



What is an appropriate practice-to-game ratio for a youth competitive league? ►

Ideally, children between the ages of six and 12 years should attend three to four practices for each game they play.

In reality, the opposite seems to be true. Sports columnist Roy MacGregor says, “In hockey, research shows that kids are being exposed to about three games to every practice. Parents are putting tremendous pressure on coaches to organize games because they want to see their kids score not skate.”

Dr. Vern Seefeldt, director emeritus of the Institute for the Study of Youth Sports at Michigan State University, says, “When children get involved in an adult model of a game, the emphasis on skill development is reduced in lieu of the team’s desire to win. Coaches tend to play those who are most likely to score and the more skilled players tend to dominate the game.”

Many competitive leagues have extensive game schedules and maintain league standing records which culminate in post-season playoffs and a championship. House leagues which provide organized, structured competitions usually have equal playing time for all players regardless of ability and do not publish league standings. All teams make the playoffs. However, house leagues have limited practice times.

The tremendous growth in the importance of professional sport has spilled over into youth sport. More emphasis is being placed on children to compete more often and at a higher level. Competitive leagues, even at the youth level, try to model the professional ranks and organize youngsters into rigorous competitive schedules.

“Professional hockey players in the NHL typically play an 80+ game season,” says consultant Tim Robinson of the Coaching Association of Canada. “Some competitive leagues are trying to match this schedule for young children. This heavy competitive schedule makes it nearly impossible for young kids to learn new skills. Children involved in a competitive league should have a minimum of three sessions per week, two of which are designed to work on skill development.”

Former coach Ken Shields, now president of the Commonwealth Centre for Sport Development in Victoria, notes that parents who have assumed the role of coach find it much easier to organize a game than to plan and implement a practice featuring effective skill development. “Much of our sport system relies on volunteer coaches, many of whom do not have expertise in the systematic design of skill learning. We need to help them in this regard. Remember, it takes years for teachers to understand the process of learning in young kids and to perfect the art of teaching skill progressions.”