

# Heading The Ball

By: John Ouellette, AYSO National Coach / Technical Director  
coaching@ayso.org

Many of you read a recent article that said heading in soccer could cause some brain damage. Never has one story provoked so many calls to the Coaching Department at the National Support Center of AYSO. Reaction such as “Is it true?” and “What position has AYSO taken?”

The AYSO Education Department and the AYSO Coaching Technical Committee believe that heading is part of the game of soccer, and it should be introduced and taught properly to players at the appropriate age and time. Introduction of heading at an early age or improper heading at any age may be linked to certain kinds of temporary or long term effects.

While scientific evidence is preliminary, some studies indicate that young players who head too early in their physical development are susceptible to potential risks, including risks to the skull, neck, and spine. In addition, soft and connective tissues, such as those associated with the brain, may be affected under some circumstances, too.

Improper heading at any age may expose a player to risk.

Studies indicate soccer is not the leading source of sports injuries to the head and neck, so the act of heading should be regarded within a complete context of risk. Studies do indicate that head-to-head contact among players, head contact with the ground, and head contact with goal posts and other associated playing equipment pose a greater risk than the simple act of heading the ball. These kinds of risk are associated with most outdoor team sports.

AYSO does not recommend heading below the age of ten. Coaches are not encouraged to teach or practice heading at these early ages.

As the level of play advances and the participants skills increase, the proper heading techniques need to be introduced to prepare the player for proper execution. Proper techniques can first be learned through the use of rag, nerf, and inflatable balls, thus avoiding unnecessary, repetitive heading of a regulation soccer ball.

When a real soccer ball is used to simulate game conditions during practice, its use should be of limited duration and repetition. Players who demonstrate a fear of the ball should be shown appropriate ball control techniques that do not force them to head the ball before they are ready.

Heading represents a player’s earliest opportunity to play an air ball. It also causes more apprehension than any other soccer skill, particularly with younger players. Therefore, the coach needs to be concerned with the apprehension and the poor technique which may result. A general rule of thumb to follow is to start teaching heading when a players show an interest, not when the coach thinks it should be taught.

Teach the skill of heading correctly. Remember to use a Nerf(r)-type ball, a rag ball, or an under inflated ball to start heading for the comfort and security of young players.

Teach your players to prepare to head the ball using the following reminders:

- keep your eye on the ball.
- place your body so that your forehead will meet the ball.
- take a comfortable stance with knees bent.
- keep your eyes open.
- keep your mouth closed.
- keep your chin tucked.
- keep a rigid neck.
- use your arms for balance.

Teach your players how to contact the ball using the following techniques:

- contact the ball with the forehead.
- your legs should propel your body from your waist to head the ball.
- your neck should be kept rigid.
- follow through toward the target.
- once you head the ball, put your body back into a position where you can then go to the next move.

Never have an unwilling player head the ball. He or she will not head in a game, why force them to at practice? Also don't have children do headers over and over again.

To sum it all up,  
introduce heading at an appropriate age level,  
teach the skill correctly,  
never force a player to head the ball,  
limit the amount of times a child heads the ball.

John Ouellette, AYSO Technical Director/National Coach  
coaching@ayso.org  
1-888-826-2976