

HEADING THE RIGHT WAY



There are so many simple ways to improve heading skills

HEADACHE

A lot of girls are scared of heading the ball. A lot of boys are scared of admitting that they're scared of heading the ball.

Most kids are scared of heading a ball in case it hurts. And it does. It hurts because kids let the ball strike them instead of them striking the ball. When they were smaller, kids were made to head a high long ball so they planted their feet, braced themselves and closed their eyes. The impact went right through them so they learned to avoid heading.

Heading is one of the most neglected skills in Soccer. Like any skill development, heading practice should start short and simple, slow and easy. As kids become more confident, they can increase the distance, speed, height and degree of difficulty. Close repetition drills enable kids to improve their heading without straining their head or neck.

We often look at the technique and overlook the player



HEAD START

Kids need to move if they want to improve. They need to believe if they want to achieve.

Kids can learn the basics of heading on their own. The skill is in their hands. The simplest drill is to throw the ball up in the air and head it back into their hands without dropping the ball. The real challenge is not to let the ball hit the ground. This encourages kids to get up on their toes ready to catch the ball anywhere in a 360 degree radius. It's a good opportunity to improve basic motor skills and agility.

It's important that kids develop one step at a time and don't try too much too soon or they'll lose confidence. All Soccer skills are simple but they need plenty of practice. Once kids can catch the ball without dropping it, they should practice the same skill while walking and then running. The next variation is to throw a high ball into the air, let it bounce and then head it back into their hands.

When kids head the ball, they need to move their whole body



HEADING OFF

In a generic coaching system, a lot of kids are learning the same skills with the same drills. Confidence with heading gives players an edge because a lot of coaches tell their players to keep the ball on the ground and a lot of kids become wary of the high ball. The player who loves to head a ball or juggle will always attack the high ball in a game while other kids hesitate and wait for the ball to stop bouncing.

Freestyle kids keep a written record of their skills and fitness levels so they know exactly where they're up to and what they need to practice. They see heading as a challenge while other kids see it as a problem. Freestyle kids know how many times they can head the ball while standing or moving. They gradually develop stronger neck muscles.

Footwork and Vision



HEADMASTER

Once kids develop their timing, their power increases naturally

Kids who want to improve heading, develop familiarity with the ball by using their hands. They start with close balls and then gradually throw them higher while they get used to the force. This gives them the confidence to go further. Achievement increases motivation.

Too many kids stand still when they practice heading. A lot of them just stick their neck out and use their head. Freestyle kids learn to get their whole body behind the ball so they can use more power. When they head for goal, they always head the ball hard into the ground to make it more difficult for the goalkeeper. They practice hitting cones.

Strength plus speed equals power. At corners, the striker who stands in the box with his marker can only use strength to head the ball. The striker who runs in from the far side can use power to head the ball.

Power and Precision



DOUBLE HEADERS

Heading in Pairs is the most effective way to develop air superiority

Ballwork in pairs teaches kids the fundamentals of possession. They learn control and support while getting hundreds of ball touches.

Heading in Pairs is the initial drill and prepares kids for Juggling in Pairs. When one kid is heading the ball, the training partner is moving into a support position so they can get behind the flight of the ball.

There's no time out with Heading in Pairs. Kids are either controlling or supporting. They learn to give and go (hit and run) instead of pass and stand still. Safety comes first with all heading drills and players should practice using one touch so they don't clash heads. If kids count the number of passes, they can see their improvement. Once they're confident, they can increase the distance, mobility and power.

Movement and Decision.



HEADLINE

So many kids head the ball over the crossbar because they meet the ball with perfect timing but it bounces off the top of their head. The key to power is to concentrate the maximum amount of force into the minimum amount of time. Sitting up and heading the ball teaches kids to keep their eyes on the ball and improve their timing and velocity.

The server stands up and throws the ball to the receiver who lies flat on the ground. At first, kids will sit up too early and head the ball too slowly. As they get used to the throw, they learn to come up later but a lot faster. They develop a lot more power by using their arms. When a player becomes really powerful at heading, the thrower will move further back to avoid getting hit. This drill is a good way to combine fitness with ball control and helps to strengthen abdominal muscles.

Belief and Repetition



HEADHUNTER

Kids don't realise their skills till we give them effective drills

Any kid can head a ball. The real challenge is to make them believe it. Like most fundamental skills, heading for goal should always start inside the 6 yard box so that kids can focus on footwork, vision, timing and technique. This stops kids from trying too hard too soon and tensing up. The balls should be fed from both the left side and right side of the 6 yard box so that kids get used to various angles.

The feeder throws the ball direct to the head and the receiver uses his neck muscles to direct the ball. Heading skills depend on confidence and kids should never practice with long, high balls until they're comfortable with short simple drills. An intelligent coach will increase the height and distance of the throw without kids noticing. By the end of the drill, kids will realise that they're good at heading.

Challenge and Intuition



HEADSTRONG

A lot of kids rush onto a ball. Smart kids learn to time their runs.

A good player will use his neck muscles to head the ball. A better will get his whole body behind the ball. The best players will run onto the ball so that they maximise the speed and velocity of their header.

Most kids try to keep the ball on the ground. Freestyle kids prefer the challenge of a high bouncing ball so they can judge the approach runs. Timing is an essential element of power. Get players to stand outside the 18 yard box and then throw a high ball to land near the penalty spot. The challenge is to let the ball bounce and then head it into the net. At first, kids will rush in and miss the ball. They soon learn to come in later but faster. As kids become confident at heading for goal they can develop their own drills for diving headers and glancing headers. Kids need to understand what, how and why when training.

Anyone can stick their neck out. Freestyle kids use their whole body.



HEADING OUT

Kids should never give away a corner if they can give away a throw. They should never give away a throw if they can get the ball up the field. Any clearance can become a pass to the forward line.

Defensive Heading can be very effective for a defender to get the ball out of the box. Kids can get above the ball to head it down, get behind the ball to head it out and get under the ball to head it up and over the attackers. Any kid can head a ball. Freestyle kids learn to put the ball where they want it to go. They can change the flight of the ball.

Plenty of kids practice using their chest or their thigh to control the ball before volleying. The head can be a lot more effective at directing a ball because of its accuracy and power. It's amazing how many team mates clash trying to head the same high ball. Calling is the most effective skill in Soccer because it's safe, simple, effective and doesn't require any energy. It tells us **where** to head the ball.

When kids are focused on a high ball, they need a good support call.



HEADLIGHT

Balancing a ball teaches kids the importance of relaxation

Kids are constantly told to do their best. Their parents, teachers and coaches tell them to try their hardest. Ball skills are different. Kids who try too hard to control a ball will just tense up. They try too hard to kick a ball too hard and either blast the ball over the crossbar or stub their kicking foot into the ground. Kids who try to balance a ball on their head will just keep dropping it. They just need to relax.

The key to balance is to stop trying and stop worrying about dropping the ball. It's an intuitive skill and shows kids how to keep their eyes on the ball and develop a feel for it. It teaches them the correct part of the head and the correct part of the ball to use for heading. As kids become confident with the balance, they can practice while moving, throwing a high ball into the air and letting it bounce first or just by sitting down and using the upper body to balance the ball.

Control comes when we stop looking for it and can learn to relax



HEADING IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION

Once kids lose their fear of the ball, they can head off on their own

Freestyle kids focus on three elements of Soccer that most kids are scared of. Some kids are scared to juggle because they don't believe they can do it. They give up in the first five minutes just when they're starting to get a feel for the ball. Some kids are scared to shoot at goal in case their team mates laugh at them or the coach shouts at them for missing. Some kids are scared of heading a ball in case it hurts them.

Freestyle kids will always take shots at goal because they can learn from every kick, good or bad. They practice juggling every day because a ball never criticises kids for making mistakes. And they will always attack the high ball in a game because most of the other players will hesitate and wait for the ball to stop bouncing.

Kids need to develop initiative, innovation and intuition

