



Level 1-2: When is it appropriate to play-up?

At the beginning of each new season, usually during tryouts for Level 1 and 2 team formation process, parents often ask the question whether it is appropriate for their child to 'play up' an age group. At one end of the spectrum, this is an innocent inquiry from a parent who simply wants to ensure they are placing their child in a developmentally appropriate environment that maximizes their child's enjoyment and potential. At the other end of the spectrum, it can be the result of a hyper-competitive parent driving the process and believes their child is significantly better than their peers and thus has to be playing with older players to enhance their development.

The decision to place players, especially those playing above their age group, is a complicated one that requires careful consideration to be given to a number of influential factors. The process should involve the player, parent and coach with the final decision resting with the coaching staff. With that, coaches must have a framework in order to make an informed and methodical decision that is consistent and in the best interest of the individual player. If it is not managed appropriately, at each stage of development, playing up can hinder a player's development as much as it can help enhance it.

The following guideline is provided to assist players, parents and coaches when working together to make better, more informed, decisions about playing up. When a decision needs to be made regarding playing up, the following factors should be considered:

Physical Development: Is the player physically ready, and skillful enough, to compete with older more mature players. Players grow at different rates and stages and it is important that physical development is factored into the process. Some players (i.e., 'early developers') mature earlier than their peers and thus sometimes require different opportunities (i.e., playing up) to ensure they are challenged. The purpose of playing up is to challenge players to solve problems (e.g., make quicker decisions and rely less on their physical attributes) they are not presented with within their own age group. However, just because a player is physically more developed doesn't necessarily mean they are the ideal candidate for playing up. Physical development is just one of many factors that should be considered.

- **Early Developers:** Unfortunately, too many parents/coaches get physical develop and skill/ability confused. An early developer can have a high impact on games, especially at the younger age groups, because they are physically more mature than their peers, but it doesn't necessarily mean they are more talented or skilled.
- **Late Developers:** Conversely, some players can have a low impact on the game, especially 'late developers', but it doesn't necessarily mean they are not talented. Some players need more time to develop physically before making a firm assessment on their long term potential. Often, late developers are missed by the 'uneducated eye' because they get physical development and impact confused with skill (i.e. technical skill and soccer IQ).

Psychological/Emotional Development: Does the player have the confidence to play up with older players? Are they ready for the psychological challenges and pressures that come with playing up? Can the player deal with the setbacks of not being one of the strongest players in the older age group? If moving up an age group means the player will shrink back, lose confidence in their ability, or be fearful of the physical (i.e. stronger challenges) and psychological challenges (i.e. not being the best) then they should very carefully consider playing outside their age group. Keep in mind, a child can be physically developed, but they may not be psychologically or emotionally mature enough, or ready, to compete with older players.

Social Development: Is your child ready for the change in the social dynamic when playing with older players? The interaction and conversation between a 14-year-old (male and female) differ from that of a 12-year-old. What if your child, who hasn't entered puberty, is having conversation with teammates who are in the midst of puberty? Are they ready for these conversations? Understanding your child's social skill development and how this relates to the age group they are considering playing with is a critical factor when considering if a child should play up or not.

Leadership Development: When considering playing up what impact will this have on your child's leadership skills and development? The leadership development of a player is one of the most neglected components when considering whether it is appropriate or not for a child to play up or not. When players consider playing up, they are often (and should be) one of the better players within their age group and as a result they often have leadership responsibilities (i.e. team captain) and serve as a role model, both on and off the field, for other players. They have the opportunity to help shape the team culture, set standards for training habits, communicate and lead their peers through difficult moments in games. When players consider playing up they are often moving into an established team environment which could result in them adopting a more submissive role and as a result minimize their opportunity to further develop their leadership skills. It is not easy for a younger player to step in an environment with older players and lead.

Positional Development: What role will your child play when playing up? Will they be exposed to different roles or will they be a role player? Usually the player seeking to play up is one of the best players in their age group and as a result play a pivotal role, often multiple roles, within their team which is critical for their overall development. However, when they move up, they can sometimes be relegated to the bench or become a role player with restricted influence within the team structure. Any player looking to play up should carefully consider the positional role and the influence this will have on their development.

Playing time: regardless of the sport and level of competition, playing time is perhaps the single most important factor when it comes to development. In short, you need to be playing in order to develop. The more you play, the more touches you get on the ball (i.e. technical development) and the more you are exposed to game-related decision making situations (i.e. tactical development) the better it is for your development. When considering playing up, it is important to ensure that you are going to receive enough minutes to develop and continue to improve. Playing up and sitting on the bench is counterproductive to development. If you are playing up you should be one of the best players within your age group, you should be playing significant minutes (i.e., over 50%) of the older age group, and be exposed to multiple positions and roles on the field as these are critical to maximize your development.

The decision to place players, especially those playing above their age group, is a complicated one that requires careful consideration to be given to a number of influential factors. Every player and circumstance is unique and thus these decisions must be made at an individual player level. The final decision should be made by the club director or team coach.