

SHOULD MY CHILD PLAY UP?



Sometimes it's the parent who thinks his child needs more of a challenge. Sometimes it's the coach who sees an exceptionally talented younger player who he wants on his team. Regardless of whose idea it is or what the reasons are, many adults are faced with the question "should this child play up?"

Unfortunately, the result is often driven by the wrong reasons. Usually, there are two scenarios: 1. A parent wants to push a child more by playing him/her against older kids, or 2. A coach or club sees a personnel dilemma (e.g. number of players in an age group, or a player significantly better than his peers) and has a player play up to "fix" the issue. The problem with these scenarios is that playing in an older age group is not necessarily in the best interest of the child. Players should not play up unless it is truly in their best interest.

Is it ever in the child's best interest to play up? Quite possibly, but there are some conditions that need to be met.

But before we get into those, let's first set the record straight about age groups in the first place.

The Problem with Age Groups

Age groups are *not* the most appropriate way to divide children. The reason we do it is because it is easy, straightforward, and makes sense to most people. But if you've ever seen a U13 soccer game, you know that all thirteen-year olds are not created equal. Some are three feet tall, while others sport mustaches and tower over the coach.

Science tells us that there can be as much as a 4-year disparity between children of the same age. This means that, although three kids are all chronologically age 13, they can each biologically be age 11, 13, and 15. This is where the mustaches vs. three-footers comes into play. All kids develop at different speeds and at different times (sometimes males aren't finished fully developing into adults until their mid-twenties!).

The same goes for the cognitive development of children. Children develop mentally at different rates – which means that there can also be a mental disparity between kids within an age group. In fact, you could have a child who is physically and cognitively different ages... Which age group is most appropriate for this child? By the way, we haven't even mentioned anything regarding playing ability yet.

This goes to show that, in a perfect world, we would have children play in the most appropriate "age" group based on their physical and cognitive development. And yes, this means that a child could possibly jump from one age group to another within a year. We call that a growth spurt. It also means that a 14-year old who is a late bloomer could play in the "12-year old" group. Unfortunately, if this was allowed, too many people would take advantage and not appropriately place children. Perhaps one day we will have an appropriate division of players, but until then, we are stuck with chronological ages.

Deciding If Your Child Should Play Up

To determine whether or not your child should play up an age group, ask yourself the following questions:

1. Is my child physically ahead of other children his/her age?

This does not mean that she is super-fast. It also does not mean that she has a "really strong

kick.” To put it very unscientifically: if you look at your child among her peers, and she looks like a mini adult compared to the others, she’s probably ahead. There are some obvious physical signs to look for such as height, pubic development, armpit hair, muscle definition, breast development (girls), and facial hair (boys).

2. Is my child cognitively ahead of others?

This is a hard one to determine. It can often be identified simply by overall maturity. But a more common clue is how a child does in school – if he understands advanced concepts in school, chances are he is cognitively ahead. As long as these same characteristics are translating to the soccer field, it is likely safe to assume that a child is cognitively more advanced.

3. Optional/conditional: Is my child technically more advanced than others?

The answer is almost always “no.” Even if your child is the best on her team (or even in the community), it does not mean she is ready to move up an age group. She is most likely just ready to go to a different team in the same age group. Question 3 mostly applies to exceptionally-special talents.

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		Physically ahead			
Cognitively average or behind	Possibly appropriate to play up		Most likely appropriate to play up		Cognitively ahead
	Not appropriate to play up		Unlikely appropriate to play up		
		Physically average or behind			

For the rest of us, technique is best served as a compliment to the two other, more important factors. If a child is cognitively ahead, but not technically good enough to execute skills at a faster speed of play, he is likely not ready to move up. If a child is technically ahead but physically behind, he is likely not ready to move up.

The Matrix

As you answer the above questions, use the following matrix to help you determine whether or not it is best for your child to play up