

Advantages of Cross-Ice Practicing and Playing *IIHF Learn to Play Program*

The IIHF Learn To Play Program, which is for children, is based on a model of practicing hockey across the 80 – 90 foot width of the ice surface as compared to practicing and playing lengthways along the full 185 – 200 foot length of the ice surface. This cross-ice practicing and playing model has been used in many of the leading hockey nations in the world for a number of years and has stood the test of time. It has been shown that children who begin their hockey training in this environment have an outstanding hockey experience.

Parents may ask the question why should my child play cross-ice, what will this bring? I want my child playing like professionals do, full-ice, because I want my child to experience “real hockey”.

To help address these questions, let’s think about a child trying to skate with a puck while performing a drill the entire 200 feet from one end of the rink to the other, how long will this take? How much energy will this require? Will the player’s decision-making skills be enhanced more in the close action of the smaller cross-ice surface or in the wide-open area of the full-ice surface? In which situation will the child be more involved in the action?

A study of hockey games played on the full-ice surface by George Kingston in 1976 found the following:

- In a sixty minute running time hockey game between 6-8 year old children, the average player had possession of the puck for 20.7 seconds.
- Top National Hockey League and international professional players were also timed and no player exceeded 85 seconds of puck possession time.
- In a sixty-minute children’s game the actual playing time of the game was 20 minutes and 38 seconds. Taking this into consideration, the individual player is only on the ice every third or fourth shift depending on how many players are on the team, resulting in even less ice time.
- An average of less than 0.5 shots per game for youth players and only 1.5 shots per game for junior and professional players.

The study concluded that:

- For young players in the “full-ice game model” of development, the youngest players would require 180 games and the older youth players would require 80 games to enjoy 60 minutes of actual puck possession time to execute their stick-handling, passing, pass receiving and shooting skills.
- Professional and international players would require 60 games to ensure 60 minutes of puck control skill development.

Many players never touched the puck in the game, especially in youth hockey.

The IIHF firmly believes that by giving children the opportunity to participate in the Learn To Play Program, which supports cross-ice practicing and playing, that their enjoyment of hockey as well as their hockey skills will be greatly enhanced.

To help you further understand the benefits of the cross-ice practicing and playing model, some of the advantages are listed below.

Practicing

- The children have more energy with which they can improve their skills when they are skating 90 feet across the ice surface as opposed to the 200-foot length of the ice surface.
- Group sizes become smaller which mean learning and teaching will become more effective.
- The close feeling of belonging to a team will motivate a child to participate with even grater enthusiasm.
- Drills designed according to the varying skill levels of players within the group are easier to organize.
- More puck contact resulting in improved puck control skills.
- More repetition/frequency in drills in one ice session.
- Decision-making skills are enhanced as more decisions must be made more frequently at a higher tempo.

Actual Game

- Playing on a smaller rink results in increased puck possession time for each player.
- Individual technical skills develop more quickly.
- More frequent line changes in the game means more ice time for each player.
- Children remain active between their shifts with various activities in the neutral zone.
- Line changes are made quickly since the players are directly beside the playing surface.
- Each player's activity increases greatly.
- Scoring skills are enhanced since the players have more shooting opportunities and the child sized goal nets force the players to shoot more accurate.
- The goalkeeper's reading of the game and reaction to changing game situations becomes more effective.
- More repetition for goalkeepers.
- The game is full of continuously changing situations.
- The speed in playing situations increases, which will require quicker mental and physical reactions by players.
- Due to increased tempo, all of the team members take part in solving the playing situations which leads to a sharing of responsibilities between the players.
- The feeling of being an important part of the action increases because of the small size of the rink.
- Hockey sense, or understanding the principles of the game, is being developed at a young age.
- There are no unnecessary breaks in the game.

General Organization

- More efficient use of the ice time and space.
- The size of the rink is in proportion with the size of the players.
- The child sized goal nets are in proportion with the size of the players.
- The middle zone is available for other purposes (player's bench, warm-up area, skill competition) while the games are played in the end zones.
- The IIHF recommends that teams play with two or three units of four or five players and one goalkeeper which results in each player having more ice time.
- More ice time for practicing and playing is made available to more teams within a single club.
- Many teams can practice together by sharing the ice surface.

General Spirit of Participation and Fun

- More children get a chance to play ice hockey.
- More children will experience a feeling of success when playing hockey.
- The same exciting and fun environment as in a “real” game is created.
- Both more and less gifted children will benefit from close/tight action on the ice.
- Children are excited and motivated to continue playing hockey.
- Hockey will be more appealing and rewarding to a wider range of children and their parents.