

PARALLEL PLAY

Sam Snow, US Youth Soccer Director of Coaching Education

Parallel play is when children play alongside each other. They do not necessarily interact as they play. Often adults will look at these youngsters and comment how nicely they are playing together, in other words they are not fighting with each other. Young children do not play *together* they play next to one another. Each child is engaged in his own game and is not sharing or cooperative in a game.

In soccer this is most evident in the U6 age group and still occurs to a lesser degree in U8 soccer. Players in these age groups swarm around and after the ball because it is the only “toy” on the field. They have not learned well the social skill of sharing. Hence passing the ball occurs by happenstance.

This social/emotional reality of children in the U6 and U8 age groups needs to be explained to the parents as well as the coaches. All of the adults surrounding the field when these age groups are playing soccer must realize that these children are not small adults. Just because we adults have put them in uniforms and call the group a team does **not** mean they will behave like an adult team. Indeed why should the children suddenly display the social skill of sharing (in soccer we call this passing) when they do not yet truly display that talent in any other setting. Just because they have stepped onto a soccer field doesn't mean they will now leap forward many years in their psychosocial development.

Children aged two to seven are in the egocentric stage of cognitive and emotional development. This stage between the ages of two and seven is a transition between purely individualized behavior and the socialized play that follows. The child's pleasure in this stage is derived from participating in a group. Preschoolers enjoy playing in the presence of others (parallel play), even though they may not always watch or interact with them.

However, there is no real interest in competition or winning.

And so this occurs in training sessions for U6 players. The coach must set up numerous activities where the players are together, but still involved in individual play. This holds true still for U8 players, but the coach can successfully get the players into pair's activities too. First graders participate in parallel play with other students and tend to be more involved in individual activities than in interaction with others. They continue to learn in groups but participate as individuals.

Parallel play and learning to share with others are the developmental milestones children master at this stage. Thus, they need encouragement to share and approval for trying that activity. It is important for early childhood coaches and administrators to teach this reality to the children's parents and to let everyone know it is OK to play swarm ball at U6 and U8.