

Introduction

The AFL Youth Policy refers to the philosophy, guidelines and requirements for leagues, community clubs and schools responsible for delivering football to the 13-18 age groups. The AFL Youth Policy aims to maximise the recruitment and retention of youth players (male and female) as they progress through the pathway to senior football.

Young people older than 12 identify the essence of sport as being centred around:

- › self-discovery and self-improvement;
- › open access and fair play;
- › providing skill acquisition; and
- › the discipline of commitment.

Young people want a safe and supportive environment, which encourages them to do their best. They do not enjoy sport when:

- › there is an over-emphasis on winning applied by parents, coaches and others;
- › they don't get enough playing time;
- › they don't have enough fun;
- › they cannot play with their friends because of imposed grading systems;
- › they are made to feel uncomfortable;
- › they are frightened of being hurt;
- › they are not as good as they want to be;
- › the coach is overly authoritarian; and
- › there is high praise for the best performers and little acknowledgment of others.

The AFL Youth Policy is based on positioning Australian Football for youth players in terms of the following qualities:

- › **Fun, fast and skilful** – the social interaction, fast pace of the game and the opportunity to play skilfully make the game fun for players. When players are able to execute their skills successfully on the field, they experience a sense of fun and mastery. The pace of the game engages their attention, adrenalin is stimulated in close competition, and success is experienced through skilful play, fulfilling team goals and coaches' instructions – all of which are shared with their peers;
- › **Team and social interaction** – participants are drawn to the opportunity to socialise, develop and maintain friendships, and to operate as a team, at an age when their peer group is of the utmost importance. Football must provide an opportunity to feel a sense of belonging and acceptance;
- › **Competition** – although players agree winning is fun, research reveals they are more concerned with the quality of the competition. The challenge for leagues, clubs and schools here is clearly to provide well-graded competitions that match the skill level of opposing teams.

General

All organisations aiming to provide football for youth players need to offer:

- › well-graded competitions;
- › skill teaching;
- › skill drills and games;
- › relevant team rules, team play and tactics;
- › specific match rules;
- › appropriately trained and accredited coaches, trainers, umpires and officials; and
- › ethical behavioural standards conforming to the AFL Code of Conduct for all participants.

Factors effecting youth drop out

Over the past decade, growth in sporting participation has been in recreational, non-traditional forms of sport. These sports appeal to people with busy lifestyles and a desire to keep fit without the risk of injury. Research reveals many young people won't commit to a team sport every Saturday and 2 nights a week for 6-9 months of the year. For teens, study, social and part-time work pressures are increasing, together with competing entertainment opportunities such as movies, music and online games.

Community leagues and clubs responsible for youth football competitions need to be mindful of these social issues and consider strategies to reduce the youth drop-out rate. It is impossible for leagues and clubs to cater for the entire array of a young person's needs and attitudes. However, some responses, like changing the traditional timing of games, modifying the rules and team numbers, altering the focus of coaching and offering broader life experiences are well worth trying.

Youth competition formats

The AFL Youth Policy, taking into account the abovementioned social issues and local circumstances, recommends the following options for junior club and school youth football competitions:

13-14 years

Fixtured club or school-based matches with minor modifications to the Laws of Australian Football should be played at this age group, supported by coaching that emphasises the consolidation of the basic skills and introduces technical and tactical skills, including positional skills and basic performance-enhancement techniques; or

A fixture of club or school-based matches complying with the AFL Youth Girls rules for this age group, supported by coaching that emphasises skill development, maximum participation and fun; or

Club or school-based matches complying with the rules of AFL Recreational Football, with an emphasis on a fun, safe and social environment where everyone can participate.

15-18 years

A fixture of club or school-based matches complying with the Laws of Australian Football, supported by coaching that emphasises the development of higher-level game skills, fitness, and individual, positional and team skills; or

A fixture of club or school-based matches complying with the AFL Youth Girls rules for this age group, supported by coaching that emphasises skill development, maximum participation and fun; or

Club or school-based matches complying with the rules of AFL Recreational Football with an emphasis on a fun, safe and social environment where everyone can participate.

Player rotation policy

Once children reach youth age levels the emphasis shifts from players rotating through all positions on the ground to them gaining a level of competency in different positions. The difference is youth players should be left in a position on the field until they have acquired that position's basic strategies and skills. Only then should they move to a new position.

To ensure all players feel an essential part of the team, regardless of their age, size, sex, ability or the competition they are playing in, it is critical they have an equal amount of time-on the field during the season. This will keep players in the game and reduce the likelihood of them leaving to pursue other sports. It also satisfies parents' expectations that their child will be given a fair go. It is recommended coaches keep records of the weekly game time of each player to ensure each has equal playing time.

Grading

Research reveals while youth players agree winning is fun, they are more concerned with the quality of the competition. The challenge for leagues, clubs and schools is to provide well-graded competitions that match the skill levels of opposing teams.

> Junior leagues

The AFL Youth Policy recommends junior leagues implement divisional competitions where teams are graded provided team numbers permit. Leagues may choose to conduct a grading round. This will ensure all teams and players participate in a competition that matches their skills and ability.

> Clubs

In the event a club enters more than one team in the same age group competition (no divisions), the AFL Youth Policy recommends players be allocated to each team so they are evenly matched.

In the event a club enters more than one team in an age group with a number of competition divisions, it is recommended players be allocated to a team in the division that best suits their skills and ability.

Although a player's peer group and the opportunity to develop and maintain friendships are of the utmost importance, this should not override the needs of the team and club when allocating players to appropriate teams. But youth players should be engaged in the decision-making process.

Fair-go rule

In the spirit of providing competitive games of football where all participants can experience a sense of achievement and to ensure the focus remains on skill development and maximum participation, it is recommended junior leagues consider applying a fair-go rule in all youth competitions.

Visit afl.com.au/policies for examples.

