

## **Playing Up**

(when a player plays in a team older than their age bracket)

This article is only discussing players who have every opportunity to play within their own age bracket but choose to play outside of it. The best reason a player should choose to play in an older age bracket is because they will learn nothing if they stay within their own age group so their overall development will be stifled.

Clearly it is a pretty big call to say a player will learn nothing from playing with players their own age. Our game needs many different skills to be played effectively and it is unusual that a player can be advanced above their age in all of them. Let's say to be a top player you need to possess at least these four attributes

**Technique** – The ability to control the ball and move it how you want.

**Speed**- Both in thought and in body.

**Decision Making** – Knowing when to pass, shoot, tackle or dribble the ball.

**Imagination** – Creative ways to solve problems on the pitch.

Let's use some examples to raise points for debate.

### Example 1

An attacking player is scoring huge amounts of goals in her own age group and her main asset is her speed. She is moved up an age group and still holds her own and scores her share as she is still one of the quickest players. This is quite a familiar example as scoring lots of goals is often a reason players are moved up and normally this would be regarded as a success as she is still scoring in the older age group.

The questions that need to be asked are is this player now having to rely more and more on her speed to score. Is she developing good decision making habits or is the only way she can beat the older players is in a race for the ball. Although this player is still scoring is she developing all the attributes of a top player or is she becoming a one dimensional player.

Could she develop more in her own age group by playing in different positions?  
Would it be better if she trained occasionally with older players but played within her own age group?

### Example 2

A young boy is an early developer and is simply physically bigger than every player he plays against. He can dominate simply by his size. Remember as discussed in the *Relative Age Effect* article a player can have the physical or emotional maturity of plus or minus 3 years there actual age i.e. a 10 year old can physically be as developed as a 13 year old.

The player is moved up an age and copes with the move as they are still one of the bigger players. Again this is a common reason for players to play in an older age group. Here the questions that need to be asked are does this player still try to use their size to beat opponents or are they able to develop other areas of their game. Also in

these cases you need to see if the emotional maturity matches the physical size of the player. Are they still a 10 year old although they look like a teenager.

Could this player develop better by training with players his own age but playing in an older age group?

The question of whether to play players up or not should be considered more long term than simply if they can cope with it or not. Take into account the four attributes mentioned before and see do these players have nothing to learn in terms of technique, speed, decision making or imagination before they are moved up. Or be flexible and encourage movement between age groups for training or matches although I know this may be very difficult to organise.

On any given weekend if I watch a couple of games I will see 4/5 or more players playing above their age and I have to ask myself are they all benefiting from doing it. Obviously some players are quite simply too good and will learn nothing by playing for their own age group but these are the exceptions.

This article was designed to raise debate on the topic and to discuss different views and opinions. If you would like to hear other coach's views or express your own then go to <http://community.footballtricks.com/forums/>



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