

PART 1 INTRODUCTION

ABOUT JUNIOR FOOTBALL

The Australian Football League (AFL) is the governing body for Australian Football and, as the “keeper of the code”, it is our responsibility to establish a framework that ensures the best possible journey for young players to progress their learning and development towards the adult version of the game.

There are over 150 junior leagues across Australia that provide opportunities for children and their families to participate every year. We recognise it is largely an army of volunteers who run these leagues for the love of the game and the enjoyment it provides their kids.

It is vital that providers of junior football are familiar with and adopt the procedures contained in this document to ensure participating boys and girls have a fun, safe and positive football experience that is suitable to their needs.

We do not want to put kids in adult environments too early and that includes large grounds, congested play, unnecessary physicality and an over-emphasis on winning when skill development is more important.

Therefore, this resource is designed to promote measures that will maximise the enjoyment and development of young players.

It is designed to introduce and retain the next generation of young players and their families.



This resource aims to:

1. Provide clear direction to leagues and clubs for the provision of appropriate pathways for all boys and girls in safe and enjoyable environments.
2. Ensure that junior football is delivered in a uniform manner (consistent rules and regulations) across all states and territories.
3. Maximise the recruitment and retention of players and umpires through programs and match rules appropriate to each age level (meets the needs of children – they are not little adults).

It should be noted that:

- » The Laws of Australian Football as administered and controlled by the AFL apply to and guide this document. This resource explains how variations to the Laws of Australian Football have been made for the appropriate delivery of junior football matches.
- » The procedures outlined in this document have been refined over a long period through experience, consultation, participant insights and continual research.
- » The AFL recognises the need for various controlling bodies to determine their own arrangements within, but not outside of, these guidelines.
- » Young people grow and mature at different rates. The junior rules are considerate of this growth and maturation diversity and, accordingly, provide an appropriate and sequential range of programs and match regulations.

THE AFL JUNIOR MATCH POLICY REVIEW – 2012

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 complete a research project specifically looking at the impact of the presence or absence of the junior match policy on enjoyment and skill development of participants and on the attitudes and match-day behaviours of parents, coaches, officials and administrators.

WHY DO KIDS NEED DIFFERENT RULES TO ADULTS?

Fundamentally, any person wishing to participate in the game should be able to do so in a manner which is appropriate to his or her skills, needs and aspirations.

For too long young lads have been allowed to play on the same size field and under the same match conditions as professional players – it is simply not right.

It is essential that young players are introduced to the game through modified rules and regulations that consider their physical, psychological and emotional needs.

In other words, young players have different needs to adults.

The overriding objective of the Junior Football – This Is Our Game philosophy is:

To provide an environment where young players can play the game and sequentially develop their skills through activities, games, match rules and conditions commensurate with their stage of learning and level of ability.

The study involved:

- » Five leagues across two states and 36 matches.
- » Over 1800 minutes of game-time was viewed.
- » 2227 participants completed the national survey.

In addition, 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. Far better match environments were experienced in leagues that complied with the Junior Policy.
3. It is acknowledged there is value in increasing some of the competitive elements at a younger age – starting at U11 as opposed to U13.
4. The role of umpires and coaches needs to be considered in the junior context with education and accreditation to match.
5. Results of a national survey suggested that Auskick is well understood in the community but junior football is not.
6. A substantial education process and marketing campaign is required to underpin the document.

So, in essence, two bodies of research and a significant amount of stakeholder discussion over a number of years have shaped this match guide.

'THIS IS OUR GAME' PHILOSOPHY

PLAYING GROUND, ZONES, TIME AND EQUIPMENT

Kids cannot 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 'This is Our Game' philosophy 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 more engaged because the ball is never far away.

USE OF ZONES

The junior football match program embraces “zones” for the younger children as an excellent teaching practice. Firstly, the use of zones prevents ball-chasing and subsequent congestion where all players congregate around the ball. Secondly, it enables groupings of players of similar size and ability to play within a zone.

TEAM COMPOSITION

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.

ROTATION OF PLAYERS

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.

CONTACT

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 years age group.

MARKING

Awarding marks over any distance in the development phase recognises that many youngsters cannot consistently kick the ball beyond 10 metres.

BOUNCING

Restricting the number of bounces prevents players running excessive distances with the ball, encourages disposal skills and enhances team play.

KICKING OFF THE GROUND

In a player's development years, the ability to enhance the skill of picking the ball up takes precedence over the need to kick it off the ground.

THE COACH ON THE GROUND

The absence of stringent competition conditions should enable the coach to provide praise, teaching and feedback when warranted or be on the ground.

PREMIERSHIP POINTS COMPETITIONS

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 encouragement is replaced by a fear of failure, the program for children is inappropriate.

AWARDS

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.

Participation in our game in safe and enjoyable AFL Auskick and junior club environments can significantly contribute to the development and social wellbeing of young people.

Australian Football must be the best experience possible if we are going to continue to attract and retain children in the game.