



AFL Junior Match Policy

Literature Review of Research relating to the
Key Principles and Policies of the AFL Junior Match Policy

AFL WORKING GROUP

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The purpose of this Literature Review is to evaluate existing practices of the AFL Junior Match Policy compared with current research and best practice, and to determine if current policies and principles are appropriate, relevant and applicable to recruiting, retaining and transitioning participants from Auskick into Junior and Youth Football.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The individual Key Principle recommendations are included in the relevant sections at the conclusion of this literature review, however there are some overarching recommendations presented for consideration.

1. Consideration be given to renaming the AFL Junior Match Policy to be the AFL Player Development Framework, or alternatively the AFL Player Development Model;
2. The objectives or purpose of the AFL Player Development Framework to be defined as:
 - a. Clear guidelines for national participation that increase consistency of delivery;
 - b. Acquisition and retention of participants;
 - c. Transition of participants;
 - d. Skill development of participants;
 - e. Personal development of participants.
3. Determination made on the name and brand of the Junior Football product/pathway, including is there a value proposition for participants entering this phase of the pathway.
4. Investment in the marketing and communication to parents and stakeholders on what Junior Football is, and what it looks like.
5. Introduce key measures to determine the effectiveness of the Framework.
6. Introduce the Development Model Sport Participation (**DMSP**) to be the basis for the AFL Player Development Framework / Model.
7. The JMP working group consider the proposed amendments to some of the key principles as listed in the document. There are 17 recommendations provided as part of this review that directly impact the Key Principles.
8. Examine the differences in the AFLW Laws of the Game compared to the AFL Laws of the game to determine if sequentially the rules around junior football through the JMP need to diverge at a designated point in time in the Junior pathway.
9. The AFL to promote the importance of sampling and diversification in sport through a position statement;

THE AFL JUNIOR MATCH POLICY

The AFL Junior Match Policy is the primary document that provides AFL guidelines for the conduct of Australian Football for players aged 5-18 years. There have been various iterations of a Junior Match Policy, with research and review of games being critical drivers to its ongoing development.

The primary purpose of the AFL Junior Match Policy is to drive consistency of delivery nationally, with clear policy guidelines provided to all stakeholders. A key finding from the existing AFL Junior Match Policy is the importance of a 'substantial education process and marketing campaign (that) is required to underpin the document'. This still holds true.

Through the education and promotion / marketing of these principles we need to be able to better sell the benefits and outcomes of adopting the core factors of the policy. There will be the need for advocates, and telling their stories of their journey and outcome from involvement with the game (both positive and negative).

THE NAME

A clear challenge of the existing AFL Junior Match Policy (**JMP**) is the terminology and the connotation of the word "Policy". For those leagues that are either non-compliant or part-compliant this is an aspect that makes it increasingly difficult to 'sell' the benefits, as it seems as they we are telling, rather than having them buy-in to the objectives and benefits. Leagues and Clubs need to understand the benefits of the approach, and the word Policy tends to be word that shuts people down to the potential of the strategies and principles within this document.

Looking at other examples, both in Australian sport and internationally, the key aspect that drives players, clubs and leagues is this notion of 'development'. Developing a player to be the best that they can be, to meet their potential, or to ensure that they get the outcomes that they seek out of sport. These all seem to be consistent drivers. You won't get many people arguing (whether they are compliant or non-compliant with the JMP) that as a Club or a League their objective is to develop players. To develop their skill level, to develop their understanding of the game, to develop them as people and individuals.

As a result, and after reviewing the literature on this aspect, it would be a recommendation for consideration that the terminology **AFL Player Development Framework**, or alternatively the **AFL Player Development Model**, be considered as a potential title for this review, and policy document going forward. From a wording perspective Framework seems more locked in, whilst Model seems more opt in / opt out, which I know is a concern flagged by those in respect to losing the title of policy.

HISTORY OF THE AFL JUNIOR MATCH POLICY

In 2008, the Australian Football League in collaboration with State football bodies and the Australian Sports Commission (ASC) developed the Next Generation Australian Football Match Policy – For the conduct of the game for players aged 5-18 years. The policy was based on a large body of generic research into best practices for children's sport which had been accumulated at that time. For some of the affiliated leagues and clubs across the country, the introduction of this policy in 2008 represented a significant shift in the match rules and procedures that were being delivered. By the start of the 2012 season, it was evident that a number of gaps still remained.

As a result, Deakin University was engaged to conduct targeted research across two phases looking at the impact of the presence or absence of the junior match policy and then its intended and actual impact. Ultimately, the research closely reviewed the policy's impact on enjoyment and skill development of participants and on the attitudes and match-day behaviours of parents, coaches, officials and administrators.

The study, conducted over three years, involved:

- Five leagues across two states and 60 matches
- Over 4000 minutes of game-time was viewed
- 2500 participants completed the national survey

In addition to this, the AFL consulted directly with state affiliates, a number of major leagues and many other key stakeholders throughout the review process. The research was one of the first internationally to begin to understand the experience of children in junior modified sport and its core findings were clear:

1. The intent of the policy was validated by the research – it is good for the game.
2. Modified rules, when implemented well, achieve two clear outcomes:
 - a. increases player involvement which positively impacts children's perceptions of competence and enjoyment
 - b. creates a better match environment that is more aligned to the actual intent of the game.
3. The way modified rules are implemented by coaches and umpire's impacts play and is critical to setting an appropriate environment. Coach and umpire education is critical.
4. Perceptions of what is important to parents in modified rules does not align with what is important to children.
5. A substantial education process and marketing campaign is required to underpin the document.

As a result, the existing Junior Match Policy has been in place since 2015.

The intent of this literature review is to determine whether current research still supports the key principles of the AFL Junior Match Policy, and to determine if any amendments or additions need to be included.

As per the existing AFL Junior Match Policy the key principles must be developed with the following points front of mind:

- **Sequential** – progressions for the players that link
- **Developmental** – meets the needs of children at the appropriate age
- **Informed** – by research, practice and stakeholder engagement
- **Inclusive** – accommodates for all in an equitable manner

Additionally, the female pathway has been identified as a key area that must be included and expanded upon. The core findings will also be assessed as part of the literature review. Porter Novelli have also been engaged to provide some additional context to this aspect through undertaking Girls Participation Research. Interestingly, the Porter Novelli research also identified

that the Junior Match Policy needs to be easier to follow and understand, and as such an easy one page flowchart / infographic should be developed to support this point.

Furthermore, the importance of finalising a nationally consistent junior coaching curriculum that underpins the principles of the Development Framework must be a priority. The AFL has recently finalised the Junior Coaching Curriculum that will work hand in hand with the Junior Player Development Framework. Both documents will need to sit alongside, and support each other in their implementation.

THE PURPOSE / OBJECTIVES OF THE AFL JUNIOR MATCH POLICY

The intent of the AFL Junior Match Policy has always been to ensure that as a sport we better meet the needs of participants, and as such the AFL Junior Match Policy should endeavour to achieve the following key objectives:

- Clear guidelines for national participation that increase consistency of delivery;
- Acquisition and retention of participants;
- Transition of participants;
- Skill development of participants;
- Personal development of participants;

The issue of transition out of Auskick into Junior Football continues to be a challenge for the industry, and as part of this review a determination needs to be made on:

- What is Junior Football called?
- What is the brand of Junior Football?
- What is the value proposition or the 'offering' for Junior Football participants? For instance Auskick has the Auskick Pack, should Junior Footballers receive something?
- How do we communicate more effectively to parents and players about what Junior Football is and what it looks like?

Furthermore, the introduction of the national junior coaching curriculum that is underpinned by the key principles assist in the achievement of the key objectives outlined above.

THE MEASURES

One of the things that has not been clear in previous iterations of the Junior Match Policy is a measure to determine if the outcomes have been achieved. If the policy is about improving participation and opportunities for participants, then we need to be able to track and report against the progress that is being made across various game segments, if the objectives are being achieved, and if the Policy document is having the desired impact.

Suggested measures could include:

- Retention rates of participants (1 year, 3 years, 5 years);
- Increase in acquisition of new participants;
- % compliant v non-compliant leagues per State;
- % degree of compliance;
- Number of participants in each age group tracked longitudinally to assist in determination of transition;
- Skill Development measure – how well have the skills been developed along the pathway?
- Personal Development Measure – determine how to best measure this component?

The AFL to consider the potential review the word compliance as again of its connotations to stakeholders (potentially the terminology is observance). It is important that the measurement of outcomes associated with the policy are included in the next iteration of the document.

WHY KIDS PLAY SPORT?

The research is clear – the number 1 reason kids play sport is to have fun with their friends. Whether its research by Cote, Visek, Allan or the blogs written by O’Sullivan, universally it is clear in that kids play sport to have Fun. They play to enjoy the game, and their involvement within it.

WHAT IS FUN?

It is important to note that kids see fun very differently to how adults do. Dr Amanda Visek, et al. in a 2014 study, ‘The Fun Integration Theory: Towards Sustaining Children and Adolescents Sport Participation’ asked children to define fun in youth sports.

Subsequently, they established a list of 81 characteristics of fun that were then classified into 11 Fun Factors that ranked what kids outline as fun in sport. The three highest rated (and most important) factors of fun for children were:

1. Trying hard,
2. Positive team dynamics, and
3. Positive coaching.

This includes aspects such:

- Trying your best,
- Working hard,
- Competing,
- Playing well together as a team,
- Supporting my teammates,
- Good sportsmanship,
- When the coach treats all players with respect,
- Having a coach who is a positive role model,
- Getting clear, consistent communication from the coach.

It is important to note that winning was ranked at number 48 in the list of 81 Fun determinants. It isn’t a primary driver when it comes to what is fun for kids in sport. It is also important to recognise the difference between competing and winning. Competing is the process, where winning is the outcome. The research indicates that the process is more important than the outcome. A great quote that sums this up is **“Compete at all times, not win at all costs”**.

Jean Cote also highlights the importance of fun in terms of developing intrinsic motivation for the participant, which is a critical component in the retention of participants in football. Importantly, Visek, et al. (2014) also identified that there was very little difference between males and females when it came to what is fun in sport.

It is mentioned several times within the literature on retention that *‘when the fun disappears, the athlete disappears’*.

Why is this important? Fun is a key cornerstone and driver of acquisition and retention in sport. The basis of this policy framework must be to ensure that the maximum number of participants are engaged through fun.

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THE KEY DRIVERS OF AN INTEGRATED CLUB BASED PARTICIPATION MODEL

The below club based Participation Model, developed as part of the research following undertaking a Churchill Fellowship in respect to Community Sport, provides a comprehensive overview of the participation 'ecosystem' that impacts retention and outcomes within the game. Participation is a complex balanced system that is supported by several controls and levers, and through the ability of a sport to positively influence each of these components, the potential for ongoing sustainable growth in participation is enhanced.

Following an *Input – Output – Outcomes – Impact Model*, it provides 4 clear focus areas that if addressed will have a significant benefit in terms of participant retention.

- **The Coach** – the relationship that a participant has with the coach is the number 1 factor as to whether a participant will be retained or not. The approach of the coach, along with the outcomes achieved, and not necessarily on field outcomes, will be a contributing factor to long term participation.
- **The Family** – the role of the family is significant to long term engagement and retention in sport. The opportunity and access that is generated through family support cannot be underestimated. The AFL must continue to play a significant role in supporting and educating families.
- **The School** – is critical to the acquisition of participants in sport, and the focus of the AFL must be to “own the school space”, through frontline staff, as this provides a clear competitive advantage. Post COVID-19 this focus must be doubled down to ensure a recapture of participation.
- **The Club** – the environment and culture that is established at a football club has a significant impact on retention, and there are some key things that a club can do in order to enhance the likelihood of retention.

These factors are explored in the model, however sitting behind this model are some key strategies that address these four components. The outcomes are also aligned to the Development Model of Sport Participation and Personal Assets Framework (Cote, et al), that are explored further below.

The model also identifies key elements that are significant to the competition that a participant is participating within, along with some societal factors that enhance long term retention within community sport. Finally, the model identifies a number of key support enablers, and mechanisms for establishing a competitive advantage in terms of participation.

KEY DRIVERS OF AN INTEGRATED CLUB BASED PARTICIPATION MODEL



THE DEVELOPMENT MODEL SPORT PARTICIPATION (DMSP)

The Development Model of Sport Participation (DMSP) developed by Côté, et al, is based on a psychosocial approach to sport development. It is a recommendation of this literature review that the AFL base their Junior Match Policy or Player Development Framework on the DMSP, which provides a whole of sport approach to participation. Utilising development theories, Côté's DMSP model introduces a number of key phases through a participation pathway including:

- **Sampling Phase** – is when participants (usually aged between 6 to 12) should sample a number of different sports. They should develop fundamental movement skills and associated all round sports skills, and there should be a high amount of deliberate play and a low amount of deliberate practice.
- **Specialising Phase** – participants start to balance deliberate play and deliberate practice, and they start to focus on a smaller number of sports, and develop sport specific skills. Participants are usually aged between 13 to 15 years old.
- **Investment Phase** – participants focus purely on one sport, and they have high amounts of deliberate practice and low amounts of deliberate play. The participant generally is looking at a high level of elite performance through this phase. The participant's age is generally 16+.
- **Recreational Phase** – Participant's focus is on enjoying sport for fitness and health reasons, and is characterised by high levels of deliberate play with low levels of deliberate practice. Participants can generally be in this phase 13 until they stop playing or move into a specialising or investment phase of participation.
- **Early Specialisation** – Côté highlights that this phase is not ideal long term in retaining youth participants. It involves an early focus on just one sport, high amounts of deliberate practice and very low amounts of deliberate play. It also can lead to reduced levels of physical and/or mental health and reduced levels of enjoyment or fun in sport. Sampling Phase



Côté, Development Model of Sport Participation

The optimal pathway for participants through to elite performance is via the sampling phase to the specialising phase and into the investment phase. This pathway helps to ensure that participation is fun for the kids, they develop physical literacy and fundamental movement skills, they have a high level of intrinsic motivation, they develop sport specific skills but above all they don't burnout or suffer from overuse injuries through early specialisation. The DMSP model describes the "processes, pathways and outcomes associated with sport development throughout childhood and adolescence" (Côté and Vierimaa, 2014).

As part of DMSP research Côté et al. (2009) proposed 7 postulates that are associated with the various pathway aspects of the model.

- **Postulate 1:** early diversification (sampling) does not hinder elite sport participation in sports where peak performance is reached after maturation,
- **Postulate 2:** early diversification (sampling) is linked to a longer sport career and has positive implications for long-term sport involvement,
- **Postulate 3:** early diversification (sampling) allows participation in a range of contexts that most favourably affects positive youth development,
- **Postulate 4:** high amounts of deliberate play during the sampling years build a solid foundation of intrinsic motivation through involvement in activities that are enjoyable and promote intrinsic regulation,
- **Postulate 5:** a high amount of deliberate play during the sampling years establishes a range of motor and cognitive experiences that children can ultimately bring to their principal sport of interest,
- **Postulate 6:** around the end of primary school (about age 13), children should have the opportunity to either choose to specialise in their favourite sport or to continue in sport at a recreational level,
- **Postulate 7:** By late adolescents (around age 16) have developed the physical, cognitive, social, emotional, and motor skills needed to invest their effort into highly specialized training in one sport.

The postulates highlight the notions of diversity and deliberate play during childhood. Côté and Vierimaa (2014) suggest "most models of athlete development in sport have been theoretical and descriptive in nature, providing no account of individual differences in attained performance or participation rates among athletes with similar developmental opportunities. There is consequently a need to move from description to prediction of athletes' development and assess the variables that affect their progression in sport". The DMSP model serves to address these concerns.

Côté & Fraser-Thomas (2007) suggest that there are three outcomes (the 3 P's) linked to junior and youth sport;

- **Performance:** Develop motor skills for future elite athletes and recreational adult sport participants.
- **Participation:** Improve physical health and continued participation.
- **Personal Development:** Contribute to positive youth development and developmental assets such as discipline, self-control, leadership, and cooperation.

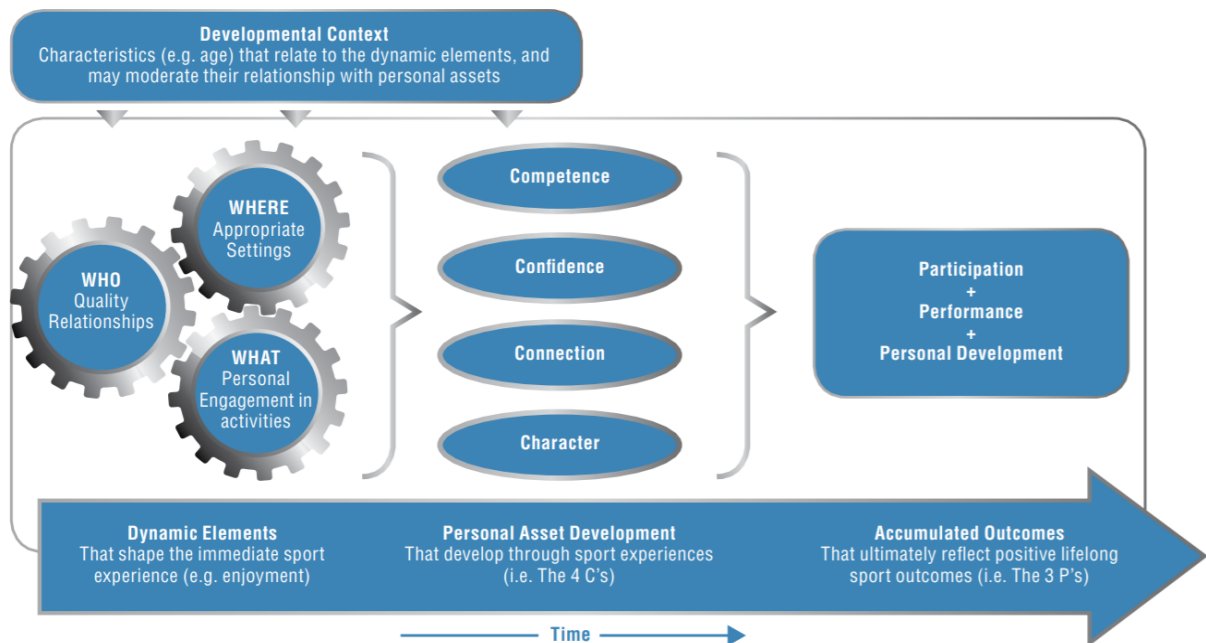
What does all this mean in terms of developing a quality, inclusive sport structure that aids the retention of participants within the game? Building on the DMSP Model, Côté and Hancock (2014) developed 10 recommendations that should be considered in the design of sport programmes or sport structures for children:

Regulate length of season to 3 or 4 months, with a maximum of 6 months.	Limit lengthy travel to organised competitions.	Introduce 'grass-roots' sport programmes that focus on trying different sports.	Do not implement a selection process of more 'talented' children until the specialisation years.
Provide healthy competitive opportunities, but do not overemphasise winning and long-term outcomes such as championships.	Discourage early specialisation in one sport.	Allow children to play all positions in a given sport.	Promote deliberate play within and beyond organised sport.
	Design play and practice activities that focus on fun and short-term rewards.	Understand children's needs and do not 'over coach'.	

These 10 recommendations support some of the key principles that are contained within the AFL Junior Match Policy and will be explored further within this literature review.

THE PERSONAL ASSETS FRAMEWORK

Building on the work of the DMSPP, Côté, Turnbridge and Vierimaa (2014) developed a framework that recommends that the; 'what' (the activity that you undertake), the 'who' (the relationships you create with others), and the 'where' (the specific setting), all play a significant role in junior & youth retention when these three basic elements 'positively interact'. Côté, et al. suggests that it "creates a context that, when repeated on a regular basis, leads to changes in the personal assets (competence, confidence, connection and character) of the participant".



Personal Assets Framework for Sport. Côté, et al. (2014)

Growth in these personal assets (the 4C's) has been associated with "positive sport experiences which in turn lead to long term outcomes, including continued sport participation, higher levels of performance in sport, and personal development through sport (the 3P's)". It is anticipated that

through this process of growth and a development in competence, confidence, connection and character that youth players will be retained in community sport.

Côté, et al. highlights the DMSP model as an ideal model to develop the 'what' aspect of this framework. The activities that are undertaken have a direct result on whether it is a positive sports outcome or not, and indicate that, as per the DMSP model, sampling is a critical aspect of developing personal assets (both across sports and within sports). They also emphasise the importance of deliberate play in this context.

Lerner (2002), as cited in Côté, et al. (2014), indicates the integral role of "interpersonal relationships as key drivers of individual development" in sport. Côté, et al (2014), cite Bass and Riggio (2006), regarding transformational leaders being identified according to four dimensions:

- Idealised influence – leaders foster trust and respect and are role models for their followers,
- Inspirational motivation – leaders inspire and challenge their followers,
- Intellectual stimulation – leaders encourage their followers to be innovative and creative,
- Individualised consideration – leaders display genuine concern for individuals' development and achievement."

It is suggested by Côté, et al. that if a coach is a transformational leader (highlighted through the above characteristics), then this "coaching style may be particularly effective in fostering positive youth development".

The participant and parent relationship is a critical one, and if the parent model's transformational leadership then there is a strong correlation to the participant exhibiting these characteristics through their sports participation. The third key relationship that Côté, et al. describe is that between the participant and their peers. As outlined, playing with friends is a critical reason as to why kids play sport; hence this relationship is a critical one in terms of junior & youth retention. "Effective peer leadership among adolescents was associated with higher levels of task and social cohesion and collective efficacy" (Côté, et al.).

Finally, the 'where' aspect of the Personal Assets Framework is critical as it describes the setting that the participant engages within. This section highlights the importance of aspects that are outlined in the AFL Junior Match Policy such as field sizes, age appropriate rule modifications, ball sizes, and team numbers.

The other important aspect to consider in this is the quality of the sports environment that is created. If there is a positive game day environment that exists, then there is more likelihood that the participant will develop the assets of competence, confidence, connection and character, and alternatively it is extremely unlikely that these would be developed if there were a poor environment. This again highlights the importance of adults (coach, administrators and parents) ensuring that the game day environment is a positive one for all participants in order to ensure junior & youth retention.

Understanding the influences and context of the 'what', the 'who' and the 'where' as key aspects of the Personal Assets Framework for Sport, will ultimately enhance a participant developing the assets outlined as the 4C's. Through the development of these qualities and individual can achieve the positive sport outcomes of participation, performance and personal development. Côté, et al (2014) propose "by shaping each of these dynamic elements in ways that promote personal assets development, coaches, parents, and sport organisations will ideally promote positive sport experiences and longer-term outcomes – both in sport, as well as in other domains of life".

Cote & Mallett (2013) highlight a 5th C in 'contribution', and suggest that 'physically, socially, psychologically, emotionally, and intellectually healthy youth develop into adults, they will choose to 'give back' to civil society (including sport)."

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KEY PRINCIPLES OF THE AFL JUNIOR MATCH POLICY

The following pages explore the key principles that comprise the Junior Match Policy, and refer to relevant research and evidence for each specific principle.

These include the following 10 key areas:

- Playing Ground, Zones, Time & Equipment,
- Use of Zones,
- Team Composition & Player Rotation,
- Contact,
- Marking, Bouncing & Kicking off the Ground,
- The Coach on the Ground,
- Premiership Points, Competitions & Awards,
- Training,
- Age Policy,
- Mercy Rule.

The review will then look at Female Participation to determine if the Junior Match Policy principles align to key research on female engagement and retention.

Finally, the document will reflect on additional considerations and also provide a brief competitor analysis or environmental scan, and also take into consideration key international examples of Best Practice.

Importantly, the recommendations provided take into consideration the research and literature, but also considers what happens on the ground from an operational and volunteer perspective.

PLAYING GROUND, ZONES, TIME AND EQUIPMENT

Existing AFL Junior Match Policy Statement:

Kids can't kick as far, run as fast or process the same level of match information as adults – so why make them play on the same size field? The AFL Junior Match Policy is committed to a reduced playing area, playing time and suitably modified equipment to take the emphasis away from endurance and allow for greater skill development. With smaller grounds, the players are encouraged to concentrate because the ball is never far away.

WHAT THIS MEANS?

The key components that are explored as part of this key principle include:

- Smaller field
- Reduced playing time
- Smaller ball size

Smaller Field

A review of the literature in respect to 'field sizes' was comprehensive in the support of smaller sided games, and in turn smaller ovals, for the development of players in Australian Rules Football.

The evidence found that participants involved on smaller ovals see an:

- Increase in the number of possessions or touches,
- Increase in skill development of the players,
- Increase in the likelihood for the team to score,
- Increase in decision making and problem-solving opportunities for the player,
- Decrease in the reliance on endurance and allows a focus on skill development,
- Increase in a player's influence or engagement in the game – the ball is never far away,
- Increase in technical and tactical development and understanding.

Most importantly – MORE TOUCHES → MORE ENGAGEMENT IN THE GAME → **MORE FUN**

The evidence is clear that the more fun a player has the more likely to be retained in the sport.

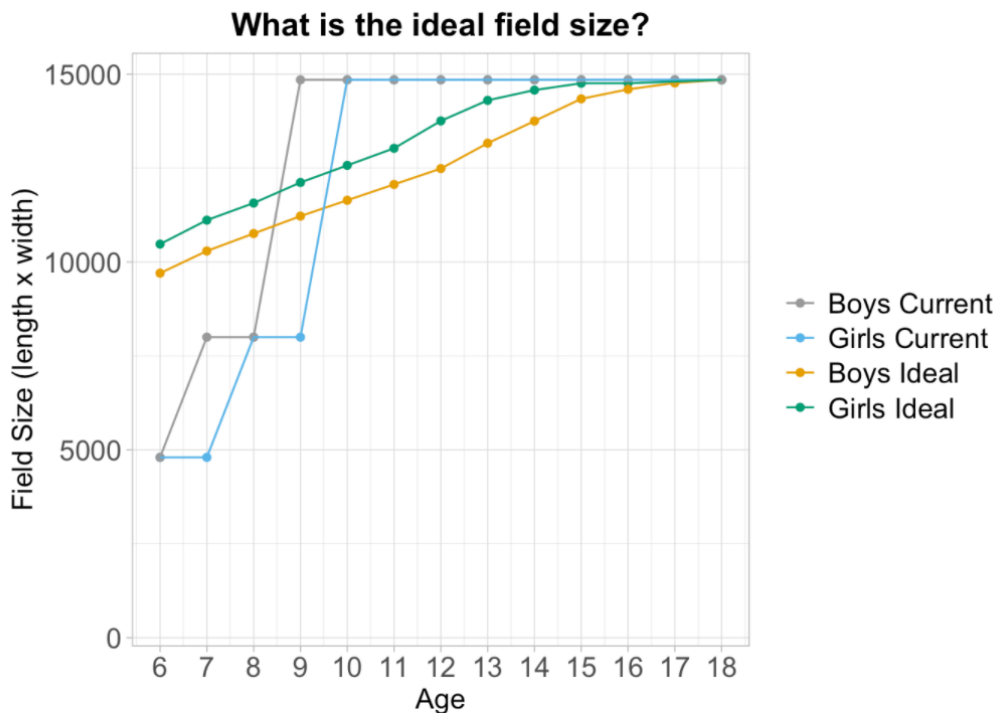


It is important to note that the Deakin research, Phillips, P. et al. (2013) highlighted that reducing the oval size should also come with a reduction in player numbers.

The current AFL Junior Match Policy ground sizes recommendations are:

- **Under 8's** – 80m x 60m (max)
- **Under 9's & 10's** – 100m x 80m (max)
- **Under 11's & 12's** – Full size field allowed
- **Under 13's - Under 18's** – Full size oval allowed

When considering the Ideal Field Size graphically (provided by Machar Reid, UWA), compared with existing modifications, the age group that stands out is the 10,11 & 12 age groups as potentially being on ovals that are too big for their age and development.



Summary

- NOTE - field area equals length x width (obviously not a true representation of an oval's area)
- NOTE - the "full-sized" oval represents the minimum (135m x 110m)

After review of the literature, and other examples of best practice, it is recommended that the following be implemented:

- **Under 8's** – 80m x 60m (max)
- **Under 9's & 10's** – 100m x 80m (max)
- **Under 11's & 12's** – 130m x 90m (max)
- **Under 13's - Under 18's** – Full size oval allowed

This would see the introduction of an oval size restriction on Under 11's and Under 12's competitions of 130m (L) x 90m (w). The research, and graph above, is clear that even at the age of 12, a full-size oval is far too big for these age groups in terms of the development of skills, game play and ensuring an increase in scoring. The intent is to continue to enhance the development of players at this level.

Reduced Playing Time

The existing recommendations in the AFL Junior Match Policy are:

- **Under 8's** – 4 x 10 minutes
- **Under 9's & 10's** – 4 x 12 minutes
- **Under 11's & 12's** – 4 x 15 minutes

Research indicates that shorter quarters enable better levels of skill development and execution due to less fatigue occurring, and there is less reliance on endurance in these age groups. Again, this assists in the development of players, and their overall enjoyment.

Therefore, it is suggested that the above playing time recommendations remain.

Smaller Ball Size

Physically, children are not mini adults, and as Bailey, et al. (2012) identify, the growth and maturation of children occurs at different rates, and that 'quality experiences for juniors in sport settings have been linked with favourable bone and muscle development, increased physiological capacities, as well as offering opportunities for individuals to develop beneficial social skills and adaptive behaviours'.

The size of the ball is critical in this growth and maturation development, along with the skill development of participants.

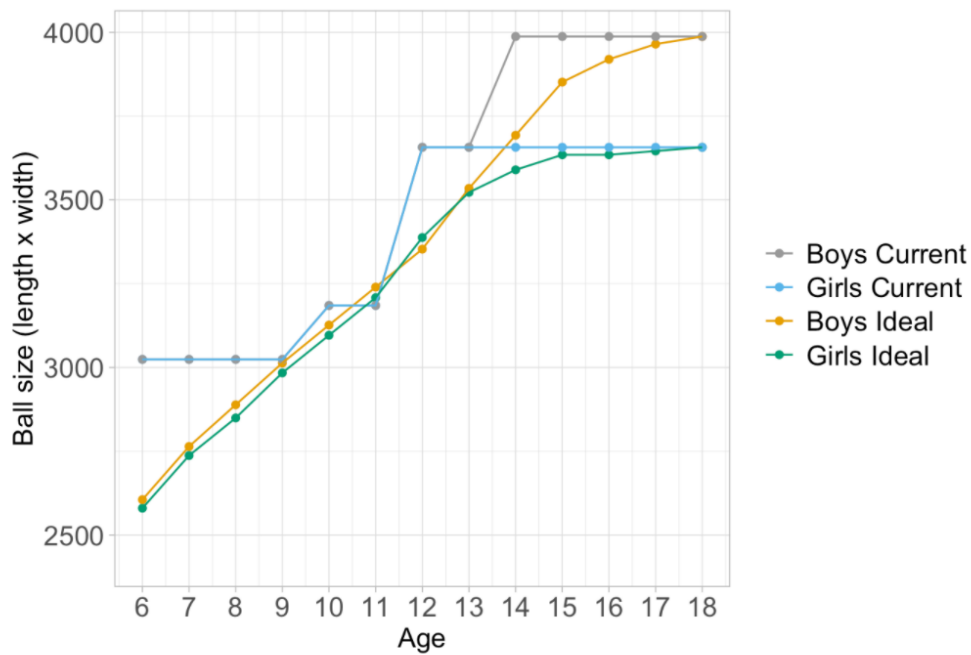
The current ball sizes outlined as part of the AFL Junior Match Policy are:

- **Under 8's** – Size 2 synthetic
- **Under 9's & 10's** – Size 2 synthetic
- **Under 11's & 12's** – Size 3 synthetic or leather

Reviewing the research on skill development and growth and maturation of children, it is recommended that the ball size for Under 8's should be a synthetic Size 1. This assists with transition from Auskick, and also enhances the potential for improved skill development of the player. Highlighted by Buszard, T., Farrow, D., Reid, M. et.al. (2014), "performance and technique were better when scaled equipment was used".

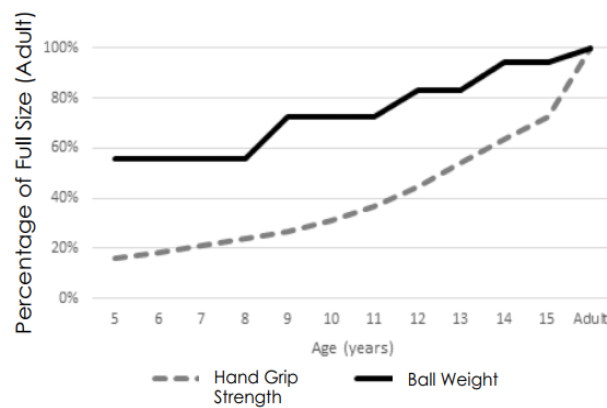
The below graph (provided by Machar Reid) highlights the existing or current ball size and graphically compares it to what would the ideal ball size should be when considering physical maturation, hand size, grip strength, kicking distance and accuracy of a child through each age group. This suggests that the ball size particularly for the Under 8's age group should be a size smaller. When considering the other age groups, the ball size recommendation is generally comparable to the development and age of the child, and associated grip strength.

What is the ideal ball size?



Summary

- NOTE - ball size simply equals length x width (obviously not a true representation of the ball's size)



The University of Western Australia also undertook research on “How does ball shape and size effect Kicking?” (Chris Collins, Xu Duan, Machar Reid & Brendan Lay). After studying kick kinematics, and outcomes including distance and accuracy, it was determined that

1. Scaled balls are easier for kids to kick, and subsequently participants have more fun.
2. Scaled balls are kicked further, and subsequently participants experience more success.

Research indicates that experiencing fun and success is more likely to lead to increased retention rates of participants.

As such it is recommended that the following be applicable:

- **Under 8's** – Size 1 synthetic
- **Under 9's & 10's** – Size 2 synthetic
- **Under 11's & 12's** – Size 3 synthetic or leather

EXAMPLES OF BEST PRACTICE

There are a number of sports that utilise the modification of their rules, field size or equipment to enhance the experience for participants. Some examples of these include:

- **Hot Shots Tennis** - Hot Shots is played on smaller courts with modified equipment, including lighter racquets, lower nets and low compression balls that don't bounce too high. With four fun stages (Blue, Red, Orange and Green), which all contribute to make the game easier for the kids, sequenced developmentally and therefore more fun.
- **Futsal** – is often played indoor with 5v5 or 3v3 on a smaller court/field. The benefits of futsal include:
 - improves players decision making skills
 - provides players with more touches on the ball
 - it develops the confidence in players to go 1v1 against their opponent
 - it allows players to be creative in getting around their opposition
 - it improves reaction time
- **3v3 Basketball** – provides players more touches, more shots, a focus on handling the ball, creates more passes, and more rebounds. The fast-paced game provides only half a court, but with fewer players means more player involvement, hence greater skill development opportunity. The lighter ball in under age basketball has resulted in more dribbling, passing, increased shot frequency and shot success, higher percentage of lay ups and more one on one situations (Buszard, Farrow & Reid (2020)).

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations based on the current research are submitted for review by the working group in respect to the key principle of ***Playing Ground, Zones, Time and Equipment***:

- Remove the word Zones from the title of this key principle as it is dealt with elsewhere. Should now be ***Playing Ground, Time and Equipment***
- Under 11's & 12's oval size should be prescribed to be 130m (L) x 90m (w) max.
- The playing time for quarters remain as outlined in the previous Junior Match Policy whereby the following is in effect; Under 8's (4 x 10 minutes), Under 9's & 10's (4 x 12 minutes), and Under 11's & 12's (4 x 15 minutes).
- The size of footballs for Junior Football be changed to reflect the following; Under 8's (synthetic size 1), Under 9's & 10's (synthetic size 2) and Under 11's & 12's (synthetic or leather size 3).

RESEARCH REVIEWED AS PART OF THIS KEY PRINCIPLE

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USE OF ZONES

Existing AFL Junior Match Policy Statement:

The AFL Junior Policy embraces “zones” for the younger children as an excellent teaching practice. First, the use of zones prevents ball-chasing and subsequent congestion where all players congregate around the ball. Second, it enables groupings of players of similar size and ability to play within a zone.

WHAT THIS MEANS?

Zones are used as a mechanism to assist with player development and team work, and to prevent the congestion that can occur in junior football. Through enabling more team play and preventing better players from dominating the play, enables skill development and increased fun for more participants.

The current Junior Match Policy position on zones is:

Age Group	Implementation of Zones
Under 8's	Field should be divided into 3 equal zones identified by markers or lines on the ground.
Under 9's & 10's	Field should be divided into 3 equal zones identified by markers or lines on the ground.
Under 11's & 12's	No Zones

There are both pros and cons to the implementation of zones, and stakeholders including clubs and coaches have mixed feedback in response to the introduction of zones. A definite benefit of zones is that they enable coaches to better manage the rotation of players ensuring that they have equal opportunity across the ground.

One of the current issues that must be addressed is that within the Auskick program the zones are removed (following the Auskick 2.0 implementation), however when you move into Junior Football under the JMP the zones are then added. This adds to the perception piece that it's almost a step backwards from some stakeholders. This may be something that can be addressed through a communications piece about what a zone adds to the experience. The education of coaches and parents will be critical.

Is there an alternative to zones? Armbands for players which act as 'loose zones' could be an alternative that could be worth a pilot. This could act as a mechanism to remind players of their position – Forward (F), Centre (C) and Back (B) – on their armbands. This can also assist coaches and umpires in positioning players, with the trial piloting when only forwards being the only ones able to kick goal, or allowing any player to kick goals.

The research undertaken by Deakin University also indicated that armbands could be more effective in the management of zones as opposed to the lines on the ground. Without zones or armbands, their research indicated that coaches spent a lot of time on the ground moving players into position as opposed to providing appropriate feedback, however there is also the feeling that the lines on the ground also prevent the natural flow of the game.

EXAMPLES OF BEST PRACTICE

- **Net Set Go** - is a prime example here whereby the use of zones within the game creates skill development opportunities for all players and limits congestion in the game on the court.
- **AFL9's** – the armbands utilised in AFL9's could provide a transitional solution for junior football in that it has the potential to limit those areas on the ground that people go and potentially that can kick for goals and creates team work.

RECOMMENDATIONS

There is no doubt that through examining the literature and the previous research undertaken by Deakin University that zones add value to the game through the reduction of congestion. One of the negatives of zones is that players get up to the line and stop dead and do not cross it, which doesn't mirror the intent of the game. Due to the fact that Auskick no longer has zones, negatively impacts the perception that the next step into Junior Football is a step backwards.

It is recommended that armbands are trialled on teams whereby they act as 'soft zones' for players and also act as a reminder as to their position on the field. If this is proven to be a successful tool for teaching positioning, and preventing congestion then it could form part of the key principles as a recommendation.

There is the potential for consideration of the following recommendation after undertaking a pilot.

Age Group	Implementation of Zones
Under 8's	Field should be divided into 3 equal zones identified by markers or lines on the ground.
Under 9's & 10's	Arm bands are utilised instead of zones (dependent on outcome of pilot).
Under 11's & 12's	No Zones

RESEARCH REVIEWED AS PART OF THIS KEY PRINCIPLE

Agnew, D. Pill, S. & Drummond, M. (2015). *Investigating the elements that encourage or inhibit the participation of children and youth in Australian Football*. Annals of Leisure Research.

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TEAM COMPOSITION & PLAYER ROTATION

Existing AFL Junior Match Policy Statement:

Reduced numbers allow individual players to have more frequent and longer contact with the ball while play is more open, even when played on a reduced-size oval. Children should experience playing in a variety of positions. The practice of rotating players through different positions and the interchange enables the development of a solid foundation and adds variety and interest to the matches.

WHAT THIS MEANS?

The components of this key principle are team composition (i.e. number of players in a team) and the importance of rotating players.

The current Junior Match Policy position is:

Age Groups	Team Composition	Rotation of Players
Under 8's	12 a-side maximum	Rotation of players to occur at least every quarter to provide opportunities in several positions including the interchange
Under 9's / 10's	15 a-side maximum	Rotation of players to occur at least every quarter to provide opportunities in several positions including the interchange
Under 11's / 12's	18 a-side maximum	Rotation of players to occur at least every quarter to provide opportunities in several positions including the interchange

Team Composition

The literature on small sided games is very clear on the positive benefit that it brings across a number of facets including skill development, team play, enjoyment and ultimately long-term retention in the sport.

Smaller team numbers are also aligned to smaller oval sizes and both support each other to benefit the participant. The benefit of small sided games includes increased involvement in the game for all participants through increased touches and engagement within the game, greater levels of skill development, greater levels of decision making (and decision making under pressure), and better understanding of the transition of the game.

Pill & Elliott (2015), through their research on *'Effects of Altering the Number of Players and the Dimensions of the Playing Area on the Possession Characteristics in Youth Australian Football'*, found that the "additional players in the 18-a-side version led on average to more tagged events (technical actions) per 18-minute period of play; however, there was a decrease in the number of tagged events per player. It was also observed that there were more scoring actions in the Small Sided Games (SSG) 12-a-side game play than in the 18-a-side. The SSG 12-a-side version provided more technical actions per player in each play period and so it is suggested that it

constructs a better educational experience, and therefore game development, than the 18-a-side game recommended for Australian football from under-11”.

They go on to suggest that the findings from their research suggest that “SSG versions comprising reduced play space and smaller player numbers be considered at Under-11 through to Under-14 level, not just as a training tool for enhanced player development, but to enhance the game day format as an educational experience”.

Tim Buszard, through the work he is undertaking on the AFL Junior Coach Curriculum highlights the importance of Game Sense training, and this should continue to be enhanced in training session to support what happens on game day.

As Pill and Elliot (2015) highlight, “research shows that children find enjoyment in gaining possessions (touching the football), kicking goals, and playing with friends. We suggest the concurrent benefit may well be enhanced player enjoyment as game participation is greater in the SSG format for junior and youth players, enhancing youth player retention”.

Player Rotation

The importance of rotating players to have them experience and learn to play in a variety of positions cannot be underestimated in terms of not only a player’s development, but also their long-term retention in the game. Cote & Hancock (2014) as part of their 10 recommendations for sport also suggest that players be allowed to play all positions. Again, the aim here is to retain participants through ensuring they develop their competence and confidence, which ultimately leads to them enjoying the game and having fun.

Importantly, as part of this process a mechanism is needed to help coaches and provide them support in doing this in a fair and equitable manner. An IT solution in and around player rotation could provide coaches some support in ensuring that playing time and playing position is equitable for all players.

EXAMPLES OF BEST PRACTICE

- **Futsal** – is often played indoor with 5v5 or 3v3 on a smaller court/field. The benefits of futsal include:
 - improves players decision making skills
 - provides players with more touches on the ball
 - it develops the confidence in players to go 1v1 against their opponent
 - it allows players to be creative in getting around their opposition
 - it improves reaction time

- **3v3 Basketball** – provides players more touches, more shots, a focus on handling the ball, creates more passes, and more rebounds. The fast paced game provides only half a court, but with fewer players means more player involvement, hence greater skill development opportunity.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Pill & Elliott (2015) highlight through their research that “It may be somewhat surprising that 18-a-side full ground play is suggested from the under-11 age group in the AFL Junior Football Match Guide”, as this does not align to current research and literature.

The key change to the recommendations based on the research and literature would be to reduce the Under 11's / 12's from 18 a-side maximum to a 15 a-side maximum as per below. The importance of rotating players must be maintained as a core principle of any future Match Policy.

Age Groups	Team Composition	Rotation of Players
Under 8's	12 a-side maximum	Rotation of players to occur at least every quarter to provide opportunities in several positions including the interchange
Under 9's / 10's	15 a-side maximum	Rotation of players to occur at least every quarter to provide opportunities in several positions including the interchange
Under 11's / 12's	15 a-side maximum	Rotation of players to occur at least every quarter to provide opportunities in several positions including the interchange

It should be investigated as a potential future research project to look at is 12 a-side or even 9 a-side preferable for the under 8's & under 9's /10's age groups. The research on smaller sided games would suggest that this is desirable. The AFL should consider undertaking an audit of the existing junior competitions, whilst undertaking a controlled research project, to determine the future approach to team numbers in order to support the transition and retention of participants. This would build on the research piece undertaken by Pill & Elliott (2015) that is specific to Australian Rules Football.

The complexity is though that when you start to ultimately increase team numbers it means teams need to merge which leads to a potential drop out point or juncture for some participants, which potential leads to an increase in dropout. Although in saying this could the junior and youth game be 15 a-side across all age groups, until they reach adulthood. This is something that the AFL should invest in further research on as to whether there is an increase in retention if team sizes are reduced across the junior and youth pathway.

“Scaling Sport allows children to experience more success, which appears to aid greater engagement, and self-efficacy. By designing environments that promote opportunity for success, children are more likely to have a heightened perception of their ability” according to Buszard, Farrow & Reid (2020). They go on to suggest that through a review undertaken as part of their research “many sports require children to play in adult environments by the age of 10 ... which coincides with a high dropout from sport during pre-adolescent years”.

Children aren't mini adults and as such we shouldn't expect the game to be identical at an adults and kids level, and as such a reduction in team member numbers at this critical juncture is recommended.

RESEARCH REVIEWED AS PART OF THIS KEY PRINCIPLE

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CONTACT

Existing AFL Junior Match Policy Statement:

Deferring the introduction of full tackling is based upon the need to provide players with the best possible conditions to learn, develop and improve their disposal skills by reducing congestion and pressure on the player in possession. All skills are eventually taught and learned, but there is an appropriate sequence for doing so. The physiological and emotional readiness of children's bodies to resist the pressures of tackling also needs to be recognised in assessing when to introduce tackling. The "age of readiness" will vary from child to child, but generally is recognised as being around the 11-12 age group.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

The importance of developing and implementing a sequential approach to the introduction of contact cannot be underestimated, particularly when it comes to Australian Rules Football. Contact (or physicality) is identified as a reason as to why young players leave the game; either they aren't ready developmentally for contact, or they fear the risk of injury from contact.

The existing Junior Match Policy position is:

	Tackling	Bumping, Barging or fending off	Smothering or Stealing the Ball	Shepherding
Under 8's	No Tackling or holding of an opponent	No pushing (fending off), bumping or barging another player.	No Smothering, stealing the ball or knocking the ball from an opponent's hands	No Shepherding
Under 9's / 10's	Modified Tackling permitted (Wrap Tackle only)	No pushing (fending off), bumping or barging another player.	No Smothering, stealing the ball or knocking the ball from an opponent's hands	No Shepherding
Under 11's / 12's	Full Tackling Rules as per Laws of Australian Rules Football	Permitted as per Laws of Australian Rules Football	Permitted as per Laws of Australian Rules Football	Permitted as per Laws of Australian Rules Football

Through a controlled and sequential approach to introducing contact it allows players to focus on skills acquisition and development. Through a staged implementation of the wrap tackle it provides players with an introduction to physical contact without the fear of injury.

Again, the reason for limiting the negating skills such as bumping, smothering and shepherding is they all limit the skill development of players being impacted, and these skills often allow physically bigger kids who have developed earlier to dominate. It is better for players to develop the skills of the game, and then introduce the physical contact skills.

When considering the growth and maturation of participants (Bailey, Engstrom & Hanrahan (2012)), and the "variability in the maturation process, chronological age has limited value in determining physical maturity". Thus, it is difficult to align on a specific age when contact should be introduced, as each individual will be developmentally 'ready' at different stages in their maturation.

It is important to note that when coaches are teaching the technique for tackling, they also must be coaching the technique on how to be tackled, as research indicates that kids need additional support or development in their ongoing growth of fundamental movement skills.

Added to this is the difficulty of umpiring tackling or contact for young developing umpires. The progression of introducing contact and tackling must be simple for coaches, umpires and players to understand, and there is nothing in the literature reviewed that indicates that the existing sequential progression needs to be changed.

EXAMPLES OF BEST PRACTICE

- **Small Blacks Development Model** – is a progressive introduction of participants to contact and tackling in rugby in New Zealand.
<https://www.smallblacks.com/app/themes/smallblack/library/files/smallblacks-poster-v4.pdf>
- **NFL Flag Football** – is a developmental game that introduces participants to the game but with no to limited contact therefore enabling skill development. Research indicates that this area of participation is growing whereby contact NFL is on the decline with junior participants. <https://nflflag.com/>

RECOMMENDATIONS

There is currently no evidence or literature to support any changes to the contact rules in Junior Football. As such the following is recommended:

	Tackling	Bumping, Barging or fending off	Smothering or Stealing the Ball	Shepherding
Under 8's	No Tackling or holding of an opponent	No pushing (fending off), bumping or barging another player.	No Smothering, stealing the ball or knocking the ball from an opponent's hands	No Shepherding
Under 9's / 10's	Modified Tackling permitted (Wrap Tackle only)	No pushing (fending off), bumping or barging another player.	No Smothering, stealing the ball or knocking the ball from an opponent's hands	No Shepherding
Under 11's / 12's	Full Tackling Rules as per Laws of Australian Rules Football	Permitted as per Laws of Australian Rules Football	Permitted as per Laws of Australian Rules Football	Permitted as per Laws of Australian Rules Football

It is important to note that the description of the wrap tackle in the existing Junior Match Policy be retained. The importance of including this information was also reinforced by Phillips, et al (2013).

This reads as per below:

- A player in possession of the ball may be tackled by an opponent wrapping both arms around the area below the top of the shoulders and on/above the knees. The tackle may be from either side or from behind providing the tackle from behind does not thrust forward the player with the ball (that is push the player in the back).
- If the player in possession of the ball is taken to the ground in the act of tackling, they will receive a free kick. If the umpire feels the player drops to the ground deliberately in order to receive a free kick, they will be penalised for holding the ball.
- A player in possession of the ball, when held by an opponent applying the wrap-around tackle, should be given a reasonable chance to dispose of the ball by kick or by handball, or by attempting to kick or handball, otherwise a free kick shall be awarded to the tackler for holding the ball.

- The field umpire shall conduct a ball-up when the player with the ball has the ball held to the body by an opponent, unless the player has had a reasonable time to dispose of the ball before being tackled, in which case a free kick shall be awarded to the tackler for holding the ball.
- The field umpire shall allow play to continue if the ball is knocked accidentally out of a player's hands by an opponent.
- A player not in possession of the ball, when held by an opponent, shall be awarded a free kick.
- There is strictly no bumping, slinging or deliberately bringing the opposition player in possession of the ball to the ground.

RESEARCH REVIEWED AS PART OF THIS KEY PRINCIPLE

Agnew, D., Henderson, P., & Pill, S. *Boys need sport but...Competing barriers on the recognised need for sport and the barriers toward participation*. Journal of Sports Pedagogy and Physical Education,7(3), 15-33.

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MARKING, BOUNCING & KICKING OFF THE GROUND

Existing AFL Junior Match Policy Statement:

Awarding marks over any distance in the development phase recognises that many youngsters cannot consistently kick the ball beyond 10m. Restricting the number of bounces prevents players running excessive distances with the ball, encourages disposal skills and enhances team play. In a player's development years, the ability to enhance the skill of picking up the ball takes precedence over the need to kick it off the ground.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

The intent of the key principles of Marking, Bouncing and Kicking off the Ground is to enhance the skill development of the individuals, and to highlight the importance of team work or team play. The current Junior Match Policy has the following rules in reference to these key principles:

	Marking	Bouncing	Kicking off the Ground
Under 8's	Any distance, reasonable attempt	1 Max	Not Permitted
Under 9's/10's	Any Distance, Shows Control	1 Max	Not Permitted
Under 11's / 12's	10m, Direct catch	Unlimited	Permitted

The importance of not considering these items (and the other key principles) in isolation cannot be underestimated. Ball size plays an integral role in the ability for a junior player to mark the ball, as does grip strength. The number of bounces that an individual player can have directly links to ground size, whilst limiting opportunities for kicking off the ground is a skill development opportunity, and assists in a safety aspect for junior football.

The literature on these components is somewhat limited and the primary source of review has been the Deakin research undertaken on behalf of the AFL previously.

Marking – the literature focus' upon the notion of an attempted mark, and called out players they observed who were putting their hands up as an attempt, as opposed to showing control. On reflection, and understanding the existing rule in reality for the under 8's age group, the current policy point (any distance, reasonable attempt) is appropriate. The subsequent progression to showing control, and a direct catch is also sequentially appropriate for the age groups.

Bouncing – The research undertaken by Deakin is consistent with the Under 8's and Under 9's / 10's policy statements, and is deemed appropriate. In reference to the unlimited bouncing in Under 11's /12's, the research clearly indicates that it be limited to 2 bounces for this age group in order to increase teamwork and reduce the dominance of more skilled players. As such a recommendation of this literature review is to restrict the players to a maximum of 2 bounces

Kicking off the Ground – the reasons in the literature for restrictions on kicking off the ground (or soccering) are two-fold – skill development in respect to learning to pick the ball up off the ground, and also as a clear safety precaution. The Deakin Research looks at having a wet weather inclusion for kicking off the ground where it would be permitted, but then restricted on dry days. This complicates the rules for players and umpires and as such wouldn't be a recommendation of this literature review. The existing recommendations in the Under 8's/9's and 10's of kicking off the

ground being prohibited should be maintained, and strong consideration given to not permitting it in the Under 11's age groups, and then allowing it for Under 12's, as part of the transition into Youth aged football.

EXAMPLES OF BEST PRACTICE

- Examples of best practice in this aspect are limited due to the unique nature of the skills and the game, however sports with zones in them limit the ability for one player to dominate – similar to the principle behind limiting the maximum number of bounces.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations for this key principle of the Junior Match Policy is as below;

	Marking	Bouncing	Kicking off the Ground
Under 8's	Any distance, reasonable attempt	1 Max	Not Permitted
Under 9's/10's	Any Distance, Shows Control	1 Max	Not Permitted
Under 11's	10m, Direct catch	2 Max	Not Permitted
Under 12's	10m, Direct catch	2 Max	Permitted

The primary change is limiting bouncing in Junior Football to 2 max which is in line with the Deakin Research, and when considering ground sizes for Junior Football, along with the importance of skill development and team play. The second minor adjustment is permitting kicking off the ground in Under 12's to be in line with the Laws of the Game, however restricting this in U11's to continue to drive skill development in this age group. This assists further in having U12's as a transition year.

RESEARCH REVIEWED AS PART OF THIS KEY PRINCIPLE

Phillips, P. et al. (2013). Examining the AFL Junior Match Policy for Recruitment and Retention. Deakin University. March 2013.

Pill, S. (2014) *Game Play: What Does It Mean for Pedagogy to Think Like a Game Developer?* Journal of Physical Education, Recreation & Dance, 85:1, 9 – 15.
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THE COACH ON THE GROUND

Existing AFL Junior Match Policy Statement:

The absence of stringent competition conditions should enable the coach to provide praise, teaching and feedback when warranted or as errors immediately they occur.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

The intent of the coach on the ground is to provide timely feedback to the player and help in the development of skills and general game play. The risk of removing the coach from the field and having them coach from the sidelines is that they tend to yell out to players, which then inadvertently reinforces to parents that it is ok to yell out from the sidelines, which in turn can negatively impact game day environments and experiences.

What ages should a coach on the ground be allowed?

The current age for a coach on the ground in Junior Football is as follows:

- **Under 8's** – Coach allowed on the ground
- **Under 9's & 10's** – Coach allowed on the ground
- **Under 11's & 12's** – Coach on the sidelines, and runner introduced.

Phillips, P. et al (2013) highlight the smaller ground size and coaches on the ground can be beneficial for players. It was noted however that the type of instruction provided to players was either encouraging feedback or very general in nature, and not necessarily specific feedback related to a player's skill development.

Another risk that is identified through numerous pieces of research and blogs on youth sport, including the work of John O'Sullivan (Changing the Game Project), is what is called 'Joystick Coaching', whereby a coach (or parents) are constantly yelling instructions to players. Move here, do this, kick the ball there, handball it to John. It effectively removes any degree of decision making from the player. Kids need the freedom to simply play, and learn and develop themselves, and joystick coaching removes their ability to make their own decisions, and removes real coaching opportunities. A coach should be more focused on asking players the right questions. What happened there? What did you see? What are the options? Why did you choose to kick the ball that way?

This will continue to be a challenge when it comes to coaching in Junior Sport. Effectively decision making on the field should belong to the players, and not to the coach or the parents. The question is does the coach on the field in Junior Football enhance the player development, or suppress it?

Phillips, P. et al. (2013) called out that the AFL should educate coaches on how to coach from on the ground to position themselves appropriately, provide quality feedback, ensure the frequency of feedback is appropriate, and how the on-ground feedback should differ from feedback provided at quarter, half and three quarter time.

EXAMPLES OF BEST PRACTICE

Hook in2 Hockey or Minkey Hockey – Coach is allowed on the playing area to assist players with learning and positioning.

Flag NFL Football – A coach is allowed on the field for Junior age group, but not interfere with the play, with the intent to provide feedback and direction to players.

Although, again with these two examples it highlights that if the coach does not understand the role that they play on the ground it can in fact be detrimental to a player's development and decision making ability.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that the coach on the ground rule be continued for the Under 8's, Under 9's and 10's age group as per the existing Junior Match Policy.

It is recommended that Junior Coaches be educated on how to appropriately coach from the ground, and the manner in which to do this to effectively improve the quality of feedback provided, and enhancing the decision making of the players, and not the coach or the parents. This could form part of the Junior Coaching Curriculum.

Research should also be undertaken on whether the coach on the ground rule is effective in the skill development of players.

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PREMIERSHIP POINTS, COMPETITIONS & AWARDS

Existing AFL Junior Match Policy Statement:

The match environment in junior football must be one of encouragement, learning and development over a focus of “winning”. Where winning overrides such aims, and encouragements replaced by a fear of failure, the program for children is inappropriate. Any awards should not replace or detract from the fun and enjoyment gained by participation in the program and the learning that is an integral part of it.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

The key components under this principle include:

- Scoring (match results),
- Premiership Points,
- Ladders,
- Finals,
- Players names published,
- Representative Teams.

The Junior Match Policy has the existing policy points in place:

	Scoring (Match Results)	Premiership Points	Ladders	Finals	Player Names Published	Representative Teams
Under 8's	No Scoring	No Premiership Points	No Ladders	No Finals	No publishing of names	No Representative Teams
Under 9's/10's	No Scoring	No Premiership Points	No Ladders	No Finals	No publishing of names	No Representative Teams
Under 11's / 12's	Controlling Body Decision	Controlling Body Decision	Controlling Body Decisions	Controlling Bodies Decision	Controlling Bodies Decision	No Representative Teams

Scoring (match Results) & Premiership Points

The general principle of this modification as part of the AFL Junior Match Policy is to enable a coach and a team to focus on participation, teamwork and skill development without the pressure of winning and finals. This along with the removal of a visible scoreboard or keeping of match results assists in enhancing the game day environment, which is a critical component when it comes to retention in club based football.

Anecdotally, you hear a number of comments regarding that ‘we are making it too soft for kids these days’, or ‘kids need to learn to win and lose’. Interestingly, when you talk to kids about what is fun in sport, winning comes in at number 48 on the list (Visek, et al. (2015)). The thing that is more important for kids, and makes sport more enjoyable for kids, is competing. Richard Hinds highlights in his article, *‘In junior sport, keeping kids involved — not the score — is all that matters’*, (2020), that when opinion is sought on the importance of winning and losing, often elite players are

Kids love to compete, and if you put a football on the ground in front of two kids they are going to compete to get, irrespective of whether there is a scoreboard, or if premiership points are on offer. The saying goes – ‘compete at all times, but not win at all costs’.

The research also indicates that the environment that is created, along with the intensity of coaches and subsequently parents, is heightened when premierships points and scoring occurs. We know that the environment and the experience that is created at games has either a positive or negative impact on the long-term retention of participants. The coaches focus also has the potential to change when premierships and wins/loses are recorded, with the focus shifting from player development, to the outcome of the game or season. When it comes to the retention of participants we need to play the long game here, and not be seduced by short term outcomes of game wins and premierships.

Ladders & Finals

Similarly, as outlined above, in the junior age groups the research indicates that there is no evidential benefit to have a ladder or finals in these age groups. As part of a transition into Youth aged football, there may be an opportunity to have a finals series in the Under 12's age group, to support this.

Published Names

As football is a team sport, the focus on individual accolades through this junior phase of the pathway is not required. The focus should be on development of all players, and the team. Similarly, generally post game praise (or tangible rewards) are received, and the need for the publishing of names is not required.

Representative Teams

The evidence is very clear that the policy that is in place currently in that no representative teams should be selected, is the correct one, and the subsequent recommendation is that this should policy position should remain. On a side note, and although not directly related to this review, the AFL should maintain its position to not support School Sport Australia's national 12's Carnival, as this is counter to the research, and also counter to the existing (and recommended) Junior Match Policy position.

EXAMPLES OF BEST PRACTICE

- **Finland Ice Hockey** – changed their approach to focus on the fundamentals of the game and limit competitive games until the age of 13 or 14. They also sopped selecting or deselecting players for representative teams and this made a significant difference in the overall development of their players. They effectively went from the wilderness in international ice hockey to being one of the leading countries internationally with players regularly selected out of this system for the NHL Draft, and winning World Championships. By removing the focus on outcomes at an early age and focusing on retention and developing fundamentals they have effectively turned their model around.
- **Norwegian Development Model** – approach to removing the focus on outcomes (scoring) in junior sport, and focus upon the individual and the fundamentals of the sport has continued to pay dividends at events like the Winter Olympics. As Tom Farrey identifies in his article, “No national championships before age 13. No regional championships before age 11, or even publication of game scores or rankings. Competition is promoted but not at the expense of development and the Norwegian vision: Joy of Sport for All.”
<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/28/sports/norway-youth-sports-model.html>

RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendation would be to split out further the Under 11's and Under 12's and incorporate a transition year in this regard, as per below.

	Scoring (Match Results)	Premiership Points	Ladders	Finals	Player Names Published	Representative Teams
Under 8's	No Scoring	No Premiership Points	No Ladders	No Finals	No publishing of names	No Representative Teams
Under 9's/10's	No Scoring	No Premiership Points	No Ladders	No Finals	No publishing of names	No Representative Teams
Under 11's	No Scoring	No Premiership Points	No Ladders	No Finals	No publishing of names	No Representative Teams
Under 12's	Controlling Body Decision	Controlling Body Decision	Controlling Body Decisions	Controlling Bodies Decision	Controlling Bodies Decision	No Representative Teams

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TRAINING

Existing AFL Junior Match Policy Statement:

The AFL recommends the following framework be adhered to when setting pre-season and regular season training programs. It has been based on advice provided from experts involved in the ongoing study of skill acquisition and training and performance principles.

Age Group	Pre-Season Training	In Season Sessions	Length of Sessions	Focus
U8-11	4-6 sessions	1 per week	60 min	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fun • Skill
U12-14	6-8 sessions	2 per week	75 min	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Skill • Team Play • Minimum Fitness
U15-16	8-10 sessions	2 per week	75 min	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Skill • Team Play • Tactical • Minimum Fitness
U17-18	10-12 sessions	2 per week	75-90 min	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Skill • Team Play • Tactical • Physical Preparation
Senior	15-20 sessions	2-3 per week	90 min	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Skill • Team Play • Tactical • Physical Preparation

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

There is significant research when it comes to training session lengths, player loads and player welfare in respect to training and games in young players. The key focus must be on ensuring the wellbeing of the players, and to not overload, burn out or increase the risk of overuse injuries. A key reason for drop out of players is injuries or burn out, and subsequently coaches should look to limit the training to the prescribed amounts. The two major considerations are:

1. **Overuse injuries:** these include osteitis pubis and stress fractures which can have a detrimental impact on their capacity to develop to their optimum potential.
2. **Overtraining syndrome:** the process by which the combination of training, competition and non-sport specific stressors combine to negatively affect the athlete. Can lead to “burnout” which is a negative emotional reaction to sport participation.

The other component to consider in all of this is that often kids are playing multiple sports, and that season lengths are beginning to ‘creep’ into each other, which again creates an increase in the likelihood of overuse injuries.

Mark Hyman, through his published work, highlights that increasing physical demands (often placed on kids by adults) is having a detrimental impact on the health of our youth. Hyman writes that overuse injuries are often a result of kids spending too much time specialising in one sport, and having no extended breaks from particular sports. Sports are tending to extend their seasons into each other by holding additional summer leagues, development programs or extended pre-season

training and this does not give kids enough down time or a physical and mental break from their chosen sport. This can ultimately lead to burnout, physical injury or kids simply saying enough is enough and walking away from the game and dropping out.

Encouraging sampling in sports is also something that the AFL should look to promote as it ultimately assists with long term retention of participants. This will be further explored in the Additional Considerations section of this Literature Review.

Overall, the research in this area highlighted:

1. Increased workload, poor technique and developing bodies are closely linked to the onset of overuse injuries;
2. Playing in multiple teams in one season is a strong contributor to increased workload;
3. Developing players are more prone to overuse injuries as their bodies are still growing and are not prepared nor conditioned for adult style training programs;
4. Appropriate amounts of rest, recovery and time away from their chosen sport, is an important consideration for sports administrators in order to prevent overtraining syndrome and possible burnout;
5. The importance of developing and implementing Player Welfare protocols to reduce the incident of injuries in Junior and youth participants.

As such the training schedule provided in the existing Junior Match Policy is consistent with the research and the recommendation is for this to remain. The key to this principle is ensuring that these limits are enforced as an absolute maximum.

Bailey, et al (2012) in their Junior Sport Briefing Paper on Growth and Maturation, also highlight that increased levels of intense training can increase the risk of fractures, disturbances in bone growth development, bone growth plate issues, and eating disorders. They go on to suggest that these risks can be minimised with proper precautions and training loads.

In addition to the training component, it is a recommendation that Season Length must also be a consideration for inclusion. The AFL should be strong in setting a maximum season length for Junior participants within the game. This again addresses overuse injuries and decreases the likelihood of burnout, which ultimately supports longer term retention.

The recommendation for consideration based on research for Season Length is as per below:

- **U8's / 9's / 10's:** 10 – 12 weeks (No Finals)
- **U11's / 12's:** 12-15 weeks (inclusive of any finals)

This assists in ensuring that players do not burnout or experience overuse injuries. Importantly this season length policy point also assists in encouraging sampling of other sports which will be further explored.

EXAMPLES OF BEST PRACTICE

- **Canadian Ice Hockey** – has a unique focus on that Hockey should be one part of a person's life and not all of it. The work that they do in limiting on ice time for players, making sure that competitions aren't all consuming assists significantly in ensuring that players don't burnout or develop overuse injuries.
- **Youth Sport New Zealand** – through their Balance is Better messaging it seeks to put into perspective sport in a child's life, and providing leadership to support changes in structure, competitions, and player development. <https://balanceisbetter.org.nz/> and <https://sportnz.org.nz/resources/changing-the-approach-to-youth-sport/>

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are made in reference to training, with the major inclusion being some further stipulations around Season Length.

Age Group	Pre-Season Training	In Season Sessions	Length of Sessions	Focus	Season Length
U8-11	4-6 sessions	1 per week	60 min	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fun • Skill 	10-12 weeks (no finals)
U12-14	6-8 sessions	2 per week	75 min	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Skill • Team Play • Minimum Fitness 	12-15 weeks (inclusive of any finals)
U15-16	8-10 sessions	2 per week	75 min	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Skill • Team Play • Tactical • Minimum Fitness 	
U17-18	10-12 sessions	2 per week	75-90 min	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Skill • Team Play • Tactical • Physical Preparation 	
Senior	15-20 sessions	2-3 per week	90 min	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Skill • Team Play • Tactical • Physical Preparation 	

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WAFC Player Welfare Protocols Document. (2017)

AGE POLICY

Existing AFL Junior Match Policy Statement:

A player must be seven by the following dates in each respective state/territory:

- » January 1 (TAS)
- » April 30 (VIC, ACT, SA, NT)
- » June 30 (QLD, WA)
- » July 31 (NSW)

The AFL understands that the starting point for children along the participation pathway can differ from player to player and philosophically believes in a policy that caters for a range of individual circumstances. Recent data shows that the birth rate has increased by more than a quarter over the past decade resulting in a growing number of children starting school aged four. The impact of this societal trend has led to school peer groups being split up due to the AFL's minimum age policies not aligning with the standard school age policy in each state/territory. While there will be children wishing to participate in junior football that fall either side of the policy dates, we feel the core principle of maintaining school peer groups as a local retention strategy outweighs this occurrence.

Competition Age Range

Where player numbers do not permit conducting a competition in every age group, the AFL policy recommends that children participate in competitions with a two-year age span, e.g. staggered age groups 8, 10, 12, 14, 16, 18. The AFL policy recognises that in regional areas and the still-evolving female football pathway, the opportunity to conduct competitions with a two-year age span is not always possible. Where leagues and clubs have trouble fielding teams, reducing player numbers is recommended (9-12 a side). If a league has no alternative than to conduct competitions that involve players participating outside the recommended two-year age span, they must first seek approval from their state football body. In these instances, coaches should endeavour to match players by age and ability level.

Playing down an age level

Junior leagues may at their discretion grant a player permission to play down an age level where a legitimate reason exists, such as physical capacity or disability. Players seeking exemption need to provide relevant medical evidence for assessment by the controlling body. If no relevant medical evidence can be provided, the controlling body will determine the application for exemption as it sees fit on full consideration of the circumstances presented.

Playing up an age level

The AFL policy acknowledges the principle role of the parent or guardian in determining that a player should play in a higher age competition than the one determined by the player's chronological age. Players should only be permitted to play up an age level when their physical capacity and social sense enable them to compete adequately at the higher age level. The decision whether a player should play up beyond the two-year age span should be based on the advantages to be gained by the player. Before a player participates in a competition outside the recommended two-year age span, the player's parent or guardian must sign a consent form.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

The key areas of this principle of the Junior Match Policy include:

- Age Groups
- Competition Age Range
- Playing Down an Age Level
- Playing up an Age Level

Age Groups

The importance of aligning to Junior sport to school year groups cannot be underestimated as both a recruiting and retention tool. It is also beneficial to look at changing age groups from under format (i.e. under9's) to a school year format, (i.e. Year 4's). This makes it really simple for a parent, and a child to know and understand what football group they should be participating within. The intent has to be to make it easier for a participant and their family.

The research is clear on why kids play sport – to have fun with their friends, hence the importance of trying to align with school years as closely as possible. This is not a change to the recommendation, however a suggested naming change to how the year groups are represented. This has been utilised in Western Australia over the last 5 years, and it has enhanced the ease of understanding for parents, and assists considerably in recruitment and retention. This is put forward as a consideration.

Competition Age Ranges

The viability of teams and competitions is a real concern for some clubs and leagues, and the flexibility to establish dual age teams should not be diminished. The preference should always be to play in a single age stream, however it is noted that flexibility is required, particularly through some regional areas. There is no evidence that indicates a change in this current position.

The recommended age range should be a maximum of two years as outlined in the existing policy position.

Playing Down an Age Level

The ability for players to play down one age group due to either physical capacity or disability is a common-sense approach, that should remain as per the existing policy point based either on medical advice, and/or at the discretion of the league or controlling state body. The inclusion of the wording "*where a legitimate reason exists*" is important as this enables flexibility where player numbers may also impact the viability of the team or competition.

In some circumstances in respect to disability there may be additional cause as to why a player should play down outside of the 1-year age range. If medical advice is supportive, along with support from the club and the league, there should be a process whereby the player/club/league can apply for an exemption in these rare circumstances, in order to support participation.

Playing up an Age Level

The ability to play up one-year level should remain in line with existing policy statement. Importantly, as per current research, there may be circumstances whereby a player potentially looks to play up more than the recommended one age group, and again in rare circumstances there needs to be the flexibility for this to occur, if the appropriate approvals are obtained.

In reference to this it is important that consideration be given to not just the physical capability, but also the social and emotional development, as often this component is not incorporated as part of

discussions in this space. Any decision regarding a player playing up an age should be based on what is best for the player.

Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development is a psychological and educational theory, but from a football context, this theory in summary highlights the need to appropriately challenge players outside of their comfort zone, and in the circumstances of playing up an age level, then it has some merit. Again, the social and emotional development aspect also must be considered, as opposed to primarily physical attributes, or sheer ability.

In summary, the flexibility of players to move up or down one age group is supported by the evidence, although it is important to recognise that outside of this 1-year shift, there are flags to the benefit and the fairness for this to occur. The competition age ranges, for those competitions which require flexibility to be viable is supported as per the existing policy statement.

EXAMPLES OF BEST PRACTICE

- **Rugby League Australia** – have an 18-month registration window that seeks to ensure that and difference or variation in maturity levels of a player is limited. This also looks to limit the impact of Relative Age Effect which is an issue when selecting players from both a participation and a talent pathway perspective. It potentially also helps to limit the impact of the Matthew Effect – whereby perception of competence in sport creates other opportunities and advantages.
- **WAFC** – has implemented age groups in Junior Football aligned to school years and it has had a considerable impact on marketing and promotion of the game, along with ease of understanding for kids, parents and volunteers. What year are you in at school ... then that's the year you play football in.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In respect to Age Policies the following recommendations are made:

- It is suggested that consideration be given to the alignment of the football age groups to school years i.e. Year 4's, to assist in the recruitment and retention of participants.
- The existing competition age ranges as per the current Junior Match Policy of 2 years should be maintained.
- The existing ability for identified participants to play down an age group should be maintained.
- It is recommended that flexibility be provided for players with a disability to apply for an exemption to play outside of the recommended one-year group.
- The existing policy position in regard to playing up age groups should be maintained.

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MERCY RULE

Existing AFL Junior Match Policy Statement:

The AFL encourages leagues, clubs and coaches once an unassailable lead is reached during a game (e.g. 60 points) to appreciate that it serves no purpose to inflict massive losses on teams. In these instances, a mercy rule should be applied that suits the local competition circumstances.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

Massive losses in Junior Football have no value whatsoever to both teams that are playing. To get beaten by significant amounts negatively impacts on the fun and enjoyment of a team and player, whilst being on the team that inflicts the loss does very little for them in terms of development. The Mercy Rule also changes the focus of coaches instead of running up the score.

Some pundits talk about that they believe that its character building to be flogged or beaten by large amounts in a game. It builds resilience. As Richard Hinds suggests in his article, *'In junior sport, keeping kids involved — not the score — is all that matters'*, (2020), "The truth is that any resilience that might be gained from junior sport comes not from the outcome but from within the game itself — tackling bigger kids, facing fast bowling, stepping up to take the penalty kick.

Creating these challenges means games must have a competitive element. But there is a tipping point where a contest becomes a walkover or a lesser player — or even a whole team — becomes a mere spectator and the experience is counterproductive for everyone".

According to Play by the Rules, a 2010 study by the University of Utah and Clemson University found that a key problem for children's sport administration is satisfying two very different consumers—the parents (who decide whether or not their child participates) and the children (for whom the sport's program is designed).

They go on to suggest that "Various studies have shown that parents choose sport programs for their children based on wanting to give them opportunities to develop or socialise, become healthier, responsible, goal-driven, and self-motivated.

Yet parents are not only the critical 'facilitators' of sport opportunities for their children, they also serve a role in influencing their child's interpretation of the sport. Parents who overemphasise a return on their own investment (financial, time and emotional) and/or outcome goals for their child's sport create stress, uncertainty and a lack of motivation in their children.

Children, meanwhile look to participate in activities in which they are reasonably confident, that provide them with opportunities to be physically active, to socialise with friends, and above all, to have fun". Visek, et al (2015) describes fun through her work on the Fun Integration Theory which helps to address what is fun for kids.

Similarly, there needs to be more of a focus on player development and achievement of personal or team goals, as opposed to a focus on the outcome of a game. A key focus of this should be the ongoing education of both coaches and parents.

Is the 60 points the right amount (10 goals)? There is discussion as to whether the right amount is 10 or 15 goals, and potentially additional research could be undertaken on this point, however 10 goals

seems to be the amount that is most logical in its application for Junior Football, and encouraging retention of players in the game.

EXAMPLES OF BEST PRACTICE

Baseball & Softball – have long had mercy rules whereby if a team gets a designated number of home runs in place that is deemed insurmountable, and a minimum number of innings have been played then the game can be called off at that point.

American Football – some junior/Youth Leagues implement a ‘running clock’ when a designated lead is reached in the game. This aims to prevent blow-outs in the game, by effectively reducing the time. In regular time the game clock may stop during certain plays, however once the mercy rule has been activated the clock does not stop (outside of injuries).

Basketball – Some junior or youth Basketball competitions have a Mercy Rule whereby full court presses cannot be applied, and the defence is required to drop back to within the 3pt line, when they are 20pts or more in front.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are made in respect to the Key principle of the Mercy Rule in Junior Football.

- It is recommended to keep the 60-point Mercy Rule in place for all levels of Junior and Youth Football, as it serves as a tool that assists in the retention of players.
- There is a need to work with coaches and educate them on what they can do, or different strategies when they get 60 points in front of another team. Assist coaches in working with players on their development and achievement of personal / team objectives, as opposed to the outcome of the game
- Develop a parent education piece that helps parents gain a better understanding of what is fun in sport for kids, and how they can support the long-term retention of their children.

RESEARCH REVIEWED AS PART OF THIS KEY PRINCIPLE

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FEMALE FOOTBALL

Female Football has been a significant growth area over a number of years, however within the existing Junior Match Policy, there isn't a clear focus or consideration if anything needs to be addressed differently in terms of female participation within the game. On review of the existing literature there are a few key call outs that should be noted that are discussed below.

As part of the literature review of the AFL Junior Match Policy, **Porter Novelli** were engaged to provide some additional research into female participation, and were effectively tasked to delve into the 'motivators' for attracting and retaining girls' participation in Australian Football. This research would then assist in informing any potential amendments to the AFL Junior Match Policy.

Through undertaking a series of stakeholder discussions three key positive participation experiences were identified for female participation

1. It is important to develop skills and understanding of the game as girls progress from junior to senior football. Focus should be on recruiting and retaining girls from a young age
2. Fostering a social environment, where girls can form friendships, is crucial in retaining players. The win-at-all-costs mentality drives players in the junior age bracket away
3. Playing into the overall enjoyment of the game, girls must have the opportunity to play with other girls at all ages where possible – thereby creating a more inclusive culture

The Key Principles that form part of the AFL Junior Match Policy that are the most important considerations have been identified as:

- Ground Size;
- Number of Players on the Ground;
- Tackling / Contact.

Porter Novelli also undertook three surveys that focused on current participants, past participants and stakeholders, and reviewed over 720 completed surveys from right across Australia. This provides a really important data point for the AFL.

Current Participants

Current participants identified the following responses as to why their daughter chose to play football.

- Love of the game
- Friends already playing
- Siblings are playing
- Provided a safe team environment
- Schools Program

This assist in not only identifying the key motivations as to why a participant is playing but also assist in recognizing the various recruitment strategies and focus areas. Similarly the reason that they stay are identified as:

- Team Culture
- Friends
- Comradery
- Inclusive Club Environments

The importance of creating an emotional connection to the game is also crucial in terms of retention.

Perception of Inequality

Through the Porter Novelli research of stakeholders into female participation it was noted that any variation in the rules through the pathway between boys and girls was seen to send a message of inequality. This is an important call out from the research.

Discussion

Interestingly, for consideration by the working group is that the end point for boys and girls in terms of rules is different. The AFL Laws of the Game for men are different to women, so does this then impact the rule progression as part of the AFL Junior Match Policy. i.e. 16 a-side v 18 a-side, shorter quarter lengths, size 4 football v size 5 football, etc.

There is an interesting tension point that is created that warrants further discussion with the working group, and may path the way for additional research, as effectively there becomes a point in the sequential development where the pathway diverges towards two separate end points.

The Five Key Takeaways

Porter Novelli have identified 5 key points through their combined research. These are:

- **Skill Development –**
 - Ensuring girls are learning the basic skills of the game, including tackling, is important in overall safety and success.
 - The importance of finding and retaining good coaches is a crucial step in this process.
- **Junior Match Policy is important**
 - Overall, the JMP is being deployed nationwide, with clubs and leagues understanding its benefit
 - Understanding how these rules can be modified for each age group, based on the most essential factors, will increase uptake and support.
- **Girls Only Teams**
 - Phone interviews revealed that girls only teams are the preferred way forward, however the surveys showed that approximately only 50% of participants agreed.
 - The age of players plays a significant role in the importance of girl only competitions.
- **An Inclusive Environment**
 - Team culture and fostering friendship is a stand out contributor to retaining players.
 - From a young age, providing an inclusive and fun environment will continue to build numbers.
- **Challenges in the Junior Match Policy**
 - The research highlighted a number of challenges for the industry to implement the JMP – however the responses were fragmented. There was no one clear issue identified.

The research undertaken by Visek, et al. (2015) on what is fun for kids in sport aligns to the research undertaken by Porter Novelli, and through the work of Amanda Visek there is no identifiable difference to what is fun for boys compared to what is fun for girls.

Key Transition Points

It is evident that through the literature, girls are sampling more and more sports these days, which means that it is critical that the environment and the experience that they have when they are

involved in football is first class, and actively seeks to retain them in the sport. The key drivers of club based participation model highlights some key areas that if addressed can support the engagement and retention of girls.

Eime, et al. (2015) identified that “There were differences between boys and girls with regard to when they started and when they transitioned or withdrew from the modified sports programs”. They go on to suggest that “this may be linked to consistent reports of lower sport participation rates among females. For instance, there is evidence that parents provide sons with more opportunities for sport participation than daughters. Verbal encouragement, support, and active participation from family members has been reported to help girls be physically active, along with strategies that focus on peers, the school and community to shape positive perceptions and attitudes towards girls’ participation in physical activities”.

This may be due to the point that “boys tend to participate in organised sport much earlier than girls, and as result seek new challenges much earlier”. Casey, M. et al. (2009), also identify that adolescent girls perceived competition sport for more skilled participants, which subsequently impacted their non-participation. The literature suggests that “girls are socialized not to take risks and try new things, which means that they are less likely to engage in things where they aren’t sure they will be successful. You can’t learn something without being willing to take a risk” (Nike, Coaching Girls Guide).

The literature would suggest that given the factors raised above, that as girls move into more competitive levels of the game that same sex teams would be preferable.

Same Sex Teams or Mixed Teams

A key question that is always raised is should there be same sex teams or mixed teams?

Play by the Rules calls out the following key points in reference to this:

- Generally, girls and boys prefer to play in same sex teams.
- Some girls want to compete with boys (and vice versa), especially if there is not an equivalent same sex team available.
- Girls and boys do play in mixed teams, particularly when sports are modified or a team could not otherwise be fielded.
- Age and gender are not always good indicators of ability e.g., there are strong, agile girls and weak, poorly coordinated boys and vice versa.
- Each situation is different and there are no easy answers.

As Queensland University’s Steven Rynne describes, “From a bio-physical point of view, there is no reason that boys and girls should be separated before the onset of puberty (a complicating factor being the age ranges that this can commence and also the reports that pubertal onset is happening earlier) – in fact, the girls should be bigger and stronger than boys of the same age group until puberty anyway.

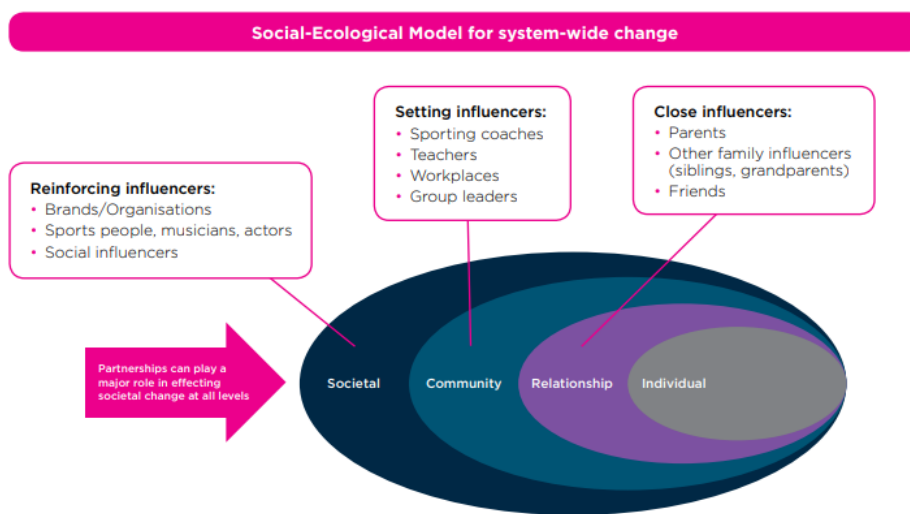
From pedagogical and socio-cultural perspectives, it’s even more complicated because girls have typically had quite different developmental experiences and trajectories (compared with their boy peers) and there are clear barriers to commencement and retention of girls in ‘traditionally’ male-dominated sports (which is where girls-only teams and comps have had some success”.

In reference to the Sex Disclination Act 1984 (CTH), the AFL Junior Match Policy has a position statement that reads: *“In accordance with the Sex Discrimination Act 1984 (Cth)1, people aged under 12 cannot be excluded on the basis of sex or gender identity from participating in a competitive*

sporting activity. Pursuant to section 42(1) of the Act, people of one gender aged 12 and over can be excluded from participating in competitive sporting activities in which the strength, stamina and physique of competitors is relevant. As a result, junior clubs will exclude females who reach 14 years of age as at January 1 in the year of play from playing in any competition that is not a 'female competition'".

Importance of Influencers

The research undertaken by the NSW Government in the [Her Sport Her Way Report](#) highlights the importance of positive influencers in increasing a girls participation in sport, and propose a social - ecological model that looks to harness key people in the lives of young women, including the impact of role models. It's the adage of 'You can't be, what you can't see'.



It is also critical that as a sport we better understand the key barriers to participation, that have been identified as part of the 'Key Drivers of an Integrated Club Based Participation Model', and address these as part of the communication to girls and parents.

The importance of working closely with AFL School Ambassadors (AFLSA's), teachers and Principals should not be underestimated as a key mechanism to influencing the engagement of girls into Australian Rules Football. A refocus on what the game does in the school space is required to ensure that we continue to 'own the school space' and then convert school based participants into community club participation. Eime & Payne (2009) identified that we need a stronger focus on integrating and linking school-community settings to enhance lifelong physical activity habits. Through implementing a strong school to club participation strategy would support this critical component identified through the research, and as a key driver of club based participation.

Eime, R. et al. (2015) also identifies that "multiple modes and types of Physical Activity need to be available, and that we need to promote flexibility of delivery throughout adolescence". The VicHealth Physical Activity Strategy 2018-2023, and subsequent Females and Physical Activity Report suggests that offering flexible options and/or activities, along with creating a positive social environment that is inclusive as two key strategies to support female participation in sport.

The fear of judgement is also a critical factor identified by VicHealth as a key barrier to participation. Being judged based on **appearance** (sweaty, clothing types, stereotypes), **ability** (not skilled enough, game is too competitive, not knowing rules), and **priorities** (friends, study). This is a really interesting

consideration, and VicHealth have launched the 'This Girl Can' campaign to help combat this fear of judgement. This was based off a successful campaign from Sport England of the same name.

Discussion

Do all girl teams help address this fear of judgement that exists?

What does this mean for the AFL Junior Match Policy?

Kumar, et al. (2009) states that "Australian statistics for 6- to 14- year-olds show that participation in sport peaks for both boys and girls at 9 to 11 years of age before decreasing. The question that this poses, is how much is this dropout impacted by the experience and the environment that is created through our Junior Pathway?"

Focusing on each of the key principles of the AFL Junior Match Policy the following comments are made:

Playing Ground, Time & Equipment

- *Playing Ground* – in junior age groups from a bio-physical perspective there is nothing to indicate that female participation should be any different to males. Skill development and application of skill is the only component that may impact oval size, but this is no different from males to females. No recommended change prescribed here.
- *Game Time* – again physical development and maturity shows limited difference to support any change in game time for female participants outside of what the Junior Match Policy currently prescribes.
- *Equipment* – Ball size is a consideration for females as part of the Junior Match Policy but only when participants get into early adolescents, and when hand size and grip strength becomes more of a contributing factor. As outlined, discussion should be held on alignment of rules to AFLW endpoint as part of the sequential development pathway. The other component that may be considered here is the uniforms worn by female players and whether this is a limiting factor, or barrier when it comes to recruitment and retention in the sport. Professor Claire Hanlon (Victoria University) is currently conducting research looking at this as a barrier to participation.

Use of Zones

- *Zones* – this component is no different for males or females and as such no prescribed change is required.

Team Composition & Player Rotation

- *Team Numbers* – There should be no difference at this young age in terms of team numbers. Alignment will be required on the AFLW endpoint and the smaller team sizes at the elite level.

Contact

- *All contact* – this is no difference from males to females in the sequential development of contact skills in the game. No prescribed change is recommended to this key principle.

Marking, Bouncing & Kicking off the Ground

- *Marking* – no prescribed change recommended.
- *Bouncing* – no prescribed change recommended.
- *Kicking off the Ground* – no prescribed change recommended.

The Coach on the Ground

- *Coach* – no prescribed changes recommended

Premiership Points, Competitions & Awards

- *Scoring (match results)* – no prescribed changes recommended
- *Premiership Points* – no prescribed changes recommended
- *Ladders* – no prescribed changes recommended

- *Finals* – no prescribed changes recommended
- *Players names published* – no prescribed changes recommended
- *Representative Teams* – no prescribed changes recommended

Training

- *Training components* – no prescribed changes recommended

Age Policy

- *Age Policy* – no prescribed changes recommended

Mercy Rule

- *Mercy Rule* – no prescribed changes recommended

There are a few AFLW Laws of the Game that would need to be assessed to determine the correct progression from a developmental perspective to arrive at this end point. Apart from this, when focusing on the research there is limited to no change required.

EXAMPLES OF BEST PRACTICE

Nike have just released their '[Made to Play Girls Coaching Guide](#)' that focuses upon 5 key pillars that aim to create a more girl friendly play and sports environment.

The aim of the guide is to assist in educating coaches on the acquisition and retention of females within sport generally.

One of the key callouts that has been evident through the literature and research in regards to female participation is the importance of friends and social connections along with meaningful relationships, along with the importance of an inclusive culture or environment. This is again noted by Nike in their campaign.

The other interesting call out is the notion of '*brave, not perfect*' as this has a shift in the feedback and direction provided by coaches at clubs, along with the ways in which parents encourage female participation by their daughters. This should form part of a parent education piece that would be recommended to be developed as part of the Auskick to Junior transition focus.

Cricket Australia

Cricket Australia widely promote their successes in female participation, and other key areas of the game, including their '[Press for Progress Report](#)'. This acts as a scorecard for CA and assists in transparency of outcomes in female participation. CA also invest heavily in promoting the complete female cricket pathway and associated documents, and this is something that the AFL could use as an example of talking to parents and girls about their pathway within the game.

THE MADE TO PLAY COACHING GIRLS GUIDE FOCUSES ON FIVE PILLARS

to create more girl-friendly play and sport environments.
These are geared for team sports, but can be used any time.



MAKE SURE THE PLAYING SPACE & TEAM CULTURE WORK FOR GIRLS.

Coaches should make spaces as safe and welcoming as possible to all girls. This applies to physical spaces as well as team culture.



CREATE CONNECTIONS WITH GIRLS.

To make girls feel like they belong in sports, coaches can model good decision-making, provide support when things are hard and share their own experiences.



LET GIRLS COMPETE.

It's a myth that girls don't want to compete. Girls are most motivated by coaches who can both create meaningful relationships and challenge them to improve and compete.



FOCUS ON PROGRESS, NOT THE FINAL OUTCOME.

Girls want feedback that is relevant to their development and not only based on the win-loss record.



ENCOURAGE GIRLS TO BE BRAVE, NOT PERFECT.

Coaches and caring adults can support girls by rewarding bravery, not perfection.

RECOMMENDATIONS

There are some interesting tension points that are discussed through the literature and research on female participation as part of the review on the AFL Junior Match Policy. In terms of purely focusing upon the key principles, at the junior level of the game there aren't too many recommended changes, outside of assessing the impact of AFLW rule changes when compared to the AFL Laws of the Game, and how this correlates to the sequential development of skills in the game.

The biggest component that has come through is how we communicate and engage with females both within and outside of the game, in order to encourage them to play and then ultimately be retained within the game from a participation perspective. How do we remove the perceived barriers to participation within the game that females may have?

The research is clear that where possible all female teams are the preferred competition structure, however the stakeholder feedback from Porter Novelli was only 50% in favour. Anecdotal feedback received indicates that girls that are maybe not as skilful or confident in the game are less likely to play in mixed sex teams, however would be more likely to play in all female teams.

RESEARCH REVIEWED AS PART OF THIS KEY PRINCIPLE

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ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

The following points should also be considered by the JMP Working Group for inclusion as part of the next iteration of the policy/framework.

- 1. Season Length** – this has been proposed as part of the training component of the existing key principles and the recommendation is for prescribed maximum season lengths for designated age groups. This will assist in reducing overuse injuries and the likelihood of burnout. Please refer to the training Key Principle for further information.
- 2. Sampling and Diversification of Sport** – The AFL should consider including a position statement on sampling & diversification of sports experiences in the updated version of the Junior Match Policy / Player development Framework. I understand that this may sound counter intuitive, however best practice both nationally & internationally is around promotion of the sampling of sports, which similarly helps in reducing the likelihood of overuse injuries and burnout and enhances the long-term retention of participants in community sport, and in our case Australian Rules Football. To put in bluntly we simply don't want kids playing football 24/7, 365 days of the year. Children need to sample other sports, learn other skills, and experience other games, and this assists with their overall skill development and retention.

This doesn't mean we say, 'don't play Australian Rules Football', what this means is we say, 'play Australian Rules Football, **AND** play other sports when you aren't playing our game', but we have to allow them opportunity, time and space to do this. We do this by having season length stipulations, ensuring pre-season training is developmentally appropriate (and not 'creeping' into other seasons, and educating parents and coaches about the importance of sampling. We also know that "children who sample a variety of sports are exposed to unique socialisation experiences that shape personal development and social capital outcomes including intrapersonal skills, pro-social behaviour, healthy identity and diverse peer groups" Eime, R., et al (2015).

A position statement such as "The AFL recognises and supports the importance of sampling and diversification of sports for Junior Participants, and children should delay the early specialisation in one sport", would be sufficient and position the AFL as an industry leader.

- 3. Character Development** – should be a key principle that the AFL looks to develop or leverage upon and support clubs in the implementation of programs or initiatives that support the development of life skills in players. As parents we put our kids into sport to develop skills that will support them through life. These skills need to be intentionally taught or developed, and don't necessarily just occur because a player is involved in sport. This could be an initiative that the AFL could partner with other organisations on as a joint initiative.

Ultimately, this assist us as an industry with the value proposition that we put to parents as why they would put their kids in to play football, and why they should stay involved in football (retention).

- 4. The Values of Sport** – similarly to the above regarding character development, the AFL has an opportunity to consider do we want to develop a list of guiding values that support Junior Football on what as a game we stand for and what we don't stand for. This would enable the sport to be a real leader in that whole character and integrity development piece, and again fits with the value proposition to parents about being involved in our game.

5. **Parent Education** – this is an area of sport that we can look to be innovative on and really create a competitive advantage on over other sports. This is something that we can do differently in order to ensure that all parents are fully across the transition from Auskick to Junior Football, and what the steps in the pathway actually look like. This would also be about how do we better support and educate parents that are a part of the football journey, or want to be a part of football, in order to retain more participants in the game.
6. **Transition** – the transition that exists currently from Auskick into Junior Football must be seen as a significant challenge that needs to be focused upon by the AFL. The AFL still has a significant drop out rate that exists from Auskick to Junior Football. Similarly, there is a drop out that occurs between Junior and Youth pathways. We know that relationships are a significant contributing factor to assist in retention as evidenced in the WAFC Transition document. The other factor to consider is the jump between programs and competitions, and are players and parents uncertain of this perceived ‘leap’ that exists. Education and communication is the key here.

Eime, et al. (2015) suggest that the “inclusion of an intermediate program within the sport participation pathway, between modified sport and club sport competitions, may assist continuation of participation in a given sport”. This is something that could be explored in terms of a transition year or program, alongside a comprehensive education and awareness strategy / campaign.

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ENVIRONMENTAL SCAN & REVIEW OF OTHER AUSTRALIAN SPORTS



The below provides a quick snapshot of other key sports in Australia and what they do around a Junior Match Policy, or modification in sport. This aspect needs to be further expanded upon and broadened.


Sport	Name of Modified Program	What areas of the game are modified	How do they market or promote the modified rules?	Research or articles regarding the sports modified rules	Considerations for the AFL Junior Match Policy
Cricket	Cricket Blast - <i>Junior Blasters</i> (5-7 year old's)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Skills Based Program ➤ 60min in length 	 Use of current & former players	https://www.cricket.com.au/news/new-junior-formats-2017-under-10-11-12-13-shorter-pitch-boundaries-less-players/2017-04-04	Cricket have the same branding and name of product (Cricket Blast) between their introductory and first junior phase ... potentially this assists in transition between the two programs. In saying this though this was initially in place for Auskick with Auskick Rules and was not wee received. Programs in Junior Comps are colour coded to show progression. Used in their collateral
	Cricket Blast - <i>Master Blasters</i> (7-10 year old's)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ 12 overs (Max) ➤ 14m Pitch ➤ 6-8 players ➤ 30m Boundary ➤ Soft modified ball (80-110g) ➤ Modified Bat ➤ 60-90 min 	 Use of current & former players	https://www.cricket.com.au/news/cricket-australia-junior-formats-changes-glenn-mcgrath-alan-davidson-greg-chappell-mike-whitney/2018-01-17	
	Junior Comp (9-17 Year old's)	Junior Cricket 1 (U11's) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ 20 overs (Max) ➤ 16m Pitch ➤ 7 Players ➤ 40m Boundary ➤ Modified Ball (125-142g) ➤ Modified Bat ➤ Rotation of fielding positions ➤ Bat for a designated number of balls – unlimited dismissals ➤ 60 – 120 minutes 	  Clear pathway documents	https://www.theroar.com.au/2017/12/02/ca-changing-game-know-time/	



		<p>Junior Cricket 2 (U13's)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ T20 or 30 overs (Max) ➤ 18m Pitch ➤ 9 Players ➤ 45m Boundary ➤ 142g Ball ➤ Smaller Bat Size recommended ➤ Rotation of fielding positions at discretion of coach ➤ Retire after a designated number of balls ➤ 60 – 120 minutes 			
		<p>Junior Cricket 3 (U14's - 19)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ T20 or 40 overs (Max) ➤ 20.1m Pitch ➤ 11 Players ➤ 50m Boundary ➤ 156g (male) & 142g (female) Ball ➤ Rotation of fielding positions at discretion of coach ➤ 120 – 240 minutes 			
Soccer	Mini Roos Kick Off (Ages 4 – 9)	<p>Kick Off</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Fundamental motor skills ➤ Player centred ➤ Small sided games ➤ 45 minutes ➤ 6-12 sessions 		https://www.playfootball.com.au/minirooms/news/top-seven-aldi-minirooms-rules-you-need-know	ALDI MiniRoos Kick-Off is a fun, safe sport taught in a friendly environment for children aged four to nine. The program involves sessions that build skills

	Mini Roos Club Football (Ages 5 – 11)	Mini Roos - Club Football (Under 6 & 7) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Reduced on field numbers (4v4) ➤ Smaller fields (30m x 20m) ➤ Smaller ball ➤ Smaller goals ➤ No penalties ➤ 20-minute halves ➤ No Goalkeepers ➤ No Throw in or Corner Kicks ➤ No Offside ➤ No publishing of Match results ➤ No Points Table 			through games and simple drills delivered in an engaging and inclusive environment.
		Mini Roos - Club Football (Under 8 & 9) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Reduced on field numbers (7v7) ➤ Smaller fields (45m x 35m) ➤ Smaller ball ➤ Smaller goals ➤ 20-minute halves ➤ Goalkeepers introduced ➤ Throw in and Corner Kicks allowed ➤ No Offside ➤ No publishing of Match results ➤ No Points Table 			

		<p>Mini Roos - Club Football (Under 10 & 11)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Reduced on field numbers (9v9) ➤ Smaller fields (65m x 45m) ➤ Smaller ball ➤ Smaller goals ➤ 25-minute halves ➤ Goalkeepers ➤ Throw in and Corner Kicks allowed ➤ No Offside ➤ No publishing of Match results ➤ No Points Table 			
Basketball	Aussie Hoops (Ages 5 - 10)	<p>Aussie Hoops Rookie (Ages 5 – 6)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Fundamental motor skills ➤ 45 – 75 minutes sessions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 5 mins warm up game - 15 mins skills - 30 mins drills - 10 mins modified game 	<p>Aussie Hoops participant receives participant pack with backpack, reversible singlet and basketball</p> <p>NEW PARTICIPANTS</p> 		<p>Aussie Hoops is an introductory program to basketball. When a child is ready, they can enter into club basketball at any age (i.e. if a 6YO is a confident basketballer, they may go into club U8s competition, while a less-confident 10YO might stay in Aussie Hoops program)</p>
		<p>Aussie Hoops Starter (Ages 7 - 8)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Provide transition from basic motor and basketball skill development into game sense application ➤ 45 – 75 minutes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 5 min warm up games - 15 mins skills - 20 mins drills - 20 min modified game 			

		<p>Aussie Hoops All Star (Ages 9 – 10)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Provides participants with a game sense focused program ➤ 45 – 75 minutes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 5 min warm up - 15 min skills - 10 mins drills - 30 min modified games 			
Netball	Suncorp NetSetGo (Ages 5 – 10)	<p>NetSetGo - Net Tier (Ages 5 – 6)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Smaller ball ➤ Altered size of ring ➤ Altered time allowed will ball ➤ No publishing of Match results 	<p>Use of Fever Players</p> 	<p>https://wa.netball.com.au/sites/wa/files/2020-01/Netball-Australia-Junior-Netball-Policy.pdf</p>	<p>Suncorp NetSetGO is a fun and safe introduction to netball and is the best way for girls and boys aged 5 to 10 to have fun with their friends, keep active and learn the basic skills of netball in a safe and social environment.</p>
		<p>NetSetGo - Set Tier (Ages 7 – 8)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Smaller ball ➤ Altered size of ring ➤ Altered time allowed will ball ➤ No publishing of Match results 			
		<p>NetSetGo - Go Tier (Ages 9 – 10)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Smaller ball ➤ Altered size of ring ➤ Altered time allowed will ball ➤ No publishing of Match results 			

Rugby League	League Stars (ages 5-12)	<p>Ages 5 – 12 (5-8 and 9-12)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Non-contact ➤ Before/after school ➤ 4 – 6 weeks ➤ Fundamental movement skills ➤ Delivered over 2 phases ➤ Program broken into week blocks <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Brilliant Basics</i> (fundamental movement, confidence meeting friends) - <i>Power Up</i> (Rugby League specific skills and team work) - <i>Game-on</i> (Non-contact, small sided games) ➤ Sessions for 5-8 > https://bit.ly/3kPArjV ➤ Sessions for 9 – 12 > https://bit.ly/2DYTE1V 	<p>Participant pack – backpack, ball, ball pump, cape flag, shirt, cap, Bluetooth speaker, luggage tag and stickers. (items vary depending on program) .</p> 	<p>https://www.playrugbyleague.com/safeplay/</p>	<p>Rugby League has developed 'SafePlay', which is applicable to all comps up to U15s.</p> <p>They have also introduced a Tackle Safe program and more Tag competitions</p>
Hockey	Hookin2Hockey (10 & under)	<p>Hookin2Hockey – Skills in Action (10 & under)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ 8 sessions ➤ Skill based program ➤ Few drills, most skills are taught through 'game play' ➤ Session breakdown: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Warm up 5 mins - Skill 10 mins - Skills game 15 mins - Skills game 15 mins 	<p>Participant pack with cap, water bottle, lunch bag, pencil case or hockey stick, shin guards and ball.</p> <p>Hookin2 and stick2 both have same branding</p>	<p>https://hookin2hockey.com.au/hookin2hockey-handbook-2/</p> <p>https://bit.ly/2Fx7aub</p>	<p>Hockey Australia have two programs, Hookin2Hockey and Stick2Hockey, for the same age groups. One is for introduction to the sport and the other is for modified games. After these programs, children go into club or social hockey.</p>

		<p>Hookin2Hockey – Game on (10 & under)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ 8 weeks block ➤ Modified games ➤ 10-15 min halves ➤ Umpires are coach and ump ➤ Played 3 formats <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 1/8 field, 3-5 a side - 1/4 field, 5-7 a side - 1/2 field, 9-17 a side ➤ Use of 1/4 field and four goals is recommended to introduce lateral thinking and triangle formation ➤ Goals scored from anywhere inside forward half ➤ No goal keepers ➤ No penalty corners ➤ No hitting or raising the ball (pushing only) 	 		
	<p>Stick2Hockey (Ages 6-12)</p>	<p>Stick2Hockey</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ 8-16 week program ➤ Focuses on 8 hockey skills ➤ U7/8, 1/8 field, 3-5 a side ➤ U9/10, 1/4 field, 5-7 a side ➤ U11/12, 1/2 field, 7-9 a side ➤ Community umpires ➤ 'safe play' 		<p>https://hookin2hockey.com.au/stick2hockey/</p>	

INTERNATIONAL EXAMPLES OF BEST PRACTICE

There are some excellent examples internationally whereby sports and governing bodies are leading the way, and subsequently some key learnings can be taken to assist the AFL.

New Zealand

The key sports in New Zealand have aligned on some key principles that will drive better participation outcomes in junior sport. They have developed a *Balance is Better Statement of Intent*, and could be something that the AFL leads with other sports.

- <https://sportnz.org.nz/resources/changing-the-approach-to-youth-sport/>
- https://www.nzherald.co.nz/sport/news/article.cfm?c_id=4&objectid=12264159

This can assist with retention through reducing burnout and overuse injuries

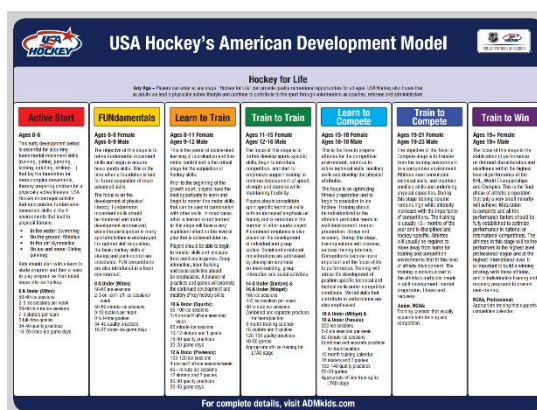
United States

USA Hockey's American Development Model (ADM), adapted from the US Olympic ADM, is a developmental approach to the game that supports the long-term engagement and retention in the sport.

Key Principles

The US Olympic ADM suggests that quality sport experiences should incorporate five key principles to help keep more Americans engaged in sport:

1. Universal access to create opportunity for all athletes
2. Developmentally appropriate activities that emphasize motor and foundational skills
3. Multi-sport participation
4. Fun, engaging and progressively challenging atmosphere
5. Quality coaching at all age levels



Key Outcomes

By creating early positive experiences for all athletes, the ADM aims to keep more children engaged in sport longer with four clear outcomes:

1. Grow both the general athlete population and the pool of elite athletes from which future U.S. Olympians and Paralympians are selected
2. Develop fundamental skills that transfer between sports
3. Provide an appropriate avenue to fulfil an individual's athletic potential
4. Create a generation that loves sport and physical activity, and transfers that passion to the next generation

Stages

The ADM is comprised of five stages designed to create a healthy sport experience and support an athlete's advancement based on their physical, mental and emotional level, and potential for growth.

The key principles and outcomes are ideologies that all sports should aspire to achieve, and the AFL can potentially be more directive in the Junior Match Policy to outline some objectives (and measures) which then assists with the 'sell' to stakeholders.



There are many more examples of best practice that could be investigated further as part of a broader review into the AFL Junior Match Policy.

JUNIOR MATCH POLICY KEY PRINCIPLE RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are made in reference to the Key Principles of the Junior Match Policy for further consideration by the AFL Working Group.

1. Reduce the ground size for Under 11's/12's to be set at a maximum of 130m x 90m;
2. Reduce the ball size in Under 8's to be a size 1 and not a size 2;
3. Pilot the use of armbands in Under 9's / 10's to determine if these are effective as a 'soft zone' to enable a sequential transition from zones to no zones;
4. Reduce the team numbers in Under 11's / 12's to be a maximum of 15 a-side;
5. Undertake additional research to determine if 12 a-side has better retention outcomes;
6. Limit Under 11's to a maximum of two bounces, and prohibit kicking off the ground to encourage the skills of picking up the ball;
7. Limit Under 12's to a maximum of two bounces, however allow kicking off the ground as a transition step;
8. Junior Coaches be educated or provided materials on how to appropriately coach from on the ground, and on how to provide quality feedback to players;
9. Under 11's to prohibit scoring, premiership points, ladders, finals and publishing of player names, whilst maintain the status quo for Under 12's which again creates a transition step into youth football;
10. Include a position on recommended season length for junior football to be no longer than 10-12 weeks for Under 8's – Under 11's, and no more than 15 weeks for Under 12's – Under 14's;
11. Consideration given to changing age groups from Under 8's, Under 9's, etc to be aligned to school years to enhance recruitment and retention;
12. Further flexibility given to players with a disability to play down outside of one year group (on application, support and approval);
13. Review of the AFLW and AFL Laws of the Game to determine at which point in the Junior Pathway do the rules need to diverge to support the development of players;
14. The AFL to promote the importance of sampling and diversification in sport through the position statement;
15. Investigate character development partnership opportunities to enhance outcomes for participants;
16. Develop a position on the values of junior football, and how this can be used to support recruitment and retention;
17. Develop a parent education strategy that aligns with the Junior Match Policy and ensures that parents are educated and aware of the pathway in junior football;

ADDITIONAL CONVERSATIONS

- **Machar Reid** (University of Western Australia & Head of Innovation, Tennis Australia)
- **Tim Buszard** (Tennis Australia)
- **Pen Piggott** (Notre Dame University, Fremantle)
- **Steven Rynne** (University of Queensland)
- **Sam Elliott** (Flinders University, Adelaide) – still to be conducted
- **Mitchell Hewitt** (Tennis Australia)
- **Kerry Turner** (NSW Office of Sport) – still to be conducted

ADDITIONAL NEWS ARTICLES REVIEWED

<https://www.kidsnews.com.au/sport/are-uncomfortable-uniforms-forcing-girls-to-quit-sport/news-story/ecb46f5c8d4fc284423fa44077bb5fe0>

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-12-20/in-junior-sport-keeping-kids-involved-is-all-that-matters/11814226>

<https://www.dw.com/en/the-future-of-youth-football-in-germany/a-49231568>

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LITERATURE REVIEWED

The *Junior Football Match Policy* is based on the Australian Sports Commission's (ASC) Junior Sport Framework (JSF).

AUSTRALIAN SPORTS COMMISSION – JUNIOR SPORTS FRAMEWORK BRIEFING PAPERS

Junior sport models representing best practice nationally and internationally

David Kirk *Leeds Metropolitan University, UK* Wolf-Dietrich Brett Schneider *Paderborn University, Germany* Chris Auld *Griffith University, Australia*

The functions of sport delivery systems at national, state and local levels in Australia

Chris Auld *Department of Tourism, Leisure, Hotel and Sport Management Griffith University, Australia*

Legislation related to safe and appropriate junior sport delivery

Steve Bennett *Blake Dawson Waldron, Lawyers, Brisbane*

Preparation of personnel responsible for junior sport delivery

Chris Auld *Department of Tourism, Leisure, Hotel and Sport Management Griffith University, Australia*

Coaching and officiating for junior sport participants

Jean Côté, *School of Kinesiology and Health Studies Queen's University, Canada* Wade Gilbert *Kinesiology Department California State University, USA*

Health and welfare of junior sport participants

Sue Hooper, Stewart Trost and Murray Phillips *School of Human Movement Studies, The University of Queensland, Australia*

Physical activity pedagogy for junior sport

Donne Macdonald *School of Human Movement Studies, The University of Queensland, Australia* Jean Côté *School of Kinesiology & Health Sciences, Queen's University, Canada* David Kirk Dean, *Carnegie Faculty of Sport and Education, Leeds Metropolitan University, UK*

Opportunities and pathways for beginners to elite to ensure optimum and lifelong involvement in sport.

Jean Côté *School of Kinesiology and Health Studies Queen's University, Canada*

Growth and maturation in junior athletes

Don Bailey *School of Human Movement Studies, The University of Queensland, Australia* College of Physical Education, *University of Saskatchewan, Canada*

Trends in sport and physical activity participation in Australian children and youth

Stewart Trost *Department of Kinesiology and Community Health Institute Kansas State University, USA*

Historical, cultural and social perspectives of junior sport

Murray Phillips, Donne Macdonald & Stephanie Hanrahan *School of Human Movement Studies The University of Queensland, Australia*

AUSTRALIAN FOOTBALL LEAGUE – RESEARCH

Report to the Australian Football League “**Analysis of the research and literature into the methods of successfully identifying and developing talent in sport from a global perspective**” Research report prepared by John Turnbull

The quality of the philosophy and practice of AFL Auskick: the perceptions of children, parents and coordinators

Research report prepared by Dr Christopher Hickey & Dr Lindsay Fitzclarence *Deakin Centre for Education and Change*

Australian Football League youth participation

Research report prepared by Hans Westerbeek & Aaron Smith *Centre for Change Management – Bowater School of Management & Marketing: Faculty of Business & Law, Deakin University*

Examining the AFL Junior Match Policy for Recruitment and Retention

Research report prepared by Associate Professor Pamm Phillips & Kylie Wehner *Deakin University*

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