



# SoccerAmerica's Youth Soccer Insider

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## Getting Players to Pay Attention

*(My recent outings to training sessions with 6-, 7- and 8-year-olds reminded me how difficult it can be to corral a group of wonderfully rambunctious children -- and prompted me to remind myself of the advice we got in this article that first appeared in March of 2013.)*

**By Mike Voitalla**

It's perfectly reasonable that children who show up to soccer practice might have a difficult time paying attention when the coach has something to say. They have, after all, spent an entire day at school listening to adults. And now it's playtime.

But even those coaches who follow the Three L's -- "No laps, no lines, no lectures" -- must at times address the entire group.

So how do you get a group of chatty, fidgety youngsters to pay attention for a few seconds?

For young children, there are those methods used by elementary school teachers: "If you can hear me, clap once. ... If you can hear me, clap twice, etc;" various clapping patterns for the kids to follow; "1-2-3 Eyes on me" ...

"I just talk quieter until they realize they have to quiet down to hear the info," says [Julie Eibensteiner](#) of the [NSCAA](#) Coaching Education Staff and longtime youth coach. "But I think how you carry yourself and your approach to practice usually commands attention. The more you say, the less value you have when you talk. If you only speak when you have something valuable to say, they will be waiting for it and tune in when you do talk."

The coach's positioning, posture and demeanor are crucial, explains **Ian Barker**, the [NSCAA](#)'s Director of Coaching of Education:

"Take off the sunglasses and baseball cap, so they can see your eyes," Barker says.

"Turn their backs to the sun. ... Turn their backs to distractions (parents, other action, etc.)

"Get down to their level ... squat or sit. Talk softly, so they have to listen harder. Tell a story or a joke to draw them in. Use first names or nicknames they respond to. ...

Sometimes I engage the most energetic child and his or her focus on me draws in the others."

**Sam Snow**, [US Youth Soccer](#)'s Coaching Director, recommends initially making eye contact with all of the players, so that they know it's time to tune in.

Once you do get their attention, there's the matter of retaining it.

"Older players also tune out during a coach monologue, they are just better at faking rapt attention," says Snow. "When the players know the coach's talk will be just another long monologue their attention quite naturally wanders. By engaging the players with one or two questions at the halftime or at a natural stoppage during a training session activity, the coach has the players' attention."

**Mike O'Neill** is the girls Director Of Coaching of New Jersey's [PDA](#).

"Keep it simple," he says. "Quick and concise is the only way!"

To players, he stresses the importance of eye contact and that only one person can talk at a time. For his coaches: "Patience, tone of voice -- and eventually the good habits will take over."

For sure, a coach's job with a bunch of 6-year-olds is mainly about creating an active environment for them to discover the joys of the game. But just because the players are older doesn't mean the lecture is effective.

In his book, "[The Talent Code](#)," **Daniel Coyle** investigated highly successful coaches and teachers. He reported that advice or instructions uttered by the great basketball coach, **John Wooden**, averaged four seconds: "No lectures, no extended harangues ... he rarely spoke longer than 20 seconds."

What the great coaches and teachers Coyle studied had in common:

"They listened far more than they talked. They seemed allergic to giving pep talks or inspiring speeches; they spent most of their time offering small, targeted, highly specific adjustments. They had an extraordinary sensitivity to the person they were teaching, customizing each message to each student's personality. ... They were talent whisperers."