

INTRODUCING CHILDREN TO RUGBY

Retaining players and developing talent in the sampling years



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The development of players from novice to expert levels, and the continued participation of players in rugby are clearly key objectives for the RFU. *“The enjoyment, safety and education of children in rugby union is vital to the sustainability of the game. Finding the most appropriate introduction for young players into rugby union is the most important issue, and the RFU is committed to helping this happen¹.”*

So what should this introduction be like? What aspects of rugby should be emphasised? How might the rules of the game for children be modified to provide a suitable learning stimulus? Presently this development is guided by the RFU Long Term Athlete Development (LTAD) Model (structure of age-group training/practice) and the Continuum (structure of age-group competition through rules of the game). New research examining children’s participation in sport suggests that it may be necessary to take a critical look at player development in rugby union.

The aim of this article is therefore to:

1. introduce an alternative model of sport participation

2. consider how it might apply to rugby
3. examine how it might impact on the coaching role.

1. THE DEVELOPMENTAL MODEL OF SPORT PARTICIPATION (DMSP).

The DMSP (developed by Côté and colleagues) proposes four distinct stages of sport development:

1. The sampling years (age 6–12)
2. The specialising years (age 13–15)
3. The investment years (age 16+)
4. The recreational years (age 13+).

The DMSP proposes two possible sport participation trajectories – recreational participation and elite performance. Both of these trajectories start during adolescence and are preceded by the “sampling years” during childhood. The different stages within each trajectory are based on changes in the type and amount of involvement in sport activities, and highlight the changing roles of social influences (i.e., parents, coaches, peers) at each stage of development.

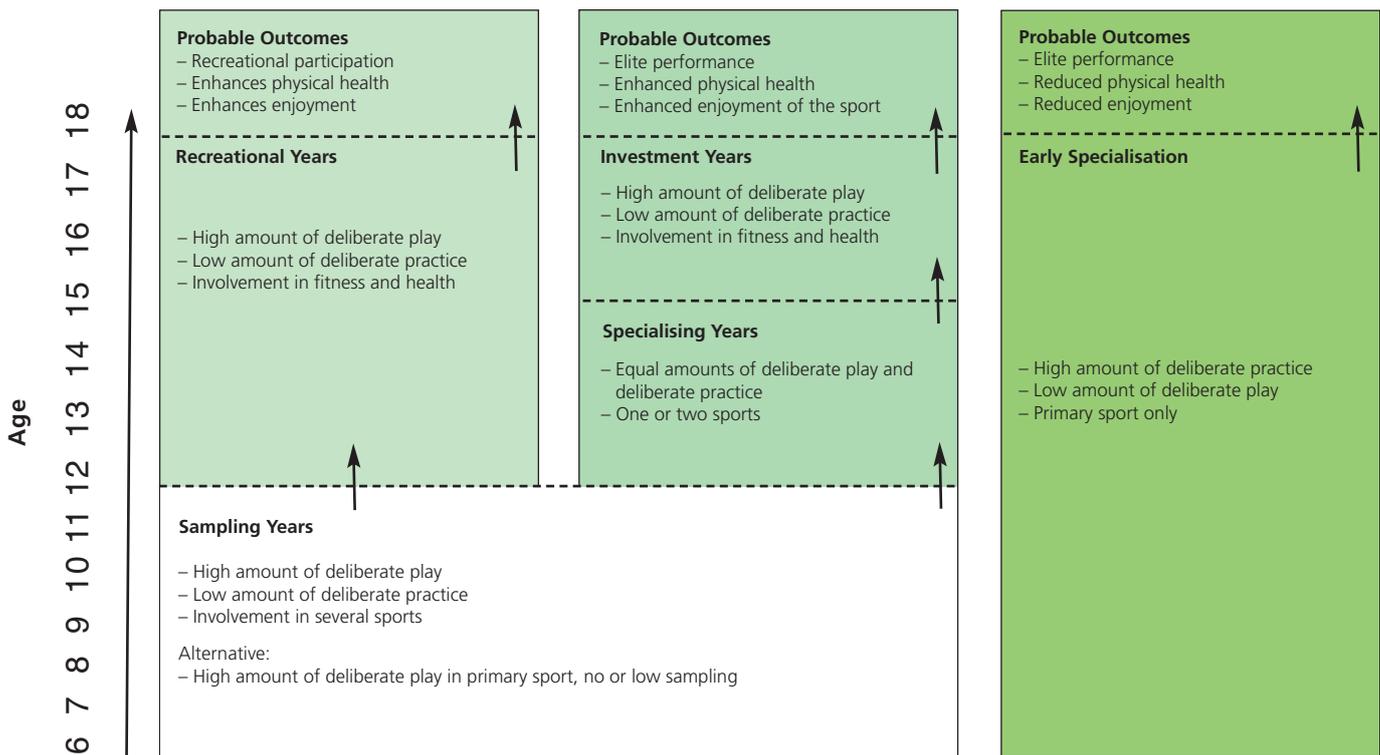


FIGURE 1: DEVELOPMENTAL MODEL OF SPORT PARTICIPATION (ADAPTED FROM CÔTÉ ET AL., 2007).

The DMSP proposes that recreational participation and elite performance should have the same activity and training foundation from ages 6–12 (i.e., sampling years). After the sampling years, sport participants can either choose to stay involved in sport at a recreational level (i.e., recreational years, ages 13+) or embark on a path that focuses primarily on performance (i.e., specialising years, ages 13–15; investment years, ages 16+) as seen in Figure 1 above.

The DMSP also highlights the relative contributions of three main types of evidence-based developmental activities that contribute to the development of expertise in each of the three distinct age ranges.

1. **Deliberate play** is unstructured activity usually led by the participants themselves and engaged in with fun as the intention.
2. **Deliberate practice** is structured activity, either performed alone or led by a coach, which is engaged with performance improvement as the intention (e.g., technical and tactical drills).
3. **Competition** is structured activity against other teams or individuals in which the intent is to win.

The model suggests children should engage in large quantities of deliberate play activities (designed to maximise inherent enjoyment, and regulated by flexible age-adapted rules) during the sampling years. It suggests that there is no need to focus on deliberate practice activities (designed to achieve a future goal, serious, specialised) or structured competition until the specialising and investment years. Indeed, research has demonstrated that increasing deliberate play opportunities can impact positively on both continued sport participation and later performance.

FINDING THE MOST APPROPRIATE INTRODUCTION FOR YOUNG PLAYERS INTO RUGBY UNION IS THE MOST IMPORTANT ISSUE

2. THE DMSP APPLIED TO RUGBY

In its strictest interpretation, the DMSP suggests that children do not benefit from adult-imposed practice drills or structured competition before the age of 12 (the sampling years). Instead, they should simply engage in deliberate play in a range of sporting activities. However, even a less radical interpretation calls into question the rigorous structure applied to the rules by which children are introduced to rugby (9–11). A DMSP approach would advocate rules reflecting the cognitive abilities of the children (i.e. not too complex); reduced structure; and an emphasis on enjoyment and involvement opportunities. Do the current rules as played by U9s–U11s really adhere to these deliberate play principles? Does the game played by children really need to look like the game as played by adolescents and adults for it to have benefits in developing basic skills and instilling intrinsic motivation to play rugby? We suggest that a less structured game might provide a more suitable introduction to rugby for children and should consider such factors as:

1. having fewer players on the pitch
2. having fewer formal positions
3. having simplified rules (e.g., reduce emphasis on the scrum and the line-out)
4. reducing the emphasis on contact.

The effect of such changes would help to emphasise the ball handling, evasion nature of rugby and de-emphasise structured elements of the game that can wait until children reach the specialising and investment years of rugby participation. Rugby is a late specialisation sport and, as such, it is important that children's early introduction to the game focuses on key, transferrable skills which will be useful no matter how subsequent physical maturation (and training) alters their body shape. For example, reduced emphasis or even removal of the line-out would increase the amount of time the ball is in play. It is difficult to say what learning or skills are developed from the line-out in its current form. It is a rare event indeed for the ball to be thrown in straight, for children to actually jump for the ball, or for the ball to pass beyond the five-metre line, rendering those behind the first two "jumpers" as redundant.

Furthermore, while contact (tackling, rucking, mauling) is an important and integral component of rugby union, perhaps children should be allowed the space to develop their handling and decision-making skills first. As James Robson (the British and Irish Lions' doctor) commented after the 2009 Lions' series in South Africa: *"We're reaching a level where players have gotten too big for their skill levels. They've become too muscle-bound and too bulky and I think you may see changes in their physical nature in order to speed up the game and introduce a higher level of skill."* By de-emphasising contact during the sampling years, perhaps skills related to decision-making, evasion and ball handling might become more ingrained.

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3. THE IMPACT OF DMSP ON COACHING DURING THE SAMPLING YEARS

While changes to the rules of the game will impact upon the behaviours of children playing rugby, there will clearly also be an impact for coaches. The model outlines how during the sampling years, coaches are primarily supportive and encouraging, while during the specialising and investment years, coaches' styles become more skill oriented and technical. However, importantly Côté and Gilbert (2009) highlight that the aim of a coach in each stage should be to ensure developmental outcomes in athletes, based on the 4Cs (Competence, Confidence, Connection and Character). Coaching effectiveness in the sampling years should therefore be defined in terms of how coaches meet their athletes needs and help them fulfil their goals. Crucially, it must be remembered that the athletes referred to in the DMSP model are young children at varying developmental stages of cognitive and physical maturation.

The 4Cs:

- **Competence:** Sport-specific technical and tactical skills, performance skills, etc.
- **Confidence:** Internal sense of positive self-worth.
- **Connection:** Positive bonds and social relationships.
- **Character:** Respect for the sport and others (morality), integrity, empathy and responsibility.

Côté and Gilbert (2009) also linked the DMSP model to the specific coaching context in which the coach operates (recreational, developmental, or elite sport). In this typology there are four different categories of coaches:

1. Participation coaches for children (sampling years)
2. Participation coaches for adolescents and adults (recreational years)
3. Performance coaches for young adolescents (specialising years)
4. Performance coaches for older adolescents and adults (investment years).

As we are focusing on the sampling years in this article, certain coaching objectives for developing athletes' 4Cs as a participation coach for children might include:

1. an inclusive selection policy: everyone to "get a go"
2. a focus on skill and competence development rather than competition
3. provision of safety structures for fun, low organisation games
4. a focus on child-centred development of fundamental movements
5. promotion of the benefits of sampling a variety of sports (social interactions with various peer groups).

4. CONCLUSIONS

This article has introduced Côté's DMSP and in particular his belief in the importance of deliberate play during the sampling years (U12s). The application of this model has clear implications for the way in which rugby is introduced; the rules by which the game is played by children; and the coaching behaviors required. The model has been applied successfully in the Australian Institute of Sport and is being adopted by UK Sport to guide their athlete development programme. The greatest impact of the model is on the sampling years and the way in which children are introduced to sport. Are the rules of rugby for the U12s currently providing the best introduction to the sport? **We think not.**

5. FURTHER READING

A more detailed discussion of the concepts introduced in this article is available in a recent RFU-commissioned report by Wilson, M., Byrne, C., Eston, R. (2009) 'Challenging The Continuum: An Evidence-based Approach To Developing Rugby Skills Based On Cognitive, Technical And Physical Developmental Factors' (will be available from www.rfu.com by clicking on 'Taking Part', 'Coach' then 'Coaching Resources').

Recent publications by Jean Côté include:

Côté, J. and Gilbert, W. (2009) 'An integrative definition of coaching effectiveness and expertise', *International Journal of Sports Science and Coaching*. 4: 307–323.

Côté, J., Baker, J., and Abernethy, B. (2003) 'From play to practice: A developmental framework for the acquisition of expertise in team sport', in Starks, J. and Ericsson, K.A. (eds) *Expert Performance in Sports: Advances in Research on Sport Expertise*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics. ISBN: 978-0-7360141-52-4. pp 89–110.

Côté, J., Baker, J., and Abernethy, B. (2007) 'Practice and Play in the Development of Sport Expertise', in Tenenbaum, G. and Eklund, R.C. (eds) *Handbook of Sport Psychology* (third edition). Hoboken, NJ: Wiley. ISBN: 978-0-471738-11-4. pp 184–202.