



AGE-GROUP RULES CARDS

4v4 through 11v11 — field size, ball size, offside, heading and the calls parents ask about, one card per format.

Based on U.S. Soccer's Player Development Initiatives. Leagues adapt the specifics — game length and restart rules in particular — so confirm with your league before you correct a referee.

U6-U8

4v4 — The Swarm Years

4v4

Four players, no goalkeepers, tiny goals, and a beautiful cloud of kids chasing one ball. Every rule at this age exists to maximize touches and minimize standing around — the two things that actually develop 6-year-olds.	
Players	4v4, no goalkeepers
Ball	Size 3
Game length	Four ~10-minute quarters (varies by league)
Field	Roughly 25–35 × 15–25 yards
Offside	None
Heading	Not allowed — indirect free kick if deliberate
Restarts	Kick-ins or dribble-ins often replace throw-ins (league choice)
Substitutions	Unlimited, flowing
WHAT CHANGES AT THIS AGE - There is no goalkeeper on purpose — nobody should be standing in a net at 6. - No score tables or standings in most rec leagues at this age. That's a feature, not an oversight. - Coaches are often allowed on the field with the youngest groups. CALLS PARENTS ASK ABOUT Redo instead of whistle-and-lecture — Many leagues use young referees or coach-officials who simply restart play — teaching, not punishing. Deliberate header → indirect free kick — U.S. Soccer's heading ban applies in games and practice at this age.	

The correct sideline soundtrack at 4v4 is cheering and laughing. Tactical instructions shouted at a 7-year-old are noise at best — the swarm IS the development.

Goalkeepers arrive, and with them the rule most sidelines have never read: the build-out line. It exists to teach playing out of the back instead of booting long — and it changes what 'good defending' looks like at this age.

Players	7v7 including a goalkeeper
Ball	Size 4
Game length	Two 25-minute halves (typical)
Field	Roughly 55–65 × 35–45 yards
Offside	Enforced only between the build-out line and the goal line
Heading	Not allowed — indirect free kick if deliberate
Goalkeeper	No punts or drop-kicks — throw or pass to restart
Build-out line	Midway between the halfway line and penalty area, both halves

WHAT CHANGES AT THIS AGE

- When the keeper has the ball (in hands or on a goal kick), opponents must retreat behind the build-out line until the ball is in play.
- Punting is banned — the keeper distributes with feet or a throw, so teams learn to build.
- Offside now exists, but only in the attacking zone past the build-out line.

CALLS PARENTS ASK ABOUT

Punt or drop-kick by the keeper — Indirect free kick from the spot of the offense — leagues vary on the exact restart, but it's always coming back.

Pressing before the ball is in play — The referee re-does the restart; persistent early pressing gets a talking-to.

Offside only past the build-out line — A cherry-picker at midfield is legal here — the line is the new offside boundary.

When the other team plays out of the back slowly and your sideline wants to scream 'PRESSURE!' — don't. The rule exists precisely so 9-year-olds get time on the ball under control.

Nine players, full offside, real positions, and the last stop before the full-sided game. This is the age where formations start meaning something — and where Michigan's Director's Academy league deliberately keeps development ahead of standings.

Players	9v9 including a goalkeeper
Ball	Size 4
Game length	Two 30-minute halves (typical)
Field	Roughly 70–80 × 45–55 yards
Offside	Full offside law, entire attacking half
Heading	Banned at U11; limited practice-only introduction at U12
Goalkeeper	Full distribution — punts allowed again
Build-out line	Gone

WHAT CHANGES AT THIS AGE

- Full offside arrives — wingers have to learn timing, not just speed.
- The build-out line disappears; pressing high becomes legal and coached.
- Common formations (3-2-3, 3-3-2) map cleanly onto 11v11 shapes a year later.

CALLS PARENTS ASK ABOUT

Deliberate heading at U11 — Still an indirect free kick. At U12 many leagues permit limited game heading — check your league's rule, because this is where confusion peaks.

Real fouls, real cards — Cautions get shown at this age. It's part of learning the game's boundaries — not a scandal.

U11-U12 is when parents first hear 'your kid should play up' or 'switch clubs now or fall behind.' Michigan's DA league exists specifically to resist that — the sorting truly starts at U13.

The full field, the full seventeen Laws, and — at U13 — the start of every national platform's age groups. From here the rulebook is IFAB's, with youth modifications limited mostly to game length and substitutions.

Players	11v11
Ball	Size 5
Game length	2×35 (U13–14) → 2×40 (U15–16) → 2×45 (U17–19)
Field	Full size, roughly 100–120 × 55–75 yards
Offside	Full Law 11
Heading	Permitted from U13 (with practice-load guidance)
Substitutions	Varies hugely by competition — re-entry allowed in most youth leagues, restricted in MLS NEXT, windowed in high school
Cards	Full Law 12 — including denial-of-goal-scoring-opportunity sendings-off

WHAT CHANGES AT THIS AGE

- Birth-year age groups meet national platforms: MLS NEXT, ECNL, GA, N1, and MSPSP all begin at U13.
- Substitution rules become competition-specific — the same player can live under three different sub regimes (club league, showcase, high school) in one year.
- High school soccer adds MHSAA's own rulebook: 18-contest limits, mercy rules, and the Limited Team Membership rule.

CALLS PARENTS ASK ABOUT

DOGSO red cards — Denying an obvious goal-scoring opportunity is a sending-off even in youth games — the last-defender tactical foul now has real consequences.

Dissent — Referees at this level are instructed to card dissent early. Teams that learn to play through decisions win more games than teams that argue them.

From U13 on, the rules your player lives under depend on the competition patch on their sleeve. When in doubt, the league handbook — not the loudest parent — is the authority.