



Cornwall FA Guidance

Equal Playing Time in Youth Football?

When considering “equal playing time” there are two important things to remember:

Why Children Play

They play because it is FUN, but the fun is in the playing. It is most fun for those who play the most and not so much fun if the child is denied the opportunity to play in matches.

The Coach's Purpose

The role of the coach is fundamentally to provide an opportunity for children to have a positive experience. For most players, many of their positive experiences revolve around their playing time. Many of the challenges involved in the “equal playing time” debate can be lessened by the development of a club or coach philosophy which clearly defines the club/coach philosophical position and intentions and can be further underpinned by using codes of conduct which communicate club/coach philosophy in terms of allocation of playing time and can manage expectations for how players get game time.

Here are ten reasons why Cornwall FA considers that equal playing time is the best strategy for player development.

1) Maximises long term player development

Without access to playing time, quality coaching or experiencing critical game situations (such as playing against special teams or cup semis/finals), players who started playing late or are temporarily behind their peers in terms of physical or mental development are less likely to improve. These same players may actually have more long term potential if provided with the same opportunities to develop.

2) Development v Winning

Why do some coaches persist in playing their "best" players all the time and ignoring the needs of their new or not-so-skilled players? There is only one answer: they want to win matches so much that they dare not take a risk with a player who might make a mistake and cost the team a goal. If a coach is focused on providing equal playing time, they can't be equally focussed on the score and winning. The coach can have this in his/her peripheral vision but instead should be more focussed on game/skill development.

3) Fun increases motivation

The number one reason children play sports is to have fun. Enjoying playing football is the main reason children work hard in practice and spend their free time playing and practicing on his/her own. Not playing isn't fun and can result in children who are less motivated to not improve, have less fun and who may choose to quit.

4) Social/psychological well-being of the players

What is the effect on the self-esteem of a player who starts as a substitute and only plays a couple of minutes every week? Are they adversely affected by being openly acknowledged as less able in terms of their social standing amongst their friends and peers? As coaches we have a duty to consider the effect that our actions have in the child's development in a wider sense and to be accountable for the part we play in it.

5) Builds confidence and resilience

From a small child to the world's greatest athlete, those who are confident are confident because they have attempted a skill or taken thousands of shots, tried and failed many times in a supported environment, then tried again and got it right. This is a valuable life lesson and only by exposure to opportunity can the child benefit.

6) Enhances Teamwork

When players feel that everyone is an important part of the team and are treated fairly, they are more likely to focus on working together. When teamwork improves, players are more likely to make friends, have fun during training and matches, and the team will have a better chance of experiencing success.

7) Players develop at different ages

How do we know which players aged, 7, 10, or 12, will be the best player aged 21? The reality is we have no idea who has the potential to be the special player. Children that excel now won't necessarily still be a shining star four years from now. All players develop at their own pace. Coaches should allow them to make mistakes and learn the game, without a dependence on the final score. It also may make sense to rotate positions so that the players have varied game positional experience which adds to their ever growing game understanding. It also stops us from stereotyping player attributes to positions e.g. a player is tall so they might be a centre back or someone who is quick so let's play him/her in a wide position. This fails to account for the fact that an early developer might be tall for their age but eventually, at age 21 are not tall comparatively and are stuck with their formative football experience in a position which does not eventually suit them.

8) Improve relationships between coaches and parents

One of the most common causes of disagreements between coaches and parents is the subject of playing time. By providing players with equal opportunities to play, coaches set the stage for more positive relationships with parents. Parents want to see their child in the game, and when they don't, it hurts. Lack of playing time can cause frustration directed at coaches, and children on the car ride home.

9) Minimise drop out

Sadly, a high percentage of children who play football stop playing the game before they get to the age of 15. A recent study found the top five reasons for the high dropout rate were:

- Lack of playing time
- Overemphasis on winning
- Other activities are more interesting
- Lack of fun
- Coaching/adult behaviours

10) Minimise fatigue

When teams fail to rotate players, the top players potentially could be fatigued by the end of the game and the lesser skilled players could be cold, stiff and have less game experience.

Interestingly in the professional game academies are governed by rules and regulations of the Elite Player Performance Plan (EPPP) in which clubs are obliged to evidence that all squad members must play at least 50% of games. This is clear recognition of the need to allow development of players holistically in their own time. The job of the clubs and the coaches is to provide the developmental platform. In the grassroots game some clubs have adopted the following policy:

Coaches and Managers of Under 6 to Under 11 teams must ensure that all players receive equal playing time for each and every game. The only exception is where a player is injured or does not want to play for whatever reason.

Coaches and Managers of Under 12 to Under 16 teams must ensure that all players receive equal playing time over the entire season. These age groups differ from the younger players because in some games, due to the superiority of the opposition, one or two players may struggle to compete which could lead to a loss of confidence or, worse still, a risk of injury. This may cause the coach to give greater playing time to some players for these games with the time being made-up for the others against weaker opposition.

What is most important is that whatever policy or philosophy a coach or a club adopts, that it is clear, transparent and consistent so that all involved understand their roles and responsibilities.

Further information:

Join the England DNA Foundation phase (follow the link below).

<http://www.thefa.com/news/2017/12/05/14/28/its-in-the-dna-coaches-praise-england-dna-foundation-phase-resource-051217>

Further information is available by following the link to a variety of podcasts below:

<https://itunes.apple.com/gb/podcast/liverpool-fa-podcast/id1304637859?mt=2>