“The players are the ones that need to learn to play the game, learn to be in the right place at the right time. When we have the players practice skills in game-like situations over all parts of the ice they will gain the ability to read and react in creative ways.”

— Paraphrased from Finnish coach Juhani Wahlsten

Why use small area games?

- Small area games allow the game to be the teacher.
- They create an environment that inspires creativity and experimentation while accelerating development. Traditional activities often have pre-determined outcomes that don’t present much challenge.
- A variety of teaching and learning scenarios will be presented to both coaches and players.
- Small-games imitate various game-like situations as players are confined to tight areas and must make quick decisions. Games played in small areas make it much easier for more players to be involved.
- Development is maximized in both the offensive and defensive areas of the ice. In addition, many games feature frequent transitions from offense to defense and vice versa.
- Small-area games will keep more players moving. Many traditional activities during a practice involve one player while the rest stand in a corner or wait in lines. Hockey is not played one player at a time and small games will maximize puck touches and keep more players active.
- Games will have players battling and create a more competitive practice environment. Players will work harder while learning to compete in game situations.
- For most players, hockey sense development comes from experience in practice. Small-area games will provide repetitions in a number of situations, both offensive and defensive. Decision-making and anticipation skills will be greatly enhanced as players will be more familiar with various hockey situations.
- Players will improve regardless of ability levels. Players will be challenged but not overwhelmed with the use of small-area games that keep players moving. If necessary, the coach can group players by ability. The more skilled player will flourish as he or she will be in competitive situations against other highly skilled players. The confined spaces of small-area games enable the weaker players to be more involved in the play and develop their skills at a faster rate.
- Players will have fun, thus increasing their love and passion for the game.
- Players will have more energy with which to improve their skills when they are skating the shorter distance across the ice surface instead of the longer length of the ice.
- With smaller group sizes, learning and teaching become more effective.
- It is much easier to design activities according to the varying skill levels of the players within the group.
- More puck touches will result in improved puckhandling skills. The puck possession time will greatly increase for each player.
- More repetition / frequency in drills in each ice session.
- Decision-making skills are greatly enhanced. Players will make more decisions more frequently at a higher tempo.
- Additional activities can be incorporated in the neutral zone if games are being played in the two end zones. This can be used to keep players active in between shifts.
- Players will have more shooting opportunities and will greatly enhance scoring skills.
- Goaltenders will be forced to read the play and react as game situations change often. Goaltenders will see more shots and make more saves.
- The games are full of continuously changing scenarios. This exposes players to transition hockey at the youngest ages.
• The speed of the game increases, forcing players to make quicker mental and physical reactions.
• Increased tempo allows all players to be involved in the game.
• There are no unnecessary breaks in the game.

Skill Work & Small-Area Games
In addition to the traditional methods of teaching skills, small area games will provide the coach with additional opportunities to develop players in a fun and competitive setting. Small-area games give players the opportunity to learn by playing the game. Small-area games require proficiency in every skill imaginable.

Skating – Small-area games will involve every type of skating maneuver including stops & quick starts, tight turns, crossovers, forward stride, etc. both with and without the puck. Players will enhance agility, balance and coordination while changing directions with body control. Players will have to use quickness to find open ice and get open for the puck.

Puck-Handling – Players will have many opportunities to handle the puck in confined spaces. Puck battles are a consistent focus in small-area games and the player will always be under pressure while handling the puck, giving the game a realistic tone.

Puck Protection – The confined spaces of small-area games put an emphasis on puck protection skills and the development of contact confidence. Players will have to use their bodies to protect the puck and create scoring opportunities both along the boards and in open ice. The puck protection (and contact confidence) skills introduced at this level will be of great benefit to the players’ long term development. Small-area games will have players constantly engaged in battles where puck protection skills are extremely important.

Passing – Almost every small-area game has passing as a key component. Many games have conditions that dictate a certain number of passes or have a certain player designated as support who must move the puck to teammates. Players should learn to move the puck to open ice (indirect passing) and use the boards.

Shooting – Small-area games allow players to take many shots under pressure in competitive situations. Confined spaces will encourage players to battle in front of the net where there are opportunities for tip-ins and rebounds. As is common in regular games, players will often find themselves (in small-area games) in tight to the net trying to use quick hands and moves to beat the goaltender.

Transitioning – A defining characteristic of small-area games are the constant transitions from offense to defense to offense, etc. Every player, regardless of position, will have to make quick decisions in order to create time and space and make plays.

Puck Support – With the many transitions in small-area games, players will be trained to anticipate turnovers and support the puck. Playing in a confined space will force players to move quickly to get open (and communicate) and find open lanes in order to be available for a pass.

Hockey Sense – Traditional activities are too often scripted where the player does not have to think and make decisions. The development of hockey sense is all but eliminated. Small-area games give players extensive experience and repetition with hockey sense development. Players will have the freedom to learn by playing in a competitive environment without pre-determined outcomes.
2002 Puck Possession Study

In 2002, USA Hockey commissioned a comprehensive study to calculate how much time the best players in the world had the puck on their sticks at the Olympic Winter Games in Salt Lake City. During each game of the tournament, three players who were expected to be key performers for their teams were chosen for the study. The coaches calculated the length of each player’s shift, how long they had the puck on their stick, how many passes they made, how many passes they received and how many shots on goal they attempted. The coaches also kept track of the number of un-timed touches; those when the puck hit their stick if only for a brief second.

Canada’s Joe Sakic dominated play in the gold-medal game, registering two goals and two assists along with four shots on net. However, during that game he only touched the puck for 1 minute, 19 seconds. During the women’s gold-medal game, Team USA's Cammi Granato lead all players with 1 minute, 2 seconds of puck possession time.

The purpose of the study was to determine the best method to develop puck possession skills with young players. To follow up the Olympic study, USA Hockey volunteers conducted the same study at the 2002 Youth Hockey Tier I National Championships. Although the skill levels varied, the results were very similar. Even the best players at the youth tournament didn’t handle the puck that much.

What conclusions can we draw?

• The numbers show that stick and puck skills can’t be developed in games.
• You can accomplish a lot more with the puck in practices compared to games.
• Players get so few opportunities with the puck in games that they must be proficient when they do get it.
• Small-area games in practice provide players the necessary touches to develop stick and puck skills.

Coaching Points

• Communicate with the players to make sure they understand the rules and purpose of the game.
• Monitor the games to encourage players while ensuring that players of like abilities are matched. The coach should watch to see that the particular regulations of each game are followed.
• Keep the length of games and shifts in mind. While playing one game for 20 minutes is probably too long, 2 minutes is too short. In general, game length of 8 – 12 minutes should be sufficient to provide each player a high number of quality repetitions. Shifts should be 30 – 40 seconds in order to imitate game circumstances as closely as possible.
• Allow players the latitude to exercise their creativity. Allow for failure.
• Consider what special needs you have – how many pucks do you need, different colored jerseys, how many coaches, etc.
• Are you keeping score? What are the consequences for the losing team? Promote competition by (for example) having the losing team pick up pucks after practice.
• Be detail oriented.
• Consider how often you are going to stop play in order to highlight teaching points. Point out the positives.
• Just as players should embrace creativity, the coach should add progressions and variations to activities and small-area games that will promote development and fun.
Special Conditions
There are many special conditions that can be used in small-area games. The coach should use creativity when implementing game restrictions and use these games to capture teaching moments.

- Confine players to a specific area of the ice. This allows you to create numerical advantages (3 on 2, 2 on 1, etc.) and create transition opportunities.
- Require some or all players to touch the puck before a shot. This forces movement, puck support, quick thinking, quick passes, etc.
- Create support players – these players can’t be pressured and play on offense all the time.
- Don’t allow dump ins – players will have to use puck protection and deception skills, use screens, offensive creativity and quickness, etc.
- Place conditions on how a goal must be scored – plays must start from a corner or behind the net, only the defensemen can score, etc.
- Play with more than one puck, increasing the amount of activity.
- Allow players to score on any net or restrict teams to attacking and defending a designated net or nets.

8U recommendations
- Ensure the players are getting as many touches and repetitions as possible.
- Keep in mind – these players are in the first phase of the speed development window and are just entering the window for skills acquisition.
- Be patient and allow mistakes to happen. The players need to learn by playing.
- Games at this level should be simple in nature. Use small area games in every session. Think of starting sessions with games periodically.
Small area competitive games from USA Hockey Handbook.

1. **Freeze Tag** – Players spread out across one third of the ice surface. Denote either a coach or a player as “it.” All other players skate within the designated area avoiding the tag. If they get tagged, they are frozen until another player unfreezes them by tagging them. The game is over when all players are frozen.
   * Designed for skating and teamwork

2. **Forward / Backward Team Tag** – Using one third of the ice, divide the area in two with an ice pen. On one side, players can only skate forward while on the other side they must skate backward. One player is “it” and begins the game by tagging the other players. If any player, including “it”, crosses the line to the other side, they must skate forward or backward depending on which side they are on. Once a player has been tagged, he/she must help tag everyone else.
   * Players learn to pivot and keep their heads up.
3. **Cops and Robbers** – Using one third of the ice, place one player in each circle. The rest of the players begin in the middle. The two “Robbers” try to get from one circle to the next without being tagged by the “Cops”. If the “Robber” gets tagged, he / she trades places with the “Cop” that tagged him / her.
* Encourages players to change direction, skate both ways and keep their heads up.

4. **Musical Pucks** – Using one or two circles (depending on the number of players) players line up without sticks around the circle. Players skate clockwise around the circle staying on the line as they crossover. If there are five players place 4 pucks in the middle. On the coach’s signal, players dive in the middle to get a puck. If they don’t get one they are eliminated. The game is over when only one player is left.
* Teaches players to crossover with their heads up.
5. **Red Light, Green Light, Yellow Light, Blue Light** – Using one third of the rink, all players start against the boards. The coach starts out between the face-off circles. The coach commands are:

- **Green Light** – skate forward
- **Red Light** – stop
- **Yellow Light** – fall down on their stomachs and get up quickly
- **Blue Light** – yell “hockey” or team name.

A new game starts when all the players have made it to the other side.

* Teaches stopping and agility while having fun.

6. **Torpedo Alley** – Using one end, players line up along the boards. The coach lines the players’ sticks in two rows across the center of the zone. On command, players ski from board to board. Using tennis balls or whiffle balls the coaches try to hit the players as they skate across the ice. Players are safe once they pass the face-off dot. This gives them plenty of time to stop before the boards so they are not sliding. Once a player is hit, they are out and must come out to the blue line. The game is over when every player has been hit.

* Teaches agility, stopping, jumping and skating with their heads up.
7. **Dodge Ball** – Players begin lined up against the boards. Players skate back and forth (dot to dot) while the coach or other designated players try to hit them with soft sponge soccer balls. Players are safe once they reach the face-off dot. This gives them plenty of time to stop before the boards so they are not sliding. Once a player is hit, they are out and must come out to the blue line. The game is over when every player has been hit.
* Teaches players agility, stopping, jumping and skating with their heads up.

8. **Sharks and Minnows** – the Minnows line up across the boards with pucks, while the Shark begins in the middle. Minnows skate from dot to dot with their puck. If the Shark takes or knocks the puck from their stick, they too become Sharks and help check the remaining Minnows. The Minnows are safe from the dots to the boards as shown. The game is over when every player has their puck knocked off of their stick.
* Teaches puck handling under pressure.
9. **Star Wars** — All players begin in the same face-off circle (Earth). Three cones are placed on the opposite side with a blue puck atop each cone. Coaches place a glove on their stick which serves as their “light-saber.” To save planet Earth, players must retrieve the blue pucks and return to Earth, which is their safe-zone, before they are tagged with the coaches “light-saber.” The game should last no longer than one minute so the kids must leave the circle to skate. Once a player is tagged, he/she is out and must come out to the blue line after returning the puck to the cone. The game is over when all the pucks are retrieved, the coaches tag all of the players or time runs out.  
* Be creative. Call yourself Darth Maul or Darth Vader and let the players be Jedi Knights.

10. **Three-Player Chariot Race** — Players line up on the side boards in groups of three. Using two sticks, the two front players create a chariot for the remaining player in the back. The player at the back holds both sticks and glides behind the front players who are each carrying the one of the sticks and skating full out. When they get to the far side face-off dot, the race is over. The players rotate and race again until each player has been in all three positions.  
* Fun relay race that encourages teamwork and improves players’ balance.
11. **Chaos Drill** – Divide the players into two groups. Players begin the drill in a face-off circle, each with a puck. The players can skate in any direction, keeping their heads up and staying inside the circle. After a few minutes, place all the players in one circle and repeat the drill.

* Coaches emphasize to the players the importance of quick skating and puck handling in a confined area.
12. **Stick Jump Agility Drill** – Players line up behind one of the face-off dots. Place all of the players’ sticks out in front of them. At the end of the sticks, two cones are set up with a stick across them. The players jump over the sticks, alternating feet, then dive under the stick placed on the cones. After each player has gone through the drill twice, tip the cones on their sides and have players try to go under again or jump over the lowered stick.

* Improves agility, balance and coordination and promotes fun.

13. **Stick Jump / Crossover Drill** – Players spread out and place their sticks on the ice in front of them. On the coach’s command, players two-foot jump over the stick back and forth. After awhile, have players jump forward from the bottom of the stick side to side, to the top of the stick side to side, then backward jump side to side down to the bottom of the stick. Next, line the sticks up around the circle and have the players skate around the circle doing crossovers and jumping over the sticks at the same time. Change direction after 30 seconds.

* Improves crossovers and teaches players to skate with their heads up.
Resources

Paul Cannatta. The Value of Small-Area Games in Ice Hockey Development. USA Hockey
www.usahockey.com

Willett International, LLC
www.Paulwillett.com