

# Underpinning principles of the AFL Junior Policy

## Introduction

The coach plays a key role in the major focus of matches for AFL juniors. His/her primary role, given safety, legal and ethical responsibilities apply to coaches at all levels, is to arrange the best possible teaching and learning conditions in matches for the children participating.

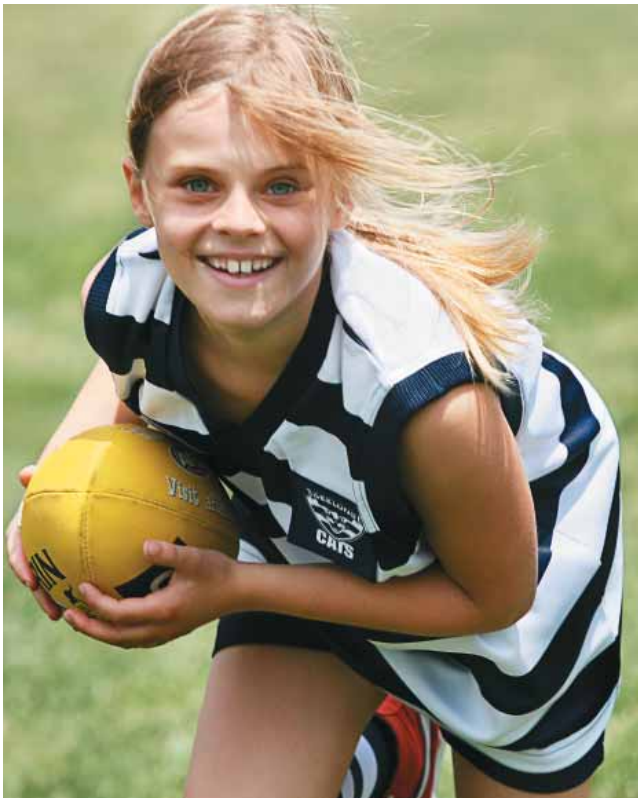
## Playing ground, time and equipment

The AFL Junior 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.

## Team composition

The AFL Junior Policy also endorses reduced numbers in teams as this allows individual players to have more frequent and longer contact with the ball, and enables the coach to see more clearly problems in basic skill development among the players. It also allows appropriate matching of opponents and teams.

With fewer players, play is more open, even when played on a smaller oval. Because of the openness of the game,



and the fact only 2 to 4 youngsters of similar size and ability usually contest the ball at once, marking and skills can be better developed.

The elimination of rucks and rovers reduces congestion and gives more players the opportunity to learn the basics of defence and attack, high-ball work and gathering skills.

## Rotation of players

Adherence to the AFL Junior Policy will mean children 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 before specialisation at a later time, and adds variety and interest to the matches.

## Out of bounds

If the ball is kicked out of bounds, a free kick is awarded against the player who last kicked it. If there is doubt, or if the ball came off hands or a body, the umpire shall call a ball-up 5 metres in from the boundary. The elimination of boundary throw-ins means the number of opportunities to kick the ball is increased, congestion is reduced and the ball is kept in motion.

## No tackling rule (optional at 11-12 years)

The AFL Junior Policy of deferring the introduction of tackling is based upon the need to provide players with the best possible conditions to learn, develop and improve their disposal skills (kicking and handballing) by reducing congestion and pressure on the player in possession. All skills are eventually taught and learned, but this policy sets out an appropriate sequence for doing so.

Players will also better develop skills of turning, twisting and dodging, be free to concentrate on the ball rather than the opposing player, and be less likely to incur injury. Most importantly, children will be more confident to try to gain possession than in a high-pressure environment where tackling is allowed.

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 appropriate age will vary from child to child, but generally is recognised as being about 11 or 12.

## Gaining possession

At the appropriate time, the AFL Junior Policy allows the introduction of the skills of knocking and stealing the ball from an opponent. At all stages, there is considerable



vigour in the game, and contesting the ball on the ground requires determined play as possession of the ball must be gained – it is not to be kicked off the ground.

### **Marking**

The AFL Junior Policy of marks being awarded regardless of how far a kick travels is designed to reduce congestion and to encourage players to attempt to mark the ball. It also recognises many youngsters cannot kick the ball more than 15 metres.

### **Bouncing**

The AFL Junior Policy stipulates players aged 5-10 may take one bounce, and players aged 11-12 two bounces when in possession of the ball. This prevents players

running excessive distances with the ball, encourages disposal skills and enhances team play. Playing to position, especially within zones in matches with small team numbers, is also made easier.

### **Kicking off the ground**

Although it might be argued this is a skill in itself, the AFL Junior Policy does not allow it in AFL Junior rules. This enhances development of possession and disposal skills by making players gain control of the ball. Having done so, they then might take a bounce, but then they must kick or handball to a teammate while under limited or no pressure. Such possession and disposal skills are vital to the development of all players.

## Use of zones

The AFL Junior Policy embraces zones for the younger children as an excellent teaching practice. Firstly, the use of zones restrict pairs of players to an area and, thereby, prevents ball-chasing and subsequent congestion where all players congregate around the ball. Secondly, it enables groups of players of similar size and ability to play within a zone. That is, tall can play on tall in one zone, smalls on smalls in another. When the zones rotate, the groupings stay together but play in different positions.

## The coach on the ground

The absence of stringent competition conditions should enable the coach to provide praise when warranted or explain errors immediately after they occur.

Although the intent of the AFL Junior Policy is to enable teaching and feedback as the match continues, it might be preferable for coaches in the older age groups to remain on the sidelines and to use a runner to deliver a teaching point or message.

## Barging

The AFL Junior Policy endorses the prevention of barging to stop players (particularly the stronger ones) from running through and over players rather than disposing of the ball.

In the younger age groups, NO contact is to be made, so the barging rule is automatically applied.

## Premiership points competitions

The AFL Junior Policy is based upon a belief the football program to be offered to players 12 years old might:

- (a) need to be the modified program presented in this document; or
- (b) in a well-conducted league with appropriate development structures, it might be the alternative premiership program (as in the 13-14 year level) in this document.



Such a decision should be made by the relevant controlling body and endorsed by the state football bodies.

Where (b) is the preferred option, it must be implemented as part of a skill development program used to teach the youngsters how to play the game in a positive, rewarding environment for all players. Accredited coaches should be engaged and implement skill development and varied training programs, avoiding the narrow focus of winning ahead of development and participation.

Where playing for premiership points leads to leaving lesser players sitting on the bench or left out of the side completely, the spirit of the AFL Junior Policy is broken. AFL Junior matches are intended to be a means of enhancing the individual's performance by encouraging all players to participate, while developing their self-esteem and sense of achievement. Where winning overrides such aims, and encouragement is replaced by a fear of failure, the program for children is inappropriate.

## Information meetings with parents

In establishing support for and understanding of the AFL Junior Policy and, in particular, the rules and procedures for conducting AFL Junior matches, it is vital:

- › coaches, support staff and, where possible, umpires should meet with players and parents to outline such rules and procedures, particularly as they apply to the rotation of players and the use of interchange.

## 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.

