



MASTER THE BALL

Lots of contact with the ball, in representative contexts that facilitate decision-making.



The importance of young players receiving lots of time on the ball cannot be overstated. At the youngest age groups, **frequent contact with the ball** can provide children with opportunities for exploration and to express their creativity, leading to a confidence in possession that they can continue to improve as their development progresses. This can be through actions like **passing, dribbling, controlling the ball, trying to keep the ball in 1v1 situations and using both feet.**

As learners progress through the age groups, this focus on mastering the ball can be combined with the development of **tactical awareness**, helping players use their technical ability and skill on the ball *'to facilitate better decision-making; improve their understanding of the game, both in and out of possession; develop the technical ability to play in a range of positions; and appreciate how their ability helps the team'* (Player Development Project).

REPRESENTATIVE LEARNING DESIGN

Representative learning design looks to ensure learning environments retain relevance to the game, enabling the transfer of training to performance contexts. At C.A.R.D.S, we use **task simplification** to simplify practice environments according to learner needs, whilst ensuring that key information (i.e., opponents, team-mates) is still available.

This approach ensures more contact with the ball for all players, whilst also enabling the emergence of decisions and actions similar - or **representative** - of the game itself. The below video clip is an excellent example of a simple activity that provides representative, game-realistic practice for young players (Opposite Direction 2017).



TASK SIMPLIFICATION

Task simplification often involves reducing the number of players involved in games and activities, promoting greater involvement and more opportunities to improve for all players. Examples of this could be the use of small numbers of players (i.e., 1v1, 2v1, 2v2, 3v2, 3v3), constraints which create multiple 1-on-1 opportunities and exponentially increase the number of ball contacts per player.

The benefits of such an approach are highlighted by findings on Manchester United's switch from 8v8 to 4v4 games in their academy program. In the 4v4 games, it was discovered that young players:

- Completed 135% more passes.
- Had 260% more scoring attempts.
- Scored 500% more goals.
- Engaged in 225% more 1v1 duels.
- Performed 280% more dribbling tricks.

These findings align with the Belgium Football Association's move to small-sided games in youth development. This change of approach catapulted a nation of only 11 million people to number one in the FIFA rankings and a third-place finish at the 2018 World Cup, whilst producing a 'Golden Generation' of players including the likes of Eden Hazard and Kevin De Bruyne. **Incorporating smaller-sided training and game formats is a key part of our approach at C.A.R.D.S.**

