

# MILAN

## INTERNATIONAL SOCCER ACADEMY

### Developing Children Movement Skills

#### 1. ABCs

Agility, balance, coordination, and speed are closely connected to the development of the central nervous system (CNS) in early childhood. The bodies of preschool children are silently waiting for precisely the kind of stimulation that will get the CNS preparing and adapting for the ABCs. As it happens, quick changes of direction and diversity of movement are intrinsic to soccer, so the simple act of playing the game provides the perfect stimuli to help children to develop these capacities. You can almost hear each child's CNS saying: "Gee, thanks for registering me in soccer!"

#### 2. Running

Soccer involves a little bit of running; actually, it involves a *lot* of running and best of all, for children who haven't reached puberty, soccer provides *exactly* the kind of running they need: short distance sprinting followed by short time intervals of recovery. Note: If your child's U9 coach is sending the team on long laps of the field, you might ask him why. The science shows that jogging around a soccer field at half speed is doing nothing to develop the quickness and interval recovery required to play soccer. Furthermore, it isn't helping your pre-pubertal child to be a better distance runner any more than if she was playing the game for 10 minutes and having a lot more fun.

#### 3. Jumping, hopping, skipping, galloping, and dodging

When your child plays soccer, there are a lot of other players on the field who want to frustrate their efforts to run and play the ball. Consequently, the game demands that kids do a lot of jumping and dodging to evade opponents. It also demands that they hop, skip, and even gallop at times as they change speed and adjust their stride to avoid players and change direction.

## 4. Throwing and catching

Hold on. When are you allowed to use your hands in soccer? Well, for starters, every time the ball passes out of play on the sidelines. Play restarts with a throw in, and every player needs to learn how to do it. And goalkeepers, a position just about every child plays at some point during their early years in the game, are constantly catching the ball with their hands and passing it to teammates with a baseball-style throw.

## 5. Tracking the movement of an object in flight

One of the less discussed aspects of physical literacy but integral to throwing and catching as well as striking something with a bat or racquet is the ability to track the movement of an object (e.g., ball) as it travels through the air. Your child's ability to use their eyes to track movement and estimate speed and distance does not "just happen". As with movement skills, it needs to be developed through real experience and practice. Soccer provides plenty of experience as the game constantly challenges players to gauge the speed, distance, and trajectory of the ball.

## 6. Decision making

The ability to "read the environment" and respond with appropriate decisions is another element of physical literacy that is often overlooked. In the days of our distant ancestors, it might have meant deciding to climb a tree quickly after spotting a lion. In the context of a sport such as soccer, it is deciding to pass the ball to a teammate running to open space or shooting at goal when the goalkeeper is out of position. The game constantly creates fresh cognitive challenges where players must gather information from their physical environment, analyze that information, and then execute an appropriate physical response.

## 7. Kicking

Not much needs to be said here. There is a lot of kicking in soccer. And the range of kicking techniques can eventually become remarkably complex as players develop in the sport. (For instance, according to Active for Life contributor *Istvan Balyi*, players in Hungary used to be expected to be able to play the ball with eight different surfaces of the foot. How many of us can even identify eight distinct surfaces on one foot?)

Soccer is a physical literacy wonder drug, if we could package it in tablet form, we could sell it as a prescription medicine for developing all-around movement skills in children.