

Play-Up Policy

Official Policy Document

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Authority: CKHA Board of Directors

Program Director: Director of Hockey

Read alongside: CKHA Travel Policy and CKHA Disciplinary Action Policy

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Introduction

The Play-Up Policy establishes how a qualified player may request to compete one age group above their birth-year classification. It aims to (1) give exceptional players an appropriate competitive challenge, (2) ensure requests are evaluated fairly and transparently with coaching-staff input, and (3) protect team balance, player development, and player safety by setting a high bar for approval.

Most players are best served competing within their USA Hockey age group. A small number demonstrate the skill, physical capacity, maturity, and readiness to succeed at the next level. This policy sets the eligibility rules, timelines, and appeal process for those requests, and works together with the CKHA Travel Policy (fees, refunds, and hardship) and the CKHA Disciplinary Action Policy (conduct and disputes).

Purpose and Scope

This policy applies to all players, families, coaches, and Board members in CKHA travel hockey. It governs how play-up requests are submitted, evaluated, approved or denied, and appealed, and defines each stakeholder's role.

I Eligibility Requirements

A. Who May Request Play-Up

A player may request to play one age group above their birth-year classification if they meet all of the following:

1. **Good standing.** No outstanding conduct violations or pending disciplinary action.
2. **Travel intent.** A genuine intention to play CKHA travel hockey (not recreational) at the higher level.
3. **Coach recommendation letter.** A signed, dated letter from the prior season's head coach (or the Director of Hockey in the situations described in Section I.B). This is a mandatory gating requirement.
4. **Prior experience.** Participation in CKHA travel hockey the immediately preceding season, or documented equivalent experience at another USA Hockey member organization.
5. **Tenure at current level.** Completion of at least one full season at their current age classification — **whether with CKHA or another USA Hockey member organization** (documented). A genuine first-year player at a level, with no prior full season at that level anywhere, is not yet eligible.

B. Coach Recommendation Letter

The letter gives coaching-staff perspective on readiness and keeps coaches partners in the process. It should address the player's skill relative to their age group, emotional maturity and competitive attitude, physical capabilities, and overall readiness for higher-level play.

If the coach is the player's parent: the assessment comes from the Director of Hockey instead, based on coaching-staff observations and prior-season records, to remove the conflict of interest.

If the prior coach has since moved to the higher age group: the assessment comes from the Director of Hockey, and that coach recuses from all evaluation and selection decisions for this player, to prevent recruitment bias.

If the player is new to CKHA or recently relocated: a letter from the prior club or program's head coach, plus documentation of competitive experience, satisfies the requirement.

If the prior coach is unavailable or declines to write a letter: the Director of Hockey provides the assessment based on available records and coaching-staff input. A player is never blocked from consideration solely because a former coach is unreachable or unwilling.

Submission and deadline: the letter is submitted with the request form, signed and dated, by the applicable deadline in Section II. Limited exceptions follow Section II.B.

C. Play-Up Limitations

1. **One age group maximum.** A player may move up no more than one age group and may not skip groups (e.g., 10U may request 12U, not 14U). Separately, no player may play up from 12U to 14U under any circumstances — see Section I.D.
2. **One request per season.** A player may make only one play-up request per season and must pursue it to completion.
3. **Roster cap.** Under Mid Am Rules and Regulations, no more than five (5) players on any team roster may be players who are playing up. CKHA will not approve a play-up request that would exceed this limit, regardless of the player's ability.
4. **Tenure requirement.** As in Section I.A.5, a player must have completed a full season at their current level (at CKHA or another USA Hockey organization) before playing up.

D. Body-Checking Boundary (12U to 14U)

Moving from 12U to 14U crosses into legal body checking (per USA Hockey rules for the applicable division) and a substantially more physical environment. A 12U-age player rostered at 14U is checked by opponents who are older, larger, and further along physically. CKHA has determined that no combination of skill, size, or maturity reliably offsets that mismatch. This crossing is therefore barred outright rather than evaluated case by case.

Safety rule

No player may play up from 12U to 14U. There is no exception and no waiver.

A request that would cross this boundary is denied on submission. It is not evaluated by the coaching staff, is not subject to Director of Hockey discretion, and is not appealable under Section IV. The bar applies regardless of the player's skill, size, prior experience, roster need, family request, or any special circumstance under Section VII. The player is evaluated at 12U on the normal merit basis.

All other play-up decisions must also comply with USA Hockey and applicable league age-classification rules, including any waiver requirement. Confirm current requirements with USA Hockey.

E. Ineligibility

A player is ineligible for play-up in a given season if any of the following apply:

- **Prior-season decline** of a travel-team placement (current or immediately preceding season).
- **Prior withdrawal** from a travel team before the season concluded.
- **Removal** from a travel team for conduct violations.
- **Already competing** at the requested age group.
- **Missing** the required recommendation letter (or Director-of-Hockey assessment).

- **First season at their current level** with no prior full season at that level at any USA Hockey organization.
- **Requesting 14U from 12U** — barred outright under Section I.D, regardless of the player's ability.

II Request Process and Timelines

A. How Requests and Tryouts Work

A player requesting play-up **tries out at both their own age group and the higher age group.** This protects the player: aiming high never costs them their home-level tryout.

1. The higher age group's coaching staff evaluates the player for a play-up spot using the criteria in Section III.
2. If selected up, the player may accept the higher placement (standard 7-calendar-day acceptance applies).
3. If not selected up, the player is considered for their own age group **on the same merit basis as every other player, based on their own-age tryout.** There is no automatic or guaranteed placement — a player who does not try out at their own level is not placed there.

Request timing. Requests are normally submitted before tryouts, at registration, by emailing the Director of Hockey with the recommendation letter attached. A request made at or after tryouts is allowed only where the deadlines and exceptions in Section II.B permit.

B. Deadlines and Exceptions

Deadlines are firm. The standard request deadline is 14 days before the first tryout for the player's age group, and any required response to a placement or non-selection notice is due within 48 hours of confirmed receipt.

Limited exceptions. The Director of Hockey may grant a narrow exception — an extension, makeup evaluation, or accelerated timeline — only for documented relocation, injury, or genuine hardship, consistent with the hardship provisions of the CKHA Travel Policy. This replaces the prior “no exceptions under any circumstances” language, which conflicted with the Special Circumstances section.

Confirmed receipt. A response clock (such as the 48-hour window) does not start until CKHA confirms the family received the notice. Silence after confirmed receipt is treated as declining travel participation for the season, subject to the hardship exception above.

Disputes about a decision are handled through the appeal process (Section IV) and, if needed, the CKHA Disciplinary Action Policy — not through repeated informal requests.

III Evaluation Criteria and Decision Process

A. Coaching-Staff Evaluation

The higher age group's head coach and staff evaluate the request, focusing on whether the player can succeed at the higher level. They assess:

1. **Skill.** Clearly exceeds the typical level for their age group (skating, puck handling, positioning, hockey sense).
2. **Physical capacity.** Can handle the faster, more physical play without undue injury risk.

3. **Emotional maturity.** Can handle stronger competition, demanding coaching, and possibly reduced playing time.
4. **Competitive readiness.** Genuinely ready and wanting to move up.
5. **Coachability.** Receptive to feedback and able to adjust to higher-level play.

B. Objective Evaluation

Coaches base the decision on the player's demonstrated ability — “Can this player meaningfully contribute at this level now?” — not on projected future improvement or how well-liked the family is.

C. A High Bar for Approval

Play-up approval is reserved for players who clearly belong at the next level. It is not a remedy for an unsatisfactory placement at the player's own age group, and not a way to gain playing time. Skill, maturity, and readiness must all be present together and clearly above the player's age-group peers; that combination is uncommon, so approvals are expected to be rare.

D. Team Impact

A request may be denied if approval would harm the higher age group's team — for example, if that roster is already complete and strong, or an addition would create competitive imbalance or reduce roster depth.

IV Appeal Process

A. Right to Appeal

A family may appeal a higher-age-group denial in writing to the Director of Hockey within 5 days of the denial notice, stating specific reasoning. Appealing the higher-group decision is separate from being considered at the player's own age group, which happens automatically from their own-age tryout under Section II.A. A denial based on the 12U-to-14U body-checking boundary (Section I.D) is not appealable, because it is a categorical eligibility rule rather than an evaluation of the player.

B. Review Panel

The Director of Hockey convenes a panel of 2–3 coaches not involved in the original evaluation. The panel reviews the original reasoning, the family's materials, and any additional observation it finds helpful, and decides only whether the original non-selection was appropriate.

C. Outcomes

The decision is issued within 5 days of the appeal. **If approved**, the player is placed at the higher level (standard 7-day acceptance). **If denied**, the higher-group decision stands; the player's own-age placement (if any) follows from their own-age tryout on the normal merit basis, and no further appeal of the higher-group decision is available.

V Board Authority to Adjust a Play-Up Placement

A. Authority

The Board may reverse a play-up placement during the season if warranted, given its responsibility for program integrity and player safety.

B. Grounds

Reversal may be considered when the player is clearly struggling athletically or in maturity/behavior at the higher level, has an injury limiting effective competition, faces a safety risk from physical mismatch, or is materially harming team chemistry or performance.

C. Process

Coaching staff or a Board member raises the concern to the Director of Hockey, who meets with the player, family, and coach before bringing any proposed reversal to the Board for a formal decision. If reversal is approved, CKHA will make every effort to place the player on a suitable team at their own age classification, though a specific placement cannot be guaranteed.

D. Acknowledgment

Families accepting a play-up placement sign the **Play-Up Acknowledgment Form (Appendix B)**, confirming they understand the Board's authority to adjust the placement and the risk that a same-age-group spot may not be available. Fee treatment on reversal is covered in Section VI.

VI Financial Implications

A. Fees

Approval does not add a fee. The player pays the fee for the level at which they compete; if a play-up is approved mid-season, fees are prorated to the dates of participation.

B. Refunds

If a play-up is denied and the player is not placed at either level, registration fees are handled per the CKHA Travel Policy refund schedule. **If the Board reverses a play-up mid-season and the player cannot be placed on a suitable same-age team**, CKHA refunds fees prorated to the remaining season, per the Travel Policy refund schedule.

VII Special Circumstances

Nothing in this section permits a play-up from 12U to 14U. The bar in Section I.D applies to every circumstance below, including injury return, late arrival, and mid-season roster need.

A. Return from Injury

A player returning from significant injury may request play-up with physician clearance to return to full competition. Standard criteria apply; injury status alone neither approves nor denies the request.

B. Late Arrivals

A player new to the area who arrives late may request play-up. Where the Director of Hockey finds the late arrival legitimate (e.g., a recent move), the timeline exceptions in Section II.B apply and evaluation occurs as soon as practical.

C. Mid-Season Additions

If a mid-season play-up is permitted (e.g., due to injuries or team-balance needs), it runs through the Director of Hockey on an accelerated timeline; Board approval may be required for mid-season roster changes.

VIII Communication and Expectations

A. Family Discussion First

Before requesting, families should talk honestly with their player to confirm the player (not just the parent) wants to move up, understands the higher level is faster and more physical, accepts that playing time may be limited during an adjustment period, and has realistic expectations.

B. Optional Coach Consultation

Families may discuss readiness with the player's current-age coach for context. That feedback is not determinative; the higher age group's staff makes the decision. A current coach should not discourage a player they believe has potential.

C. Director of Hockey as a Resource

The Director of Hockey can answer questions about eligibility, process and timeline, what higher-level staff look for, and what to expect if approved. The Director will not disclose confidential evaluations but will provide general guidance.

IX Conduct and Compliance

A. Respectful Engagement

Families are asked to engage with the process respectfully and to accept decisions professionally. A family that disagrees may use the appeal process (Section IV) and, if appropriate, the CKHA Disciplinary Action Policy. Raising a good-faith concern through these channels is a right, not a violation, and will not affect future play-up eligibility.

B. Conduct of Play-Up Players

Players approved for play-up are subject to all CKHA policies and the Travel Policy Code of Conduct. Conduct violations may result in return to the original age group, removal, or other action under the Disciplinary Action Policy.

C. Actions That Undermine the Process

The following harm the integrity of the process and may affect future play-up consideration:

- Lobbying coaches informally about play-up before the official deadline.
- Repeatedly re-requesting reconsideration outside the formal appeal process.
- Refusing to participate in the player's own age group tryout as leverage for a play-up.

Harassment, abusive conduct toward volunteers, and public disparagement are handled under the Code of Conduct and the Disciplinary Action Policy.

X Amendments and Contact

This policy is reviewed annually by the Board. Significant amendments will be communicated with 30 days' notice; minor clarifications with shorter notice.

Director of Hockey — Chris Lipsett · Email: lipsett@centralkentuckyhockey.com

A Appendix — Play-Up Request Form

Submitted with the recommendation letter (or Director-of-Hockey assessment) by the Section II deadline. Collects:

- Player name, birth year, current age group, and CKHA registration status.
- Parent/guardian name and contact information.
- Requested age group (one group up only).
- Prior-season team and organization, and confirmation of tenure at current level.
- Attached: signed, dated recommendation letter (or Director-of-Hockey assessment).
- Acknowledgment that the player will also try out at their own age group.
- Parent/guardian signature and date.

B Appendix — Play-Up Acknowledgment Form

Signed by a parent/guardian when accepting a play-up placement. It documents informed acknowledgment of the following (it is an acknowledgment of program terms and risks, not a release of liability):

- The higher age group is faster, more physical, and more competitive, and playing time may be limited during adjustment.
- The Board may adjust or reverse the play-up placement during the season under Section V.
- If reversed, a same-age-group placement is not guaranteed; fees are handled per Section VI and the Travel Policy.
- The family has read this policy and agrees to engage with the process respectfully.
- Parent/guardian signature and date.