

Through sport



Sport is an important part of the Australian culture and a great way for children to be active.

However, children's participation in sport has declined in recent years (ARACY, 2013) for a number of key reasons.

While some children thrive in sport's traditionally competitive environment, this doesn't suit all children, particularly if they lack the skills to confidently get involved and aren't given guidance by appropriately trained teachers or coaches.

The structure of sport through club and membership models and structured seasons may limit children's involvement if they're unable to commit to a whole season or weekly training sessions.

The cost of playing sport can also be prohibitive for many families, with children from lower socioeconomic areas less likely to participate in team or club sports for this reason.

The distance and accessibility of sports facilities may also restrict families and children from participating. Accessibility may also be an issue for people with a disability or parents with prams.

Children's sport also requires a significant time commitment from parents, in terms of providing transport or helping out at the club.

Despite these barriers, sport remains an important form of physical activity, and sporting organisations and clubs need to consider new ways of attracting, re-engaging and retaining children's participation.

Benefits of new approaches to children's sport

Supporting children to develop their skills at their own pace rather than focusing on winning means they're more likely to have fun playing sport – which in turn can lead to better participation and retention rates.

Opening up future leadership opportunities for children in coaching and officiating roles can also help to encourage their longer term participation in sport.

In 2009, VicHealth undertook research into barriers to participation and ongoing involvement in sport.

The findings provide insight into the family-related barriers likely to be preventing involvement of young people in sport:

- Changing lifestyles mean traditional participation times (week nights and weekends) may no longer be appropriate for many families. As such, there is a need to provide more flexible participation options.
- The social opportunities presented by sport should be as important as the competitive aspect.
- Sport is being re-prioritised below other aspects of people's lives (work/family). There needs to be greater focus on encouraging participation by highlighting the social aspects, opportunities for family involvement and flexible participation.

(VicHealth 2012b)

Rethinking how and where sport is delivered, including providing more flexible options for involvement, has the potential to increase children's access to and participation in sport, as well as increase their activity levels during training and games.

Ensuring sporting clubs are family friendly can also help to support children's participation. This can be done by providing healthy food options, reducing alcohol consumption and ensuring a smoke-free, safe, inclusive and welcoming environment.

VicHealth's Healthy Sporting Environments Demonstration Project was a pioneering program that supported sports clubs to become healthier and more welcoming and inclusive. Evaluation of the program found that with the right support, all community sports clubs have the potential to become healthier, more welcoming places through good governance, leadership, and a culture that supports health and wellbeing.

To find out more about Healthy Sporting Environments visit: vichealth.vic.gov.au/healthysportingenvironments

'Sport in regional, rural and remote areas provides children opportunities to be physically active and connect socially with other children. With changing community demographics and lifestyles, new approaches to involve children in sport are necessary.'

SHANE HUGHAN, CHAIR, REGIONAL SPORT VICTORIA.



Practical actions for encouraging children's participation in sport

Shifting the concepts of *design* and *time* of junior sport programs and activities can create more opportunities for children to be active through sport.



ACTION

Rethink the places where sport is played and how it is played so it's more inclusive, more accessible and less structured. Enable sport programs and games to be better integrated into the school, community and home settings.



Consider:

- Creating safe opportunities for street-based activities such as street cricket or football to increase access to sports games in local neighborhoods.
- Building stronger links between clubs and schools, where schools can become venues for club training and games.
- Integrating sport into community programs for children (e.g. leadership camps), where it supports the delivery of program outcomes.

Club-based sport can present barriers to participation, given its structured and membership-based delivery model. Allowing for more flexible approaches to playing sport could encourage more children to get involved.



Sport has always been an important part of Australian culture, but how can sport programs, clubs and organisations adapt to meet changes in our lifestyle?



ACTION

Consider ways that junior sport programs can maximise children's participation and activity levels during play, enhance their skill development and enjoyment, and support ongoing participation (see Small-Sided Football case study p 31). This can assist in broadening participation options for children who are less suited to or interested in a competitive model of sport.



Consider:

- The structure of sport programs to reduce time spent waiting for a turn and increase time spent being actively involved.
- Forming teams based on friendship groups rather than player ability.
- Smaller team or group sizes to increase active participation and strengthen the focus on developing individual children's skills and knowledge.
- A culture of participation for all, above a focus on outcomes or results.
- Flexible options of delivery, such as inter-club games.
- Providing different pathways for children based on their ability and desire for competition.

Lack of ability or enjoyment are barriers to participation for children (Abbott et al 2008, Hands et al 2004), including those still developing their skills and ability. A greater focus on participation over winning could enhance children's enjoyment and willingness to participate (see Brunswick Netball Club case study p 32).



How can children's movement during sport programs be maximised to reduce idle time, particularly among team sports where individual players have varied levels of skills and abilities?



ACTION

Explore alternative options for delivering sport programs, so that the burden on a few volunteers or coaches is reduced and children's participation experience is enhanced.



Consider:

- Mentoring programs for developing coaches within clubs.
- Teenage players coaching junior club teams to maintain their interest and build their leadership skills.
- Strengthening links with skilled staff or volunteers at local community organisations, for roles such as coaching or administration.

Having adequately skilled and trained people to deliver sports programs, such as certified club coaches, helps children develop the necessary skills and ability to actively participate, which also enhances their enjoyment (Ridgers et al 2013).



What are the opportunities to attract new or retain existing volunteers in coaching roles and build leaders within the club?



ACTION

Allow flexibility when scheduling junior sport programs and competitions and consider the length of seasons or programs to better meet the time constraints of children and families.

Consider where programs and activities are delivered so they're more convenient to access. More flexible and adaptable delivery models and approaches can lead to greater access to sport programs for children.



Consider:

- Whether game participation is reliant upon compulsory attendance at training, which may present barriers for some players.
- Different models for participating in training or sports activities rather than just via teams or competitions.
- Flexible options for competition scheduling.

As family life has become more structured and children's participation in sport increasingly influenced by busy family schedules, the flexibility and accessibility of sport programs is an important influence on participation.



What are flexible options for when, how and where junior sport programs can be delivered?



ACTION

Make changes to membership models of club-based sport to allow more social, flexible or casual options, so that children and parents don't need to commit to a whole season or term.



Consider:

- Options such as a dual club membership model for seasonal sports such as football/cricket, netball/tennis.
- Flexible club or program fee structures.
- Pathways in participation from a casual to a regular competition.

Time pressures on families as well as the cost of fees, uniforms and equipment present real barriers to children's participation in traditional club-based sport. Allowing for more flexible membership options could help to attract and retain more children.



In considering the requirements for junior sport programs (such as numbers within a team, number of matches), what flexible options can be offered to maximise participation?

Further information and resources to support these actions are available on VicHealth's website (www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/activeforlife)

CASE STUDY

More fun for everyone with Small-Sided Football

Football is one sport that has recognised the need to make their junior offerings more inclusive and fun with a focus on skills development over winning.

In 2008, the Football Federation of Australia (FFA) introduced Small-Sided Football to encourage children aged five to 11 years to get involved in football. It's created a more consistent junior program nationally and a more positive experience for young players right across the country.

With approximately 200,000 Australian children playing Small-Sided Football, it's certainly achieving its goal of increasing participation in the sport.

As the name suggests, Small-Sided Football features smaller teams competing on a smaller sized field, so every player gets more contact with the ball. Playing numbers vary according to age, with four to six year-olds playing four per side, eight and nine year-olds playing seven per side and 10 to 11 year-olds playing nine a side.

While the model is club-based, games aren't scored and winning isn't the primary focus. Rather, it's a way to introduce children to the game in a fun, inclusive way.

And with fewer team members, there's a stronger focus on developing each child's skills and technique.

There's also flexibility in the way clubs can offer games, depending on what works best for them.

For some that might mean inter-club competitions. For others, this might be difficult to manage, so there's the option to offer intra-club games. Likewise, clubs can choose to run training programs or to simply offer games on the weekend.

With education and training from the FFA, Small-Sided Football has been widely embraced by the football community as an effective, inclusive way to teach children fundamental movement skills and get them hooked on the world game.



CASE STUDY

‘Team unity’ focus for Brunswick Netball Club

Team unity and building the potential of individual players has been the ethos of the Brunswick Netball Club since it was founded by local parents in 2000.



It's a unique model with an emphasis on fostering strong team bonds rather than grading players and ranking teams.

The approach originates from the way the club was founded, when a group of local parents decided they wanted their daughters, who were all friends, to give netball a go.

Today, the club continues to form teams around friendship groups, supplemented by players on the waiting list.

Players start and continue to play with the same team, which enables participation with friends, fosters leadership roles for players of higher ability and provides a supportive environment for those of lesser ability.

The model has proved popular, with the club now fielding 25 teams in the local competition ranging from Netta to Under 17 and Open. Many of the original players are still part of the club, playing in the senior teams.

The club's players enjoy competition as much as any other team, but it's not what drives their interest in playing.

Rather, it's the chance to connect with their friends and explore their potential at their own pace and in their own way.

In practical terms, this means being given the chance to try out different positions and areas of the court, rather than being pigeon-holed into one particular position.

Parental involvement is also a key feature of the club, with coach and team manager roles filled by parents, who receive strong support from other parents. The club ensures each family has a clear understanding of expectations around behaviour, with parents asked to adhere to a Code of Conduct.

Coaches are encouraged to attend accredited netball coaching courses and also sign up to a Code of Conduct.

The club takes the time to ask team members what they want out of a coach, with the majority of players saying they're looking for someone who is encouraging, fair, approachable and positive.

With this sort of approach, the club ends up teaching its members more than just netball skills – they also take away important social and life skills.