning of the season is a big step up from u8s and u9s with lots of new things to discover: the number of players increases (now 9 v 9), we now have midfield positions (1-3-2-3 formation), the ball becomes a size 4 and the field and goals are enlarged compared to the 7 v 7 game. However, whilst the u10 – u11s games become more recognizable as an adult game, they are still a **non-competitive age group**. Please avoid the tendency for coaches (and parents) to become obsessed with results, and forget that the players are still in the skill acquisition phase.

At these ages coaches should no longer be on the field as instructing referees. From the sideline the coach should allow play to proceed with a minimum of interference i.e. players need to learn to make their own decisions and they need to feel free to make mistakes and learn from those mistakes. It is incredibly seductive for a coach / parent to become a puppet master: ('shoot now Johnny', 'run Johnny', 'stop Johnny') if the goal is just winning. By comparison, match day is when the coach can start developing the players' insight and understanding of the basic team and player tasks. This involves reinforcement and elaboration of the basic tasks introduced at training during skill games: ('get between the lines', 'can you face forward?' 'look for the killer pass', 'make the field big', etc) rather than 'tactical' coaching. It's not easy to get this right but it helps to assess games in terms of core skills performance rather than worrying about what the score was. That way, training and matches are closely and logically linked.

At these ages it is also disadvantageous for young players' development to specialize for a specific team position too early; let them experience the various positions and aim for specialization during the Game Training phase (u13 – u17s). The rationale for this is excellently explained in the book 'Coaching Outside the Box' by Mairs and Shaw. For u10s and u11s I'd recommend players to be familiar with differing positions in at least 2 of the 3 lines (forwards, midfielders, and backs) and for goalkeepers to play as much time in field positions as goalkeeping.

References / resources

<http://www.ffacoachingresource.com.au/about-the-curriculum/the-skill-acquisition-phase/>

<http://northernnswfootball.com.au/coach-headquarters/>

Consider taking the opportunity to undertake a Skills Training Certificate. This is a very practical 6 - 7 hour non-assessed course which is advertised throughout the year via our club and the websites above.

Please feel free to contact any of executives of the club for assistance with coaching or to me directly. We thank you for your support of the club and our beautiful game.

Regards,

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