



# U9

## CANADIAN PLAYER PATHWAY



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SECTION 1:  
**Introduction  
to U9 Hockey**



# Introduction

The first years of hockey need to be a positive experience. A fun and exciting start gives young players the opportunity to enjoy hockey for life!

If a beginner has fun, develops basic skills and builds confidence, there is a better chance they will enjoy themselves. But if the early experience is unrewarding, they may never discover all Canada's game has to offer.

U9 hockey should be delivered through a progressive, learn-to-play teaching curriculum for 7-8-year-olds. Children learn best through practice drills and skill sessions, as well as informal games like shinny, freeze tag and obstacle courses.

The skills of skating, puck control, passing and shooting are introduced and refined one step at a time. The focus should always be on fun and skill development, but the early years of hockey should also allow youngsters to experience fitness, fair play and cooperation.

To ensure a positive experience, a coaching clinic has been designed for the on-ice coaches that focuses on communication, teaching skills, leadership, skill analysis, lesson organization, and safety and risk management.



Hockey Canada wants every Canadian youngster to have the opportunity to participate in and benefit from a program designed to meet their specific needs, one that ensures progressive skill development through well-delivered practice sessions and age-appropriate game play in an environment suited to their skill level.

U9 hockey serves as the foundation upon which the entire hockey experience is built. It is a crucial piece in building the skills of players at every level – players benefit from getting the 'right start' in the game.

“Learning the basic skills at a young age will set the foundation for everything a player will accomplish in the game of hockey.”

**Corey McNabb**

Director, Hockey Development  
Hockey Canada



SECTION 2:  
**Rationale for  
Programming**



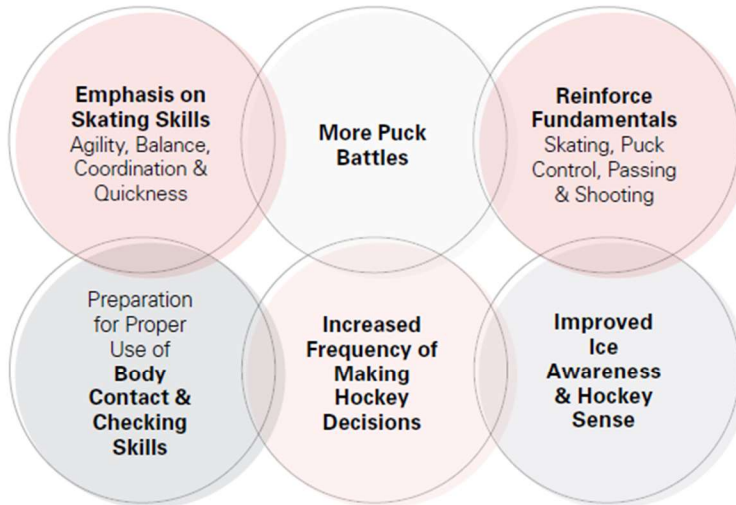
# Benefits of Half-Ice Hockey



There can be concerns from parents about how small-area games may impact their child's hockey development, but parents should trust Hockey Canada and its research. Putting young players into a competitive environment too early will compromise their development; they need to be placed into competitive situations that suit their age-specific abilities. This is why Hockey Canada's **Long-Term Player Development Model** is so important.

Dividing the playing surface is a decision that has been made in consultation with experts in athlete development. It is important to understand the benefits of cross-ice hockey and why Hockey Canada has a national policy ensuring all U9 hockey is played in smaller, modified spaces.

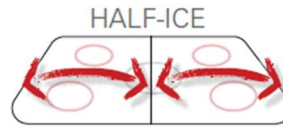
There are several advantages to the smaller-surface games model:



“You have to be able to make plays in pretty small areas. The more you practice in small spaces, the better off you are.”

**Sidney Crosby**  
Canada's National Men's Team

# Benefits of Half-Ice Hockey



2X

## Puck Touches

Players are close to the play and can touch the puck more often, meaning opportunities to be engaged offensively are doubled.

6X

## Shot Attempts

Players are closer to the puck at all times and the puck is put towards the net much more often.

3X

## Shots on Goal

Players are much closer to the net, skate shorter distances and have increased opportunities to create offence.

2X

## Pass Attempts

Players pass and attempt to pass the puck more often – with and without the puck, they are closer to the game.

5X

## Passes Received

When passes are shorter (5 to 10 feet), accuracy improves and players have more success receiving the pass.

“You need to be able to make quick passes and have quick communication. Small-area games are important.”

**Brianne Jenner**  
Canada’s National Women’s Team

## U9 Principles

Dr. Stephen Norris has consulted with Hockey Canada in the areas of player development and performance programming for a number of years. He was one of the founding members and contributors to the 'Canadian Sport for Life' movement focusing on athlete/participant development. Dr. Norris contributed to Hockey Canada in the design of the **Long-Term Player Development Model** and Player Pathways.

In each area outlined below, rationale has been provided and has been supplemented by Dr. Norris.

Player evaluation/selection cannot be scheduled prior to the start of the school year.

- Give local hockey associations and parents back the summer – the season does not need to start this early only to be finished at the end of January or early in February (start later and end later).
- Give local hockey associations a chance to get organized and begin planning.
- The start of school year can be very stressful for young players, and they do not need hockey evaluations starting at the same time as the school year.

*The notion of evaluations taking place weeks, if not months, in advance of the actual season for this age group makes very little sense due to the realities of child development during these periods.*

*The summer months are a time where youngsters not only consolidate previous experiences, but also advance their competency due to aspects such as recovery from earlier specificity, demonstrate adaptation of all previous experiences to new situations and activities over the summer months, and reveal growth and development opportunities that occur naturally – physical, psychological, cognitive, motor development, social, etc.*

*Everyone should understand that the return-to-school period (both the couple of weeks before, the week of and the 'wash-in period' until the student is settled back into the routine) is an extremely stressful period for the student.*





Minimum of four practices and/or skill sessions prior to formal player evaluation/selection.

- A player's first experience in the new hockey season should not be a formal evaluation – this gives all players the opportunity to get back on the ice in a 'player-friendly' scenario.
- Level the playing field; not all players have a chance to go to hockey schools or prep camps prior to the start of the season.
- Provide local hockey associations the opportunity to run their own prep camp instead of members spending money outside the association.

*There is a substantial benefit for children to have the opportunity to participate in four ice sessions prior to formal selection or evaluation. Players feel more relaxed and are able to perform at a higher level, compared to being evaluated in their first time back on the ice. By providing these opportunities, players are placed in a situation where stress has been mitigated and they are able to showcase their ability.*

Player evaluation/selection must be a minimum of three formal sessions. Recommendation is one skills session, one small-area games session and one half-ice game.

- Players need a chance to be evaluated – standardization means transparency, fairness and consistency.
- Provide coaches with the foundation for a solid and quantifiable evaluation.

*This follows the previous point of providing ALL players with the opportunity to re-engage with hockey. For example, it would be unacceptable for a school in the first week of September to give children an exam they must pass, or else the child would not be permitted to take that subject during the school year. This would be unacceptable to parents, yet this is the impact of evaluations early in the process before anything is taught.*

Development time following team selection and prior to the start of the regular season.

- It is very important to provide coaches with the opportunity to develop and improve their players' skills prior to organized games.
- The progression should be skills before tactics and tactics before systems.
- This will eliminate or reduce the focus on and/or pressure to win.

*Professional and/or knowledgeable individuals wishing to provide positive developmental experiences for children or youth should reinforce the need for an instructional or practice component prior to the start of the season. With the implementation of this policy, we are moving forward to not only accept, but welcome development opportunities for the betterment of players.*





# SECTION 3: Seasonal Structure



The U9 seasonal structure can take on many forms. There is flexibility in the recommended timeframes local hockey associations can use to build their seasonal plan. If the season starts in October or even as late as November, the local hockey association should still follow the guidelines of a balanced season approach. Some dates and timeframes are guidelines, while others are fixed. The number of games and practices are also recommendations by Hockey Canada supported by the **Long-Term Player Development Model**.

## The Ideal Season

Young players have an opportunity to continue their development while having a positive and fun hockey experience. The ideal season does not conflict with the start of the school year, provides a fair evaluation/selection process and is structured to maximize development opportunities.

The U9 Player Pathway and corresponding coaching materials provide progressive and incremental skill development. By using the Hockey Canada Skills Manuals on the **Hockey Canada Network** and **Drill Hub**, coaches are provided with the framework for practice sessions that meet their players' needs. The monthly seasonal goals should correspond with the U9 Skills Matrix (Section 5) that outlines the skills players should be exposed to throughout the season.

1. Preparation/Evaluation Phase  
UP TO 4 WEEKS

2. Development Phase  
UP TO 8 WEEKS

3. Regular Season Phase  
UP TO 16 WEEKS - 14 WEEKS IF TRANSITION

4. End-of-Season Phase  
UP TO 4 WEEKS - 6 WEEKS IF TRANSITION



# Annual Calendar & Seasonal Phases

## 1. Preparation/Evaluation Phase UP TO 4 WEEKS

- Players are grouped with like-ability players for maximum growth. Players should not be cut.
  - Hockey Canada recommends 18 players per team.
  - Allows for four lines and two goaltenders (4 on 4).
  - Tiering can be done by team or by association to ensure skill-based balance.
- No evaluation/selection during the off-season phase (March through August).
- No evaluation/selection prior to the first week of school, or during the first week if it starts the week after Labour Day.
- Where school starts prior to Labour Day, there must be four skates/practices starting the week following Labour Day before evaluation/selection commences.
- Minimum of four practices/skill sessions prior to formal evaluation/selection starting.
- Minimum of three formal evaluation/selection sessions.
  - Recommend one skills session, one small-area games session, one half-ice game.

## 2. Development Phase UP TO 8 WEEKS

- Ideal practice-to-game ratio is 3:1 – three practices to one game played.
- Focus on skill development:
  - Fundamental movement skills: striding, turning, stopping
  - Manipulation skills: shooting, passing, puck control
  - Motor skills: agility, balance, coordination
- Fun and safe environment to promote self-confidence.

### 3. Regular Season Phase

UP TO 16 WEEKS • 14 WEEKS IF TRANSITION

- Ideal practice-to-game ratio is 2:1 – two practices to one game played.
- Continued focus on skill acquisition and skill development.
- Recommend a maximum of 40 games (exhibition, league, tournament/jamboree/festival).
- Recommended seasonal breaks:
  - Season should allow for two seasonal breaks (not including Christmas/long weekends).
  - Minimum five days without a scheduled game or mandatory practice.

### 4. End-of-Season Phase

UP TO 4 WEEKS • 6 WEEKS IF TRANSITION

- Reinforce skill-development elements in practices.
- Tournaments are jamboree/festival format, engaging players in a fun environment:
  - JAMBOREE: Coming together of several players who are then placed onto teams. Games may or may not be competitive and the emphasis is on fun.
  - FESTIVAL: Coming together of teams to participate in games and fun activities. Games may be competitive, but no standings are kept.
- There are no playoffs in U9 hockey.
- U9 players can transition to full-ice hockey January 15 or later (see *Playing Surface*, Section 4).
- Important to continue practices through transition to introduce full-ice concepts.



# U9 Seasonal Structure OPTION 1: FULL SEASON OF HALF-ICE PLAY

PHASE	Prep/Evaluation Phase & Development Phase	Regular Season Phase	End-of-Season Phase
DURATION	Up to <b>12 WEEKS</b> prior to the start of the Regular Season phase	Up to <b>16 WEEKS</b> after the completion of the Development phase	Up to <b>4 WEEKS</b> after the conclusion of the Regular Season phase
ICE SET-UP	HALF-ICE GAMES	HALF-ICE GAMES	HALF-ICE GAMES
BALANCE	<b>40%</b> OF THE SEASON	<b>50%</b> OF THE SEASON	<b>10%</b> OF THE SEASON
VOLUME	UP TO <b>12</b> WEEKS	UP TO <b>16</b> WEEKS	UP TO <b>4</b> WEEKS
PRACTICES	<b>14</b> PRACTICE SESSIONS	<b>34</b> PRACTICE SESSIONS	<b>7</b> PRACTICE SESSIONS
GAMES	UP TO <b>6</b> GAMES	UP TO <b>22</b> GAMES	UP TO <b>12</b> GAMES
JAMBOREES	<b>1</b> JAMBOREE	<b>1</b> JAMBOREE	<b>1</b> JAMBOREE



# U9 Seasonal Structure OPTION 2: TRANSITION TO FULL-ICE PLAY

PHASE	Prep/Evaluation Phase & Development Phase	Regular Season Phase	End-of-Season Phase
DURATION	Up to <b>12 WEEKS</b> prior to the start of the Regular Season phase	Up to <b>14 WEEKS</b> after the completion of the Development phase	Up to <b>6 WEEKS</b> after the conclusion of the Regular Season phase
ICE SET-UP	HALF-ICE GAMES	HALF-ICE GAMES	<b>MAY PROGRESS TO FULL-ICE</b>
BALANCE	<b>45%</b> OF THE SEASON	<b>45%</b> OF THE SEASON	<b>10%</b> OF THE SEASON
VOLUME	UP TO <b>12</b> WEEKS	UP TO <b>14</b> WEEKS	UP TO <b>6</b> WEEKS
PRACTICES	<b>14</b> PRACTICE SESSIONS	<b>34</b> PRACTICE SESSIONS	<b>7</b> PRACTICE SESSIONS
GAMES	UP TO <b>6</b> GAMES	UP TO <b>22</b> GAMES	UP TO <b>12</b> GAMES
JAMBOREE/ TOURNAMENTS	<b>1</b> JAMBOREE	<b>1</b> JAMBOREE/TOURNAMENT	<b>1</b> JAMBOREE/TOURNAMENT