



Playing Time – The “Every Child Plays” Philosophy

Because PLC regards play as so important to children’s development as well as physical and psychological health, PLC asks its youth sports organizations to develop policies that welcome all children to the youth sport experience and to give them as much playing time as possible. PLC believes that youth sport organizations should guarantee each child as close to equal playing time as possible through the 6th grade and substantial playing time (at least 25%) in the 7th and 8th grades. We differentiate the 7th and 8th grades from the earlier grades because 7th and 8th grade leagues often function as a transition to high school sports. Whatever youth sports organizations do to accommodate for differences in children’s athletic skill levels and readiness for competitive play, PLC believes that youth sports organizations should provide opportunities for children at all ability levels to play a substantial amount of every game. This means more than guaranteed playing-time. It may mean creating more teams to keep team sizes small, providing A, B, and C leagues, or establishing an intramural league to make sure that all children feel welcomed to play no matter what their skill level is.

PLC has become a strong playing-time advocate because so many youth sports organizations do not have adequate playing-time rules or do not enforce the rules they have. Too many organizations leave playing-time to the coach’s discretion or stipulate only token participation. Most organizations “try” to provide equal playing-time for young children, but the cutoff age for equal playing-time is rapidly decreasing. For example, leagues that once promised equal playing-time to children below the age of 12, now promise equal playing-time only to children below the age of 7.

Why should we be concerned about giving each child playing-time? At the professional, collegiate, and high school levels, we assume that playing-time ultimately depends upon an athlete’s ability to help the team. At these highest levels of sport, most believe that playing-time is to be earned; it is not a right. Why should we regard playing-time differently for younger athletes?

PLC’s response to the playing-time issue is a simple one: because play is critical for child development, a significant amount of playing-time ought to be guaranteed to each child. To place undue restrictions on children’s play is to deprive them of a significant opportunity for physical and psychological development. In many parts of the country, organized youth sports have almost completely replaced the pickup games of childhood. Adults have assumed the roles and the responsibilities that children once had. Adults select the teams, assign positions, devise the strategies, manage games, and officiate. Adults also do something that children rarely did – they consign some children to the bench. Although children sometimes exclude other children from playground games, children as young as age 7 generally find such exclusion unfair. When left to their own devices, children devise ingenious ways of including others and of compensating for inequalities of experience and talent. For example, children will add a “short fielder” to a baseball team if they have 20 players and younger players may be given an extra strike or two.

Parents encourage their children to play sports for a variety of reasons. Sports are a great way to get exercise, to meet other children, and to develop virtues of perseverance and courage. Most importantly, youth sports introduce children to activities that can provide a lifetime of enjoyment both as a participant and as a spectator. Youth sports are different from adult sports because youth sports are played by children whose bodies and souls are at an especially formative phase of development. Although some athletic prodigies can be identified at an early age, the trajectories of children's physical and psychological development vary widely. Yes, children will vary greatly in athletic ability and in psychological maturity. This is true in the classroom as well as on the ball field. Yet shouldn't all children have the same opportunity to develop to the fullest extent possible? We believe that it is in the best interests of each child and the sport itself to put a priority on player development in the elementary school years (through the 8th grade). Managers in Minor League Baseball have been operating with this philosophy for decades. The larger the pool of children playing sports by the time they get to high school, the greater the probability that greater numbers of exceptional athletes will emerge in high school and beyond!

If we can all agree on the importance of play for child development, is there any justification for denying children through the sixth grade (ages 11 & 12) equal playing-time? Some argue that practices are the time when all the children get to play, and children and their parents shouldn't focus so much on the distribution of playing-time in games. We can all agree that practice-time is an excellent opportunity for giving all children playing-time. On the other hand, children are as aware as their coaches and their parents, that practice is just that -- practice. Practices prepare children for the "real games." When children are forced to sit on the bench, they are being told that they aren't good enough for the "real game." They are being deprived of the opportunity to show off what they are learning.

Some coaches argue that giving equal playing-time puts undue pressure on less-skilled athletes. Does it really help children to keep them on the bench in order to protect them from the embarrassment of being "shown up" by superior athletes? If the youth sports environment becomes so threatening, youth sports leaders have responsibility to change the environment, not to remove children from it. Again, PLC reminds youth sports leaders that youth sports are for the sake of the child. Youth sports offer children an excellent opportunity to develop the virtue of courage and to learn from their mistakes.

Some coaches object that giving equal or substantial playing-time fails to acknowledge that some children simply don't deserve to play when they miss practice, goof off when they are in practice, or fail to perform as well as others on the team. In our view, children below high school age should not be blamed for missing practices or for not putting forth sufficient effort. Getting children to practices is the parents' responsibility. Motivating children to put forth their best effort in practices is the coach's responsibility, as challenging as this may be. Youth sports should help children to have fun, get exercise, and to develop the virtues that will serve them in adolescence and adulthood. Children vary by motivation just as they vary by skill. PLC's GROW approach offers techniques for

developing children's intrinsic motivation. PLC strongly discourages the use of playing-time as a reward or punishment. Playing-time is just what the words say – *time for play*. All children should have equal access to the joys of competition and to the physical and spiritual benefits of the play.

Finally, some coaches and youth sport administrators argue that guaranteed playing-time is for "recreational" not competitive leagues. PLC believes that this distinction misses the whole point. Playing-time has nothing to do with competition. Leagues guaranteeing meaningful playing-time can be every bit as competitive as leagues that do not guarantee playing-time. Differences in skill levels do not justify different treatment. If a child is good enough to "make" an "elite" team why should that child have to sit on the bench?

PLC calls on youth sport leaders at all levels to advocate for children's right to play. All children, no matter how unskilled they may be, have an equal right to experience the thrills and challenges of competition. All children have a right to physical activity that can help to prevent obesity and related health problems. All children have a right to build character through sports. And most importantly, all children have a right to have fun playing competitive sports.

PLC challenges youth sport organizations to develop playing-time policies that reflect the values discussed above. Because circumstances vary widely from organization to organization, PLC looks to each organization to develop policies that are fair and workable.

PLC's mission is to educate not legislate. PLC teaches youth sport leaders and coaches research-based ways in which they can optimize the benefits of the youth sports experience for each and every child. PLC trusts that informed leaders and coaches will come up with wise policies that will meet the needs of all of the children whom they serve.