

UPHOLDING CHILDREN'S RIGHTS IN SOCCER

A Holistic, Rights-Based Approach to Grassroots Soccer

Beyond developing technical skills and tactical awareness, it is fundamental that grassroots programs are built upon a foundation that respects, protects, and fulfills the rights of every child. [The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child \(UNCRC\)](#) provides the essential framework. By consciously embedding these rights into our entire methodology—from the training ground to match day—we ensure that the environment is not only about developing better players, but also about nurturing confident, respected, and empowered young people.

Article 3: The Best Interests of the Child

This principle states that the best interests of the child must be a primary consideration in all actions concerning them. It means ensuring their overall well-being (physical, emotional, and psychological) is the top priority.

- ▶ **In Training:** Using a variety of activities and station-based training helps cater to different needs and keeps children engaged. Designing games that are appropriately challenging for the age group, such as by modifying pitch size or player numbers, ensures activities are developmental and not overly stressful.
- ▶ **In the Game & Club Environment:** A club's policies should prioritize player well-being over winning. This includes managing player workload to prevent physical and mental burnout, ensuring travel arrangements are safe and appropriate, and making decisions (like tournament entries) based on the developmental needs of the children, not the ambitions of adults.

Article 12: The Right to Be Heard

Children have the right to express their views in all matters affecting them, and to have those views given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity. This empowers them and fosters a sense of ownership over their experience.

- ▶ **In Training:** Actively creating opportunities for children to lead parts of the session is a perfect embodiment of this right. This can be done by allowing them to decide on rules, formations, or even design their own warm-up games.
- ▶ **In the Game & Club Environment:** Coaches can involve players in setting team goals for the season or creating a team code of conduct. A club should have clear, accessible channels for children to provide feedback or raise concerns without fear of judgment, perhaps through a designated player representative or a primarily liaison for child protection.

Article 19: The Right to Protection

Children have the right to be protected from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect, and maltreatment. This includes creating a safe, supportive, and positive environment free from undue pressure or intimidation.

- ▶ **In Training:** Emphasizing teamwork, fair play, and personal improvement over a 'win-at-all-costs' mentality helps create a less pressurized and more supportive atmosphere. Coaches should model respectful behaviour and language at all times.

- ▶ **In the Game & Club Environment:** The club must have and enforce clear codes of conduct for players, coaches, and parents. Having a visible and approachable Primary Liaison for Child Protection, along with robust anti-bullying and safeguarding policies, ensures there is a system in place to protect every child.

Article 31: The Right to Play

Every child has the right to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to their age. In a sports context, this is the right for the game to be fun and for every child to participate meaningfully.

- ▶ **In Training:** Offering a diverse range of activities directly supports this right. Using different formats, such as games with multiple goals or adding fun rules, keeps training fresh and exciting and maximizes active participation for all.
- ▶ **In the Game & Club Environment:** This right means ensuring fair playing time. A child should not spend the entire game, or the majority of the season, as a substitute. The match-day environment, regardless of the score, should be positive and encouraging, where children feel free to try new skills without fear of being criticized for making a mistake.