

# 8-and-Under



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At the 8-and-Under level, coaches should focus on teaching age-appropriate concepts and skills so that children have an enjoyable hockey experience while also developing as players and young people.

## FOCUS POINTS

- Fun
- Engagement
- Active Practices
- Age-Appropriate Training (includes skills and concepts)

## FUN

8-and-Under coaches should never underestimate the value of having fun. While this is true at all ages, it is especially true at this age, where the hockey-for-life seed is planted. If it's not consistently fun at this age, the novelty of the sport will wear off and the young player(s) may eventually quit. Players at this age should have fun every time they are on the ice.

## ENGAGEMENT

Coaches should recognize the importance of engagement. It goes hand-in-hand with fun, but it's more than just fun. It's targeting the optimal skill level for each player – not too easy and not too hard. It's designing small games that do the teaching. The players don't need a coach to provide the feedback. The games themselves give players the opportunity to successfully demonstrate targeted skills and concepts. The coach becomes the facilitator – less talking from the coach and more learning by doing.

## **ACTIVE PRACTICES**

Practices at this age level should include a high amount of activity and a low amount of rest. Players should not spend large amounts of time standing in line, waiting to participate in drills or games. Coaches should strive to design practices in which players are active for the majority of the practice. Coaches should set goals related to the amount of activity they expect each player to achieve in a practice (e.g., each player will be active for 40 minutes in a 60-minute practice). While the activity level is not the only crucial component on which coaches should focus, it definitely is important in the long-term development process, as coaches must remember that players learn by doing (more than by watching or listening). Designing practices with high activity levels and opportunities for many repetitions is very important at this age. Refer to the Player Activity Chart found on the free Mobile Coach App and at [admkids.com](http://admkids.com) under Coaches/Repetition for a form to evaluate the developmental opportunities that occur for players in practice and in games.

## **STATION-BASED PRACTICES**

Station-based practices are an excellent way to accomplish these high-activity goals. Coaches are encouraged to split the ice into 4-6 areas with an age-appropriate skill, drill, or game to be practiced in each of area. A typical station-based practice would include six stations with 6-10 players at each station. While coaches have some flexibility when it comes to the duration of time that players spend at each station, 6-8 minutes is a good guideline for players at the 8-and-Under level. Coaches should restrict the instructional part to less than a minute for each station. Players should practice the desired skill at each station, with coaches making sure that each player is active the majority of the time, thus receiving a high number of repetitions. Coaches may have to be creative to ensure that all players spend more time practicing the desired skill rather than waiting in line to participate. Coaches are encouraged to use a stopwatch to determine the amount of time a player is active and count the repetitions performed by an individual player at each station. USA Hockey has a large number of these station-based practice lesson plans available on the free Mobile Coach App and at [admkids.com](http://admkids.com).

## AGE-APPROPRIATE TRAINING

8-and-Under coaches must determine what skills and concepts are appropriate for the kids in their program to learn and understand. Most would not expect a second-grader to be taught sixth-grade math. The same should hold true for the skills and concepts related to 8-and-Under hockey. First, coaches must determine whether the players are ready to learn the desired skill or understand the desired concept. Second, they should decide whether the skill or concept is truly important for an 8-year-old. Teaching players the right thing at the right age is crucial in their development.

Cross-ice hockey, or hockey on a smaller surface (half-ice), is an important part of age-appropriate training for 8-and-Under players. Using a smaller surface in offers several benefits, including increased puck battles, increased puck-touches for all players, puck carriers will have to avoid more players in the small areas, etc. All of these benefits are extremely important in the long-term development of each player.

## PRACTICE FOCUS

Practices should focus on (percentage of time listed after each):

1. Individual skill improvement (hockey skills, activities, and games) — 85%
2. Hockey sense (teaching of concepts through small area games) — 15%
3. Systems (team-play training) — 0%

## SMALL AREA GAMES

Coaches should utilize small area games on a consistent basis in every practice for fun, practicing skills and teaching basic concepts. These games should be included in station-based practices and there should be a variety of games for 8-and-Under players. The number of players, rules of the game, and size of the game area should be varied with each game. Coaches might also opt to use blue (light-weight) pucks, balls or ringette rings to change the dynamic of the game. Refer to the *Small Area Competitive Games Handbook* for age-appropriate small area games.

## OPTIMAL WINDOWS OF TRAINABILITY

In order for players to maximize their ability and reach their potential, it's important for youth coaches to do the right thing with young athletes at the right time. Focusing on these key components at the appropriate age will give the young athletes the best opportunity to achieve their potential as they progress through their teenage years. Researchers have concluded that players in this age classification should spend time developing the following capabilities related to their long-term development:

1. **Speed** — constant stopping, starting, changing direction, and puck races in small areas
2. **Suppleness (Flexibility)** — perform a variety of activities and exercises through a full range of motion

## PLAYER KNOWLEDGE

8-and-Under players are not at a cognitive level where they should be lectured on the following topics; however, throughout the course of playing hockey at this level, they should learn:

1. **Puck Pursuit** – Players should be taught to pursue the puck aggressively and engage in battles to gain possession of the puck.
2. **Puck Support** – Players should learn to make themselves available to receive a pass from a teammate. This is the beginning of the idea of “getting open.”
3. **Acceptable On-Ice Conduct** – Acceptable conduct should be taught and reinforced. Unsportsmanlike conduct is the broad term covering this topic, but acceptable conduct should relate to teammates, opponents, coaches, officials, etc. This is the beginning of teaching players to be good sports and to respect everyone involved with the game.
4. **Allowable Contact with Opponents** – Players should learn what types of physical contact are allowed with an opponent. Players should learn the importance of having their stick on the ice in puck battles, so that good body-contact habits are established early. The players should also begin to learn the types of physical contact that are not allowed, such as body checking, checking from behind, slashing, tripping, etc. While these young players are not at an age where they should be lectured as to the types of illegal contact, they should be made aware when they have made contact in a way that violates the rules.

## INDIVIDUAL HOCKEY SKILLS

Players must learn and master:

1. Skating
  - a. ready position
  - b. edge control
  - c. forward start
  - d. forward stride
  - e. controlled stop: two-foot and one-foot snowplow
  - f. controlled turn
  - g. forward crossover
  - h. backward skating
  - i. backward stop
  - j. ABCs of skating (agility, balance, coordination, and speed drills)
2. Puck Control
  - a. lateral (side-to-side) stickhandling
  - b. front-to-back stickhandling
  - c. diagonal stickhandling
  - d. attacking the triangle
3. Passing and Receiving
  - a. forehand pass
  - b. backhand pass
  - c. receiving a pass properly with the stick
4. Shooting
  - a. wrist shot
  - b. backhand
5. Body Contact
  - a. stick on puck
  - b. stick lift
6. Goaltending
 

At this level, coaches should not designate full-time goaltenders so that players may begin the development of skills that will help improve their long-term skating and athleticism. These are crucial for goaltenders as they progress to higher age levels.

## TEAM CONCEPTS

While the teaching curriculum recommends that no time be spent on teaching systems related to team-play in 8-and-Under hockey, players should begin learning important skills and basic

concepts that will be important when they get to an age where systems and team-play takes on added importance. Players should learn and understand:

1. **Puck Pursuit** – Players should pursue the puck aggressively and engage in battles to gain possession of the puck.
2. **Puck Support** – Players should learn to make themselves available for a pass whether they are close to the puck or further away. This is the beginning of near- and far-support concepts, as well as creating and finding passing lanes.

## NUTRITION

Players should be introduced to:

1. **Proper Hydration** – Players should learn the importance of proper hydration before, during, and after all games and practices.
2. **Good Eating Habits** – Players should be encouraged to eat good meals and refrain from eating candy and other foods that lack nutritional value.
3. **Recovery Drink** – While there are many recovery drinks on the market, players should be encouraged to drink chocolate milk following any practice or game session.

## OFF-ICE ACTIVITIES

Players should perform exercises and play games that improve their agility, balance, coordination and speed (ABCs). For off-ice activities and exercises, coaches should utilize the 6-and-Under/8-and-Under Off-Ice Training Cards that are available through USA Hockey and are on the Mobile Coach App. Exercises and activities should include:

1. Stretching/flexibility exercises
2. Fun games
3. Relays
4. Eye-hand coordination exercises
5. Exercises related to improving the ABCs

## PLAYER SAFETY

Players should be in practice and game environments where their health and well-being is a priority. Expectations related to safe practices and acceptable on-ice conduct should be taught and reinforced with the young players.

## HOCKEY ENVIRONMENT

Players should be in an environment where:

- the practices and games are fun. Young players should enjoy each session and they should want to return for the next one.
- making mistakes is okay. Mistakes are common and a part of sports. Maintaining the confidence to attempt new skills or moves is important to developing those skills, as is continuing to work on correcting mistakes.

## CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT AND LIFE SKILLS

Players must learn:

- they are part of a team and are expected to follow team rules.
- to have respect for their teammates, coaches, opponents, officials, and parents.
- to always try their best.
- the foundation of a strong work ethic by consistently participating in practices with a high level of activity.

## PARENT DEVELOPMENT

Refer to *An American Hockey Parent Handbook* found on the USA Hockey website.





## NOTES

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