

4. SPORT PATHWAYS

MOVING PROGRESSIVELY
THROUGH JUNIOR SPORT

Introduction

During their growth from 5 to 17 years, young people develop physically, psychologically, emotionally and socially. These changes in young people are reflected in differences in

- the way they learn
- the variety of skills they are capable of
- the activities they like
- the time they are prepared to spend in the systematic practice of sport
- their attitude to, and need for competition.

Pathways* need to be designed for young people to move progressively through sport to provide opportunities to

- gain skills in line with their level of maturation
- move easily from one stage of involvement to another
- be motivated and have fun while developing their skills and interests
- inspire them to stay involved long term.

Stages in Sport Progression

Although sports have different requirements, they all have definite stages in taking young people from their early involvement to being an experienced participant.

Generally, the progression moves through the following stages

- **broad experiences** when young people master basic sports skills in many sporting activities with fun the focus
- **progression** when a greater focus is placed on skill development, but fun and enjoyment are still important
- **specialisation** when some young people become serious about sport and are keen to refine their skills
- **recreational participation** when sport is played for fun and to maintain skills.

Life-long involvement is the end goal for all, with adults participating in recreational, elite, masters' or veterans' activities according to their talent and interests.

Planning the Progression

The aim of pathways planning for young people is to sequentially develop their sports skills to equip them to

- reach their potential in sports of their choice
- continue in and enjoy adult sport.

The planned developmental levels should also accommodate individual differences, because participants

- differ in their ability to gain sports skills
- move through the various development stages at different rates
- have different levels of skill requirements and challenge.

To encourage long term involvement, it is important young people are able to participate in sport at the right level for their interests and abilities.

Training/Practice and Competition

Training/practice and competition are important in meeting the aims of junior sport, and must be tailored to the specific sport and developmental level of the participants.

Training and practice vary for the different stages of participation in the

- activities presented
- style of instruction used (see Guideline 7)
- education in the rules and etiquette* of the sport
- time and frequency devoted to it.

Competition provides stimulation and challenge. It involves more than winning or losing.

Through competition, young people make friends and experience loyalty, co-operation and learning through managing success and mistakes, and coping with disappointments.

Competitive experiences should be planned to

- reflect the level of physical, social and emotional development of the participants
- provide a progressive bridge to adult competition.

Broad Experiences

It is important that children* are able to “play at sports” in an informal setting during their early development. Children need to

- develop basic movement skills such as running, throwing, catching, jumping, kicking, striking, rolling and twisting
- be introduced to simple rules and ethics of sports.

This is best done through play in as wide a range of sports activities as possible. In the process of doing this, participants are also learning

- teamwork and cooperation with others
- body awareness, decision making and other skills.

Sports can be modified (rules, equipment size, degree of skill difficulty etc) to provide opportunities for success through a level of challenge suited to the young participants.

Training/Practice

To keep them motivated while developing basic motor skills and concepts, young participants need to spend most of their play time experimenting with sport activities.

The role of sport providers is mainly to act as resource people who can

- provide helpful instruction and suggest modifications to make the most of practice time
- adapt activities when children are not skilled to keep the focus on their abilities rather than their limitations
- modify activities to make them more challenging when young people are ready to progress
- ensure the environment is inclusive, safe and fun.

Competition

When children are being introduced to sport or fundamental activities it is best not to have formal competitions so that the focus can be kept on participation, skill development and fun for all.

Later in this stage, low-level competitions can be offered involving structured minor activities and modified sports where basic sports skills can be acquired and refined in an enjoyable, positive environment.

These act as a good introduction to the simple rules and ethics of sports.

Progression

As the young person advances in sport, fundamental motor skills in the previous stage need to be supplemented by more specific sports skills.

Participation in a wide range of sports is still encouraged. This will produce athletes who are more trainable for long-term sport-specific development (because of good basic skills).

The aim is for young people to gain a variety of sports skills which will better equip them to make choices on which sports and positions they enjoy.

Training/Practice

In this stage, young people are learning how to train and practice becomes a more powerful factor in skill development, but fun and enjoyment remain important. They should be able to

- try out different positions within one sport
- gradually increase the time they spend in practice
- experience fun, challenge and excitement through the way activities are organized.

Fundamental movement skills should be practised and mastered before sport-specific skills are introduced. Sport providers need to progressively increase

- the amount of practice activities while gradually decreasing play activities
- the level of challenge.

Competition

Competition is introduced when the critical movement skills and concepts have been developed. However, the emphasis is still on learning and improving the basics.

Competition helps the practice of technical skills and learning how to cope with the physical and mental challenges presented during competition.

Inter- and intra-school, and inter- and intra-club competitions should act as stepping stones to more formal competition in the later years of this stage.

There may be times when either a single or mixed sex competition is preferable. When making a decision social and emotional factors are likely to be more important considerations than age.

Scores can be kept but there should be no competition rankings and a focus maintained on enjoyment while building technical and tactical skills.

Specialisation

Many young people will decide to specialise in their favourite sport and training becomes a significant part of their life with a more serious focus. The goal is usually competition.

Coaching clinics and talent development programs play a role at this level by assisting young people to make informed decisions about their sport specialisation.

Some junior sport participants will be committed to achieving an elite level of performance in a single activity.

They should have developed their physical, cognitive, social, emotional and motor skills to a level needed in highly specialised training in one sport.

Coaches will need to provide

- a specific and well-planned training, competition, and recovery regime to ensure the best development and
- emotional and social support and enjoyment to balance the effort and motivation needed for intense training at a highly competitive level.

Some young people will be disappointed when after dedicated training they are not selected. Be ready to offer them support if necessary.

Training/Practice

Practice becomes the focus of training in the specialisation stage and sport providers need more technical expertise to assist the development of young people. Sport providers play an important role in

- keeping young people involved long enough for them to develop to their full capacity
- acting as mentors (eg assisting in setting and working towards individual goals and aspirations, monitoring workloads especially when young people are involved in more than one sport)
- maintaining motivation, fun and a love of the sport for life-long participation.

For young people wishing to compete at elite levels, the focus of training shifts to the optimisation of performance through intense practice.

Preventing physical and mental burnout (see Guidelines 3 and 9) is an issue in the specialisation stage.

Competition

In the early part of this stage, activities should become more structured with an emphasis on skill development and game appreciation, and involve both inter-school and inter-club competitions.

As young people advance in physical maturity they will be ready for more intense competition and for a progression in their sporting experiences.

Competitions at inter-club, inter-school, state and national levels should focus on enjoyment while meeting the need these young people have to perform to the best of their ability.

Competition should also be planned to meet the needs of the committed young people who wish to perform to a high level.

Recreational Participation

Junior sport participants prefer to play sport primarily for enjoyment

- if they choose not to enter the specialisation phase or
- after they have fulfilled their desire to specialise.

This is a desirable progression and may lead to the ultimate goal of life-long participation. The main aim is to have fun through playing sport and spending time with friends.

At this stage, some young people may also be encouraged to commit to being a volunteer and training to be a coach, official or administrator, so they can contribute to the sport they love.

Training/Practice

Young people in the recreational participation phase are looking for satisfaction through

- maintaining and enhancing their sports skills
- being physically active
- enjoying physical challenges through fun activities with their peers.

Sport providers will be able to create appropriate experiences if they understand these needs and focus on providing them.

Practice can be in the form of games aimed at maintaining and improving basic sports skills and technical proficiency.

Competition

Some young people in the recreational participation phase look for a competitive sport experience, while others prefer competitions focusing on social outcomes and fun.

Implementing Pathways

One sport pathway cannot satisfy the needs of all sports. A difference among sports relates to whether specialisation in the sport happens early or late.

This affects how quickly young people move through the stages. In addition, the individual timing of development/maturation influences how soon young people reach the various stages in the pathway.

Therefore, no recommendations about specific ages for each stage have been made in the guidelines.

Each sport has a responsibility to develop its own pathways to meet the needs of the sport and its participants. It should

- set out and implement a planned development for young people with attainment targets identifying what is expected of them at each stage
- back up each stage with appropriate support
- provide for talented young people with a clearly defined pathway.
- monitor and evaluate the delivery of the progression and make improvements as necessary.

Schools and clubs should work together to have consistent pathways for young people in any particular sport (see Guideline 5).

Sport development should be based on the principles and strategies set out in the *Junior Sport Guidelines 2003*.

Table 1 summarises generalised skill and game progressions to help in drafting a pathway for a sport.

4.1 Strategies for Designing Sport Pathways

- Develop a framework of progressive stages to take young people from beginner to experienced participant.
- Plan and document for each stage the
 - motor and tactical skills to be gained
 - knowledge required of the ethics and traditions of the sport
 - duration and structure of training and practice
 - number of sessions* (training, practice and competition) per week
 - type, level and frequency of competitive experiences
 - different competitive structures for boys and girls after the age of 12 years.
- Plan modifications to activities to suit the developmental level, competitive level, gender mix or social needs of participants, by changing
 - the type of activities offered
 - the degree of skill difficulty
 - distances and dimensions of the field, pitch, court
 - rules such as duration, team size, time for each participant, interchange of participants, rotation of positions
 - equipment, dimensions and weight.
- Evaluate and improve the delivery of your sport pathway on an ongoing basis.
- Incorporate coaching clinics, and talent identification and development programs into planning.
- Provide a structure to support talented young people through access to
 - quality coaching and use of quality facilities
 - performance camps to train with others at a similar level
 - specialised training and regular high level competition
 - a mentor to provide individual guidance.
- Encourage young people to continue their participation in volunteer roles by training to be a coach, official or administrator
- Provide consistent pathways across organisations by working together (especially clubs with schools).

Key Message

An important role of sporting organisations is to assist all sport providers (including parents/ carers) to move young people through specially designed pathways according to their talent and interest.

There is satisfaction in a job well done when young people

- enjoy their sport
- play to the best of their ability
- continue in sport throughout their lives.

Key Points - Sport Pathways

- Developmental changes in young people between 5 and 17 years require stages so they can progress in line with their maturity.
- Planned developmental levels should also accommodate individual differences so young people can participate at the best level for their ability at any stage.
- Gaining fundamental skills in a variety of activities through play is important in the *Broad Experiences* stage. This builds the base for a good grounding in skills later used in a chosen sport.
- The *Progression* stage requires more time to be devoted to training, practice and competition while gaining a variety of sports skills.
- In their teenage years, many young people are ready to move into the *Specialisation* stage, as they will have developed the physical, psychological and social skills required for specialised training.
- In the *Recreation* stage, training is focussed on maintaining and increasing sports skills, and competition might have an emphasis on socialising and having fun.
- Careful planning is needed at every stage to increase the chances of
 - ◇ young people being committed to life-long involvement in sport
 - ◇ talented young people having success in elite sport.

Further Reading

Briefing Paper

- 4 *Opportunities and Pathways for Beginners to Elite to Ensure Optimum and Lifelong Involvement in Sport*

Guideline

- 3 *Physical Growth and Maturation*

Case Studies

- 1 **Play Ball** illustrates the use of modified bat and ball activities to give young people the necessary skills to progress in baseball and softball.
- 2 **Aussie Hoops** illustrates a program structure to teach young people basketball skills while having fun
- 3 **Soccer in the Outback** illustrates a planned and coordinated pathway for soccer in Outback communities.

1. Play Ball

Pathways to Baseball and Softball

Play Ball uses several modified bat and ball games to introduce children aged between 5-12 to some of the common skills and activities in softball and baseball.

Aims are to provide an

- ⇒ opportunity for children to participate in a safe, fun and fair environment.
- ⇒ entry level for children to progress into the sports of baseball and softball.

Modified games in the program include

- ⇒ Tee Ball
- ⇒ Yard Ball
- ⇒ Blastball
- ⇒ Coach Pitch
- ⇒ Mod Ball

Resources for schools, teachers and clubs are provided to increase the coverage and to maintain consistency of the skills that are taught.

From the **Play Ball** program, children are then able to

- ⇒ move into youth baseball and softball then
- ⇒ work their way up from clubs to state and national level.

Play Ball is a joint initiative of the Australian Baseball Federation and the Australian Softball Federation and forms a part of the ASC's Targeted Participation Growth Program.

2. Aussie Hoops

Aussie Hoops introduces young people to basketball by focusing on

- activity and spontaneous experimentation
- learning by doing
- exploration in an atmosphere of fun with a non-competitive approach

The **Aussie Hoops** program has

- no emphasis on being the best and winning
- no long drawn-out "lecturing"
- no expensive uniforms.

Aims are to

- be safe
- gradually build confidence
- emphasise involvement
- develop healthy lifestyles
- develop a relationship between elite and grass roots basketball
- create a positive outlook on physical activity
- be enjoyable for players, teachers, parents and coaches
- be easy to implement
- adapt to any locality.

The program structure includes

- *Fun Time* – school-based activity to introduce young people to having fun with basketball.
- *Play time* – club-based activity to further develop enjoyment of basketball.
- *Game Time* – a modified game of basketball allowing young people to experience the fun of playing basketball.
- *Big Time* - Mini-ball competition where young people are provided with opportunities to compete in basketball.

Young people start at any age. Each stage is not a prerequisite for the other. The needs of the players, community and resources govern the duration and length of the stages.

Aussie Hoops coordinators are trained to emphasise the exploration approach when facilitating activities.

3. Soccer in the Outback

Soccer in the Outback is a special initiative of Soccer Queensland for remote, isolated and Indigenous communities.

It provides young people in Outback Queensland and the Northern Territory with an opportunity to take part in organised sport.

Funded by a combination of grants and sponsorship, it has involved more than 4,250 participants in 55 communities.

Young people in the Outback tend to leave home at the start of high school and move to boarding schools in metropolitan areas so **Soccer in the Outback** has targeted two groups

- Under 12 years to build basic skills for local competitions and the passion to continue playing when transferring to boarding school
- 13 - 16 years to encourage advancement in skills and competition, allowing pursuit of a representative sporting career.

The program provides a planned and coordinated pathway from initial involvement to long-term involvement by

- developing skill levels in players, coaches, officials and administrators
- providing assistance and information to develop local competitions
- coordinating regional carnivals
- providing a pathway for talented young people to pursue their goals
- supporting and empowering local communities to become actively involved.

Table 1. Progression for Junior Sport - a general guide to give sports ideas for customising their pathways

	Broad Experiences	Progression	Specialisation	Recreational Participation
Ability	Beginner	Intermediate	Advanced	Any level
Age Span¹				
Focus	Fun, learning, general athletic development	Fun, improving wide range of skills	Enjoyment and improving performance	Enjoyment, social and personal satisfaction
Considerations	Modifications to equipment, venue and game structure for safety and success	Athletic and behavioural skills for life-long participation	Fitness, technical and tactical training, goal setting, managing aspirations	Social aspects and events Encourage involvement in other roles (eg coach, official)
Session Duration	Up to 60 mins	Up to 90mins	Up to 120mins	Up to 90 mins
Session Frequency	1-2 times/wk per sport	Up to 3 -5 times/wk per sport	Up to 7-10 times/wk in total	Up to 3 times/wk per sport
Session Contents	Play, simple games, opportunities to participate focussing on gross motor skills	Skill development through understanding, training and games	Training and competition with the aims of skill development, game sense and performance	Training and competition with options at various levels
Approach to Conditioning	Minor aspect, not a focus	Careful introduction and progression to suit individual development	Evaluate individual to determine focus and gradually progress	Train to avoid negative outcomes (eg injuries)
Competition	Modified activities with the objective of individual improvement No representative teams Scoring tallies optional; not central objective	Competition with emphasis on all-round development and rotation around all positions Emphasise fair play Representative teams and regional competitions in later years Scoring tallies	Introduction of inter-state competitions Emphasis on individual and all-round development Experience competition also through officiating and coaching younger groups	Focus on social competitions Level of competitive intensity appropriate to individual motivation
Recognition	Recognise effort and participation	Recognise effort, improvement, application and participation	Recognise effort, improvement and performance	Recognise effort, participation and contribution to the sport

¹ no recommendations are made about specific ages for each stage as there are considerable differences across sport