

Active Start (6U & Learn to Skate)



USA Hockey Programs

USA Hockey member organizations offer 6 & Under programs as well as first-year participant Learn to Skate and then Learn to Play programs.

Objective

Design activities that help children to feel competent and comfortable participating in a variety of fun challenging sports and activities.

The focus for this stage is the initiation of fundamental movements including running, jumping, kicking, throwing, catching, swimming, sliding etc. Exposure to a broad base of movement activities.

USA Hockey recommends that parents guide their children to be physically active and develop a broad range of fundamental movement skills through structured and unstructured free play in a variety of environments

Locomotor Skills	Stability Skills	Manipulative Skills
Walking	Balancing	Throwing
Running	Landing	Catching
Hopping	Turning	Striking
Skipping	Twisting	Kicking
Bounding	Bending	Dribbling
Leaping	Stretching	Bouncing
Jumping	Extending	Pushing
Rolling	Flexing	Pulling
Galloping	Hanging	Carrying
Sliding	Bracing	Trapping
Dodging	Rotation	Collecting

USA Hockey's key focus for this stage

- Encourage daily physical activity, throughout the day, with a focus on play
- Develop fundamental movement skills in a fun environment
- Introduce stick and striking skills through unstructured play and ball hockey
- Provide the opportunity to explore a new surface (ice) and mode of locomotion (skating)
- Develop on-ice balance and coordination
- Introduce basic ice skating through a qualified Learn to Skate program; preferably without use of a hockey stick and with the opportunity to progress to Learn to Play or 6 & Under program dependent on ability level and readiness for organized sport
- Develop an interest and passion for hockey in all children

Early childhood is a formative stage of human development that involves significant growth and development and is the beginning of the formative years. Besides the rapid

growth in body size, there is also rapid development of the brain and nervous system and related learning of movement and motor abilities.

A key time to develop the ABCs of movement

During infancy and toddlerhood (0-2 years), reflexive and rudimentary movements (e.g., reaching, grasping, crawling, sitting, standing, walking) are acquired as a means of learning information about the environment. These basic movement abilities allow for continued development of fundamental movements as young preschool-aged children (3-5 years old) begin to move about and explore the environment by running, jumping, rolling, kicking, dribbling, etc. These fundamental movement skills are often categorized into three categories (see below): locomotor, in which the body is moved through space; stability, in which specific parts of the body are moved while maintaining balance and stability; and manipulative or object control, in which objects like a ball are moved.

The fundamental movement skills are a major component and first step of long-term athlete development (LTAD) as they are considered to be the building blocks of more specialized movement sequences such as sport skills.

Fundamental movement skills, physical activity and fitness: Getting off on the right foot

As mentioned, fundamental movement skills are the building blocks or foundation for LTAD. In addition, developing appropriate levels of motor competence is positively associated with perceived competence (i.e., how skilled and effective a person perceives themselves to be in a particular situation), physical activity, and fitness. Therefore, as recommended in the Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans it is important for parents and other caregivers (e.g., daycare, preschool, etc.) to provide young children active play throughout the day that includes a broad range of movement and physical activity opportunities in safe, fun and varied environments, including in the water (swimming); on the ground (various games and sports); in the air (gymnastics); and on the snow and ice (skiing and skating).

The importance of play

Physical activity and the acquisition of fundamental movement skills should occur primarily through play – that is, activity for enjoyment rather than a serious or practical purpose such as organized sports. Play is so important to optimal child development that it has been recognized by the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights as a right of every child. More specifically, a large portion should be allowed for **unstructured play**, which is open-ended with no directions or specific learning objective and is not led by an adult. It is creative, spontaneous, free improvisation that allows for the use and exploration of many movement patterns and fundamental movement skills. However, structured play, or play with a purpose, can also be included and is beneficial to learn rules and procedures, and also learn, practice and reinforce fundamental movement skills. Structured play may include a game (e.g., Duck, Duck, Goose) or activity to develop a skill (e.g., kicking a soccer ball) but keep in mind that since preschoolers have a short attention span it is recommended that structured play be conducted in blocks of time from 10-20 minutes.

Some of this play should also be encouraged outdoors. Research shows that children who spent more time outdoors were more physically active than children who spent less time outdoors.

In addition, parents should also be involved in play with their children, as children of active parents tend to be more active and it creates parent-child bonding.

Get off on the right foot but understand that early achievement and more is NOT necessarily better. We have all heard someone say, “oh, he’s already walking (at 8 months). He’s going to be a sprinter!” And we’ve seen the video of Tiger Woods – golf prodigy at two years old. There is no scientific evidence to suggest either. Instead, we should concern ourselves with the process of motor development and attainment of milestones.

Components of Athlete Development: USA Hockey Active Start Stage

Technical and Tactical – none

Physical Development

- This is a period of rapid growth in body size (height, weight, bodily dimensions) and development of the nervous system including the brain
- Develop fundamental movements such as running, jumping, twisting, kicking, throwing, catching, swimming, wheeling and skating that form the base of the ‘movement vocabulary’ and physical literacy. These motor skills are the building blocks of more complex movement and help lay the foundation for lifelong physical activity and athletic development
- Provide physical activity throughout the entire day and every day regardless of weather conditions
- Provide infants, toddlers and preschoolers with opportunities to participate in daily physical activity that promotes fitness and movement skills for a minimum of 60 minutes a day
- Encourage play, as it is an essential part of physical, mental, cognitive, emotional, and social development and well-being
- Develop basic gross motor skills and coordination with whole body, large muscle groups through unstructured activity

Psychological Development

Physical activity and play are essential for child brain development; among the benefits, physical activity and play enhances:

- Development of brain structure and function
- Cognition, memory, concentration, and academic performance
- Language learning
- Social skills
- Emotions, attitudes and imagination
- Confidence and positive self-esteem
- Stress reduction by quality of sleep
- Decreases the likelihood of mental health issues
- Decreases the severity of [ADHD](#) symptoms and [autism](#) spectrum disorder

Training and Competitive Environment

Active Start	
Training/Competition Ratio	No formal competition; activity games and small-area games should be incorporated in every ice session
Training Volume	1 to 2 times hockey per week. Session lengths no longer than 50 minutes at Learn to Play and 6 & Under levels.
Total # of sessions	
# Practices	
# Competitions	No formal competition
Training Year	4 months/year (20 weeks per season)
Team Composition	Teams should consist of a maximum of 9 to 10 skaters. The goaltender position is excluded during this stage of development.
Team Structure	Players can be grouped with the overall focus on evenly distributing the player ability pool across all teams
Competition format	No formal competition
Overall activity ratios	25% hockey, 75% other sports and activities
Complementary Sports	Players are highly encouraged to participate in many sports and activities

Quality Coaching

General Considerations

- Create a positive, fun and safe environment for the players
- Encourage active participation by all players
- Be clear and precise in communication and use terminology appropriate for the age
- Limit the amount of technical or tactical information to what is appropriate for the age
- Ensure that the ice surface size is in proportion to the age – cross-ice games
- Ensure that the players have the appropriate equipment when on the ice under your supervision
- Have an organized plan for each ice session
- Provide some opportunities that guarantee success for all participants
- Become knowledgeable with regard to the physical and mental capacities, and LTAD model for the age category group
- Encourage all forms of creativity
- Encourage parents and players to explore a wide range of other sports to assist in their long-term hockey development
- Include planned coordination exercises within training sessions both on and off ice

Coach and Instructor Recommendations

- Coaches must all have the appropriate level of USA Hockey Coaching Education Program (CEP) certification and completed the following:
 - On-line coaching module for the age category being coached
 - Background check
 - Completed the United States Center for Safe Sport online program
 - Current year membership registration with USA Hockey
- To be the most effective instructor for kids at this age group, coaches need a sound knowledge of child growth and development principles and also an understanding of how to develop fundamental movement skills and basic hockey skills.