

Advice for first time hockey folks

Philosophy Hockey is a tremendously challenging and rewarding game to play. Players learn a game with a number of skills and concepts to master. Not only must a player control a rubber disc with a stick, he or she must do so on ice, with 11 other players, at a pace beyond running speed.

The result is a player's game: it requires that each player read the play and respond effectively, contributing to the group response. Each player is a passer, receiver, and defender and must understand the game well enough to make split-second decisions with five other players. Once the puck drops, each player is his own coach—no huddles or set plays, because every situation evolves differently, and there's no time to consult the coach while the puck is in play. Good hockey players are skilled decision-makers.

Hockey players use a number of different physical skills to collaboratively improvise--creating the game with teammates as it happens. Hockey is about making good, immediate decisions that help the group respond as effectively as possible to whatever happens. Success in hockey requires developing good habits and being willing to risk mistakes and recognizing patterns as they happen and getting into the flow of play and handling emotions and working well with others. Hockey is about being fully in the moment, finding a way to contribute to the group effort, while thinking ahead to what's likely to happen next. All of these skills will help players reach their full potential on and off the ice, as players and as people.

While the game seems complicated, it's really very simple: keep the puck out of your net and get it in the other net.

All of the skills come down to three basic sets: skating, puck-handling, and decision-making. Skating and puck-handling take a while to master, in part because these skill sets aren't developed in many other activities and because they have to be used so quickly when making decisions. The decision-making skills are deceptively simple—a big game of keepaway—and kids are hard-wired to play keepaway the way bear cubs are hard-wired to wrestle and growl. If we help kids develop the first two skill sets without regimenting the playfulness out of them, the third set will come a lot more easily.

This game is unlike most other team sports in one fundamentally important way: while most team games are based on one team having clear possession with time to plan an attack, hockey is a transition game—possession changes constantly, and there isn't time to run scripted plays. To help kids play well, we have to allow them to develop their ability to deal with chaos, to think on the fly, to react to whatever's happening by applying some basic principles rather than remembering scripted plays.

To become a good player, learn to skate and handle the puck, and have fun. These are the first three priorities of hockey. To help kids become good players, keep the cost low and the enjoyment high, and players will continue to play and learn the game. Basic skills and enjoyment have to come before positioning and systems. If players are going to play well, they need to learn skills and basic principles and how to apply the ideas to the game. The more we empower them to apply the principles effectively, the better they'll play.

Get involved If you've played the game, you realize its value. Even if you're not an experienced player, you can contribute to the hockey development of your son or daughter. At the early stages, you can provide encouragement and focus, helping players develop the skills they need to master. Crowd control, personal attention, and a sense of connection are just as important for developing young players as teaching specific hockey skills. If you'd like to get involved in coaching, contact your local hockey association and consult the Coaches page of www.usahockey.com.

Equipment

In general, start with less. Players learning to skate need the flexibility to solve new challenges to balance, and should not begin with a stick—like learning to run with crutches—or be burdened down with shoulder pads, elbow pads, and hockey pants. If your child begins to walk like Frankenstein when wearing equipment, start jettisoning the nonessentials.

Skates should fit now—snug, with the toes just barely touching the front of the boot. They should be laced to the top and tightened securely without cutting off circulation. Learning to tighten skates gives players greater self-reliance and stronger forearms, so encourage them to tighten their own skates as soon as possible. If you'd like to help, offer to hold down the intersection of laces being tightened, so the player can move up to the next pair without losing tension. Players who learn to skate without a stick will have better balance and posture, which will make playing the game easier when they add a stick. Best to develop basic eye-hand coordination of stickhandling off-ice and add a stick on-ice only when a player can move confidently in all directions, forward and backward. Anyone who can skate well backward will do fine forward, so learning good backward skating technique is a high priority early on.

Stick should be only tall enough to reach from floor to no higher than the mouth when held in front of a player on skates, and the blade should be straight if possible.

A first stick should be inexpensive, cheap enough to cut to the appropriate length—at this point, proper length and proper blade are far more important than a high-tech composite shaft, which is what you may be feeling if your child outgrows a \$150 stick in the first season.

Puck control is a challenge for beginning players, and a stick that is too long makes puck control and proper skating technique even more difficult. Imagine trying to eat dinner without any elbows and you'll have an idea of the challenge. Many good players use sticks that are a couple inches short of the chin.

As a rule of thumb, most players use their dominant fine-motor-skill hand at the top of their stick. Most players are naturally left handed shots—right hand at the knob of the stick—but are often given right-handed curves and never learn to play to their natural hand. An uncurved stick blade will allow the player to find which way feels the most comfortable.

Helmet, mask, and mouthguard—Mask must be securely attached to the helmet, and the helmet must fit snugly without being too tight. Make sure the mouthguard is fitted properly; follow the instructions on the package or consult a dentist for a professional fit—a mouthguard that fits to the upper teeth will be comfortable and easy to wear, and can help protect against concussion.

Neck guard—Required equipment in most youth associations

Gloves—regular winter gloves are ok for starters, hockey gloves are recommended once a player earns a stick.

Shin pads, elbow pads, cup or pelvic protector—valuable padding as players begin to play. Knee pads and a padded jacket are fine for learning to skate.

Breezers (hockey pants) and socks—fun for players, but not essential for beginners; good protection for tailbone on falls, but until pucks get lifted in Squirts or Peewees, breezers aren't necessary.

Schedule

Get to the rink early—at least 15 minutes before session for first-year skaters. An important part of games and practices is preparation—spending time with teammates and learning what the plan is for the ice session.

Players carry their own gear and learn to tighten their own skates—good players take care of themselves and their teammates, and learn how to take care of the game.



Development The nature of hockey--a transition game that is too fast and physical to allow prolonged puck possession by one team or the other—makes it a game of constant shifts from offense to defense and back again. Hockey is a player’s game--once the puck drops, there is little opportunity for the set plays of football or basketball. Every player must be a passer and a receiver, a defender and above all, a good decision-maker who works effectively with his teammates.

The speed of hockey requires that players develop the ability to play in the moment, relying on skills that almost become instinctual. It is a game that rewards good habits, and players who develop good habits as they learn the game can progress more quickly. With so many skills and concepts to master, coaches and parents should prioritize players’ learning and development.

As adults, we feel the responsibility to provide control and structure to the game, but focusing on systems at the expense of skills and tactics is a sign of a coach getting ahead of himself. The best coaches focus on helping players develop their skills and tactical understanding of the game first so that the players can reach their full potential. There’s no point for mites to practice power play systems if they can’t skate or pass or figure out how to create a 2-1 situation. By helping players learn the skating, puckhandling, and read/react skills first, coaches put the game in players’ hands.

Primary on-ice focus for beginning players should be good skating skills in all directions at top speed; Squirts should focus on developing good puck skills, particularly protection, reception, and quick accurate release; Peewees should develop good tactical game understanding, particularly read/react skills, on-ice communication, and creating/preventing 2-1s all over the ice; and Bantams should build on this knowledge to develop good understanding of systems: basic defensive zone coverage, forechecks, special teams, breakouts, transitions, and faceoffs. Off-ice development should include speed, agility, and balance, strength and athleticism, puckhandling and shooting, and developing tactics through dungeonball, lacrosse, or other flow games.

Additional Resources

www.usahockey.com check the ADM page for further information about getting started—also many more hockey resources at this site

www.minnesotahockey.org you can find a directory for the various districts and hockey associations in Minnesota as well as coaching resources and further information

<http://www.mndistrict9hockey.com/page/show/168173-minnesota-hockey-district-9> has further information about District 9 in southeastern Minnesota