

TNT Dynamite Soccer Club – Notes from the DOC Playing Up

Youth soccer in the United States is typically organized by age groups, with August 1 serving as the cutoff date between divisions (ex: a player born on January 1 of 2000 would be in an older age group than a player born on August 1 of that same year).

These age groups are created to ensure that players participate with peers of similar development – skill-wise, physically, mentally and socially. However, these age groups should not be considered a “box” that kids must be a part of – since every player develops at different rates, and each player may reach a higher level of development than the other, players should be afforded with the opportunity to “play up” (compete in an older age group) when appropriate.

The key question is “when is it appropriate for my child to play up?” To answer this, we must consider the following questions:

1. Is my child physically capable of excelling in an older age group? Do they possess the size, speed, and coordination to do well against older players and (potentially) on a larger field designed for older players?
2. Does my child have the skill (the technical ability) to excel in an older age group?
3. Is my child mentally capable of excelling in an older age group? Playing in an older age group typically means the game is faster, so players must be able to make decisions faster as well as physically execute them faster.
4. Is my child emotionally capable of excelling in an older age group? Players mature at different rates, and handling stress, adversity and setbacks may be too much for a younger player.
5. Does my child have a competitive age-appropriate team that can offer a more appropriate environment? Is my child under-challenged or bored by playing in their age group? Also consider the teams they are playing against – is that level of competition failing to challenge my child?
6. Do the rules allow my child to play up? Some leagues do not permit players to play up more than one or two age groups.

When we ask ourselves these questions, it’s important to consider a few key words, phrases and ideas:

Excelling vs. Competing: A child playing up should excel in that older age group; he or she should possess great individual skill and confidence with the ball and should be able to make an impact in the game. Often times, parents and coaches think “holding their own” is enough to warrant a child playing up. However, there is a difference between “being competitive” and “excelling” - this player should still be able to make an impact in the game – this “impact” could take the form of scoring goals, dominating the 1v1 matchup (with and without the ball), distributing the ball and directing the team’s attack, making critical saves as a goalkeeper, etc. If they are merely a contributing player, they are losing opportunities to develop their game to its fullest potential, and ultimately may stunt their development. In other words, the player should be a leader of the pack and not a follower or role player.

Physical, Mental and Emotional Abilities, and Technical Skill: When considering whether playing up is appropriate, all four variables should be considered. Ideally, a

player competing in an older age group can do so because all four factors are strengths. A player lacking significantly in one of these areas may be reason enough for them to play in their own age group.

Playing Up vs. Training Up: When a player is not excelling in games in an older age group, a more appropriate option may be to cross-train (play games with their age group, but train with their age group and the older age group). This provides a more competitive training environment for the child, and gives them opportunities to make their mark in the game with their own age group. Depending on league rules, opportunities to compete in games of the older age group could be offered.

Age Appropriate vs. Grade Appropriate: Many players who wish to play up do so to play with their peers (ex: a 7th grader born on or after August 1 may technically be u12, while their peers are u13). The typical concern expressed by parents is that they don't want their child to be left behind their classmates by playing in a younger age group. The irony is that if their child does not meet the criteria for playing up, they will get left behind by playing up. A player placed in an older age group – even if it consists of their grade school peers – may stunt their development, if they fail to excel athletically, mentally, emotionally and technically (skill, or ability with the ball).

A comparable example would be the higher levels of classroom subjects – there is a reason why some students in the same grade study calculus while others are in trigonometry, and others are in algebra. You could move the student in algebra to calculus so they're in the same class as their friends, but ultimately that student's comprehension of mathematics will be underdeveloped.

Returning to Their Age Group: Returning to their appropriate age group for children who do play up should be considered inevitable; most players can compete in an older age groups from ages eight to 11, but the growth spurts players have on or after age 11 cause a separation in the age groups. While returning to their age group is not definite, players and families should understand this will most likely occur and have dialogue about this event to make the transition smoother. When or if it does take place, it should not be viewed as a demotion but as a decision to better develop the child's abilities to their fullest. It can also be viewed as a challenge to the player to raise their level of play to warrant advancement to the older age group.

Opinion of the Coach and Director: It is important that when making the decision as to the best interest of the child, the family (parents and player) trust and respect the opinions and positions of the coach and the club director, both of whom have past experience with and knowledge of these situations that the family may not.

Conclusion: Players who have the ability to excel in an older age group should be afforded the opportunity to do so. However, this opportunity should be warranted and not forced, as the player's best interest and development must be kept in the forefront.