



St. Johnstone FC Youth Academy

Multi-Sports and Early Specialisation

Parent Information Sheet

Welcome to St. Johnstone FC Youth Academy. We hope this is the beginning of an enjoyable journey for our players. Although our main aim is to develop players who can perform and be successful in our first team, we also aim to develop essential skills which will contribute to our players living a healthy, active life. The purpose of this document is to provide parents (and players) with educational information about the benefits of developing fundamental motor skills (such as running, jumping, landing, throwing and catching) at a young age and to explain the potential dangers or early specialization in one sport.

Fundamental Motor Skills

The importance of learning fundamental motor skills at a young age has been well documented in scientific research over recent years. Research has shown that the most rapid improvement in motor skills occurs between the ages of 7-12, however, beginning the process in a fun and directed way is encouraged even prior to this

Due to the limited contact time we have with the players, it is difficult to incorporate a well-rounded multi-sports curriculum into our programme. Therefore, we actively encourage our young players to engage in other sports to improve their all-round athleticism. The benefits of learning fundamental motor skills from a young age are described as:



1. Increases long term participation

Making Children aware of the many different physical requirements of playing sports and physical activity may lead them to take responsibility for their own physical development and preparation as they get older

2. Transfer abilities to other sports

Physical skills, decision-making ability and other positive attributes can be developed through multi-skills coaching and can be used if, or when, children transfer to another sport.

3. Improves Sporting Performance

Improved fundamentals of movement such as running mechanics, quicker direction changes and a more stable base will improve performance in almost any sport in the long-run. Multi-skills sessions can develop flexibility, core stability, strength, stamina, power and speed and provide all-round physical conditioning.

4. Creates a healthier nation

Multi-skills coaching can play a role in ensuring that the health agenda is being met. Different sports need different levels of physical exertion. Using a multi-skill activity for part of your session will ensure heartbeats and breathing rates are elevated, resulting in a fitter and healthier group of participants

5. Develops Valuable Life Skills

Problem-solving, communication, team working and working independently are highly valued attributes in sport and life in general. Playing one sport will allow some of these skills to be developed. Including multi-skills activities in your sessions will increase the likelihood of all participants developing more of these skills

6. Injury Prevention

Multi-skills sessions can reduce the risk of injuries such as repetitive strains and an imbalance in muscular development

7. Improves academic performance

A review of 50 studies that examined the effect of school-based physical activity on academic performance conducted by the Division of Adolescent and School Health (part of the Center for Disease Control and Prevention) in the USA found varied physical activity can improve attention span and concentration, classroom behaviour and achievement test scores

8. Develops the whole person

Remember that you coach children, not just your sport. Use a multi-skills approach to truly develop multiple skills. Develop social and lifestyle skills as well as physical and sport specific. Multi-skills coaching develops competence, confidence, connection, creativity, character and caring. A multi-skilled athlete should be a multiple-skilled person.

"You can't be a good footballer and average at everything else. Running, jumping, throwing, catching and general skills that you put little thought into all add up when you take to the field. Coordination and balance are vital tools to possess in most sports and these skills should, sometimes unknowingly, be ingrained into us at an early age"

Michael Owen, former England Internationalist

Early Specialization v Early Engagement

Early specialization is defined as intense training in 1 sport while excluding others. Early specialization involves a greater amount of 'deliberate practice' (structured activity with the primary goal of improving an important aspect of current performance) as opposed to deliberate play (engaged in by individuals for the purposes of enjoyment and has rules adapted from adult norms that are set-up and monitored by the children themselves or an adult involved in the activity).

Early engagement differs as it is defined by 3 clear stages: **Sampling years** (6-12 years of age); **specializing years** (13-15 years of age) and **investment years** (16+ years of age). During the sampling years the focus of participation is learning the sport through deliberate play and fun activities as opposed to regimented, structured practice. During this time, players develop a love for the game and subsequently choose to invest time to practice through deliberate play on their own accord.

While we actively encourage players to generate as much practice hours as possible, we believe that this process should be enjoyable and should not become a burden. Research has demonstrated that early specialization from a young age (i.e. during the sampling years in the early engagement theory) can increase the risk of:

Injury and Illness

Due to increased training loads placed on young bodies and repetitive strain

Psychological Issues

Parent and peer pressure can cause stress and anxiety

Drop Out

Dropping out of the sport completely due to 'falling out of love' with the game



"At young ages we should be talking about athleticism. If you want to be a great cricketer, a great footballer, a great hockey or tennis player you actually have to have the skills of a track and field athlete. You have to be able to run all day, have to be able to sprint, have hand-eye coordination. If you can throw a cricket ball it is actually the same dynamics as throwing a javelin. We have to encourage youngsters to think about athletics as a way of moving into other sports"

Lord Coe, Interview on Talk Sport

Here at St. Johnstone we 100% value the importance of excellent technical skills which are of critical importance at young ages, however, we also believe that developing these skills should be done in a fun and engaging way where the player can develop a life-long love for the game. Some activities which fall into this category include:

- Futsal
- Box Soccer
- Coerver
- Fun 4s
- Playing with friends
- Wall Ball



We hope that this document has provided you with valuable information which makes you aware of some prevalent issues with professional football academies. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact one of the academy staff and are excited that you have chosen to be part of our quickly progressing academy.

****Information in this document was extracted from various research articles and from UK Sport***