

When you sign your kids up for activities, you never really know if they will engage in it or just taste the experience and spit it out. If your child has fallen in love with soccer and you just realized that you know next to nothing about this game, here's a brief primer.

Soccer, at least modern soccer, developed in England about 200 years ago. There are ancient games in China, Mongolia, Greece, Rome, and India that were similar but the modern game is attributed to England. Wherever the British Empire planted the flag, they also planted soccer and the former colonies became soccer-playing societies.

Other European nations adopted the game and began international competitions creating a need for similar rules and schedules. Out of all of this, came Federation Internationale de Football Association or FIFA, the governing body of international soccer. FIFA , founded in 1904 and located in Zurich, Switzerland, has 208 member associations (national entities). It has a Congress, an Executive Committee, a General Secretariat and many committees that assist the Executive Committee. The current president of FIFA is Sepp Blatter. Soccer, including youth soccer, all over the world is affected by the decisions and policies of this organization.

The game itself is adapted to young players by shrinking the field, the size of the team, and the size of the ball. This enables young players to manage the space more easily and to have more contact with the ball. Coaches call this "touches on the ball". As players get older, the field gets larger until the full 100 to 120 yards by 50 to 80 yards is reached .

The rectangular field is divided in half with a 10 foot circle in the center. In the center of the circle is the "kickoff" spot and the circle is to keep the opponents away from the ball as the kickoff takes place. Each end of the field has a rectangular structure with a net attached to it. This is the goal and a goal requires only that the entire ball cross the goal line at the mouth of the goal. It does not have to hit the net.

In front of the goal structure is a small rectangle inside a larger rectangle. The small rectangle is called the goal area. The large is the penalty area. Inside the penalty area is a penalty spot, directly in front of the middle of the goal structure. If a penalty occurs within the boundaries of the penalty area, this is where the ball is place for the penalty kick.

If the ball rolls across the side line, (these are called “touch lines” hence the term, “out of touch”) the entire ball must cross the entire line. This requires the team that was not the last to touch it to throw it in. A player throwing in the ball must be behind the touch line, throw the ball with both hands overhead, and keep both feet on the ground.

If the ball crosses out at the end lines but outside the goal, it is either a goal kick where the goalkeeper returns the ball to play or a corner kick, where the opponent takes the ball to the corner and kicks it back into the gathering of players in the penalty box. The type of kick is determined by which player was the last to touch the ball. If it comes off a player defending the goal, it will be a corner kick. If it comes off a player attacking the goal, it becomes a free kick from inside the penalty box and usually taken by the keeper.

In older age division (above U10) there are three referees. College and professional levels use four. There is one in the center who moves back and forth with the play of the game; one along each sideline who moves up and down half of the field signaling with a flag to announce “out of touch” or “offsides” or a foul. The center referee is the one who decides on the call and uses a whistle.

“Offsides” is the complicating piece of soccer. Offsides occurs when an attacking player is ahead of the last defender (except for the goalkeeper) at the time the ball is kicked. A player may move forward ahead of the defender after the kick and not be offsides. A player may be in an offsides position but not involved in the play and not be guilty of “offsides”. Referees determine offsides.

Because soccer is the most difficult game in which to score, it is not at all uncommon to see games result in a 0-0 tie or a 1-0 score. Games ending in a 0-0 tie are said to be “played to nil”. If there must be a winner, such as in tournament play, additional time is added (2, 15-minute periods) and if there is still a tie, each team chooses 5 players from those on the field at the end of play to kick penalty kicks at the opposing goalkeeper. The team with the highest number of successful kicks is the winner. This is called a “shoot out”.

There are penalties of differing seriousness that call for losing the ball to the opponent by a free kick from the point where the infraction happened. These are called

“direct” or “indirect” depending on the foul and where on the field it happens. A player earning a “direct” kick can shoot it right into the goal to score but from an “indirect” kick, another player must touch the ball after the kick is taken for a goal to be scored.

For more serious offenses, the center official may produce a small, playing card size yellow or red card. A red card means the offending player must leave the field...not just the game and the team will play with one less player. A yellow is a warning and results in a turnover of the ball. A second yellow card equals a red card and expulsion from the field. In some levels of play, yellow cards accumulate from one game to another.

Referees enforce the rules that in soccer are called “Laws of the Game”. Although Americans have a baseball tradition of hollering at the referee, in soccer such behavior can get you or your team in trouble. A player who is obnoxious to a referee may face a yellow or red card for “dissent”. A coach can also be ejected for abusing an official and, in some leagues, may be carded for the bad conduct of his team parents and fans.

There are no “time outs” in soccer. The referee keeps time and if play is stopped for injury, she may add additional time to the end of the half or the final moments of the game. There are occasions when a referee may call for a “water break” midway in a half when high heat and humidity could endanger players. This is common in youth divisions but unusual in the highest levels and was utilized at the Beijing Olympics in the men’s gold medal game.

Now you have the basics. Get more information at the library or borrow from the league’s video and book library. Watch the televised games. Take younger players to high school games and learn what your child already knows. This is a beautiful game.