

Player Development

Stage 1 Under 7, Under 8 and Under 9

Stage 2 Under 10, Under 11 and Under 12

What are we trying to establish in Rugby Union for children?

Develop a grounding in the core values of the game – enjoyment, respect, discipline, teamwork, sportsmanship – through the:

- Child first approach and the coaching of fundamentals
 - Focus of the sport for all – everyone “plays” – not based on the child’s ability to perform, but on their ability to participate
 - Promotion of the social aspect of sport and multi-positional play and activity
 - Development of confidence and self esteem
 - Celebration of success as the learning of new skills and understanding
 - Enjoyment and engagement of the player in low-organisation games.
-

A Framework for Player Development U7 – U12

The Player Development Framework is not an exhaustive list but offers a broad outline for the development of children in each age group. The range of levels of development in children of the same age is immense and to offer a ‘one size’ fits all development programme would be exceptionally challenging for some children while being not challenging enough for others, being equally demotivating for both.

The Player Development Framework has been designed to provide the coach with a framework for delivery. It is split into four sections:

- Social and Personal
- Physical and Movement
- Game Understanding
- Skill Focus

Although the framework separates specific areas for development it is important to recognise that they are entwined and linked to each other – and many of the activities will cover all aspects.

The Social and Personal aspects provide the key to all others. Confident, competent, decision-making rugby players come from confident, competent, decision-making people. The framework provides guidance on how that might be achieved through the coaching sessions and competitive situations.

The framework provides a focus for delivery, but sessions should not be limited by them. The coach should be mindful of the following when using the framework:

- **All** the children will be able to achieve most of the areas for development
- **Most** of the children will be able to achieve all of the areas for development
- **Some** of the children will be able to achieve some of the areas for development at the next level.

As with all aspects of development, these areas will require continued work and should not be neglected once they have been demonstrated. The aspects should be practiced and constantly referred to by the coach.

Background

Up to the age of 12, children should be allowed to play rugby and be involved in the sport for the simple fact that it is inherently interesting and satisfying to do so. Children need to be engaged in fundamental movements and need to try out various roles within the context of sport. Coaches should avoid the temptation to promote competitive performance and instead design a variety of play activities and low-organisation games to meet the children's skill development needs. While it may be necessary to progressively introduce some drills to intentionally endow children with sport specific skills, the goal should still be fun, and 'time on task' should be maximised while minimising 'inactive time'. The coach should act as a 'resource person' who can flexibly modify the play and practice environment without imposing a rigid structure.

It is important that children participate in a variety of sports during these stages, with it being likely that they will be involved in a decreasing number of sports from 13-15 and again from 16 to adulthood. This enables them to develop all round skills, spatial awareness, decision making and game understanding.

It is also important that children participate in a good deal of deliberate play. Deliberate play is unstructured activity usually led by the participants themselves and engaged in with fun as the intention. Children should engage in large quantities of deliberate play activities (designed to maximize enjoyment, which are regulated by flexible age-adapted rules) during these stages.

Deliberate play is a form of sporting activity that involves early developmental physical activities that are intrinsically motivating, provide immediate gratification and are specifically designed to maximise enjoyment. In its 'purest' form, deliberate play consists of activities such as 'street' or backyard football, basketball and even rugby, with rules adapted from standardised sport rules and monitored by the children playing. Although not specifically designed to improve performance, learning occurs when children are involved in deliberate play activities, just as learning occurs in more primitive forms of physical activity play seen in younger children.

Deliberate play activities are thought to be essential during early sport experiences because such activities provide an opportunity for young athletes to develop fundamental motor skills – such as running, throwing and jumping – in an enjoyable environment and is essential for the development of intrinsic motivation (i.e. the player “wants” to do it) for sport, which is necessary for continued commitment to sport participation. With regards to the development of skill learning, a key benefit of deliberate play situations is that they allow children the freedom to experiment with different movements and tactics and the opportunity to learn to innovate, improvise and respond strategically.

In deliberate play situations there are few periods of waiting or off-task time; these can be found in structured practice settings, for example waiting around to perform the next drill or waiting while the coaches set up equipment. Although there are obvious advantages to having a coach provide feedback, instruction and monitor success etc., it is likely that the player's engagement in deliberate play activities is at least equal to those coaching interventions.

There is also new research evidence to suggest that focusing on motor skill development during the early years may actually have physiological benefits that carry through to adolescence. It is suggested that fundamental motor skill development in childhood may be an important component of interventions to promote long-term fitness. A deliberate play approach, given its focus on developing skills in a fun environment would appear to be one way by which this strategy could be implemented.

U7 – U12 In Summary:

- Social and Personal Development of the child is the focus with rugby as the tool
- Children should be encouraged to engage in a range of sports/activities
 - In place of pre-season rugby activities, rugby clubs should consider providing opportunities in football, cricket, athletics, volleyball, softball, fun activities etc
- Players should participate in deliberate play activities
 - Coaching through games
 - Variety of games and situations
 - Players devise own games
- Gradual introduction of some deliberate practices (drills)
 - Should be enjoyable
 - Maximise time on task
- Coach as “resource”
 - Learning through play as/ more beneficial as/ than coaching interventions.

