



**AGE GRADE GOOD PRACTICE
WORKING GROUP
REPORT**

MARCH 2017

INDEX

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	2
INTRODUCTION	8
AGE GRADE PLAYER SURVEY ANALYSIS.....	10
BANDING BY AGE.....	13
PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AND THE ROLE OF RUGBY	16
PURPOSE OF AGE GRADE RUGBY	19
COACH AND TEACHER EDUCATION	21
BALANCE OF MATCHES AND TRAINING, AND THE IMPACT OF PLAYING AND TRAINING LOADS	23
THE IMPACT OF OVER PLAYING AND TRAINING, AND UNDERPLAYING.....	28
INJURY PREVENTION IN AGE GRADE RUGBY	31
OUT-OF-SEASON ACTIVITY	34
PLAYING AND TRAINING OUT OF AGE GROUP	37
FEMALE AGE GRADE RUGBY.....	41
PLAYING ADULT RUGBY.....	42
SEVENS	44
COMMUNICATION METHODS AND CODE OF GOOD PRACTICE	45
PRINCIPAL FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS.....	48

ANNEXES

TERMS OF REFERENCE AND WORKING GROUP MEMBERSHIP	A - 1
DEVELOPMENT PRINCIPLES FOR RUGBY	B - 1
TRAINING OR PLAYING MATCHES AGAINST OTHER CLUBS, COLLEGES AND SCHOOLS.....	C - 1

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. The recent Age Grade Competition Review provides a framework of principles where rugby activity for youngsters is player-centred, development driven and competition-supported, to enhance their development. However, the type and frequency of activity must also take account of the long-term aim of retaining these youngsters so that they continue to play regularly when they are adults. Moreover, both player development and long-term retention must be overlaid by player welfare to minimise the risk of injury. There is little **evidence-based** documented advice for coaches and teachers on the rationale underpinning the framework and the associated RFU regulations. In addition, coaches and teachers need a better understanding of the type and frequency of training, and how to control the amount of rugby activity an individual should undertake, both during the season and out-of-season. The aim of this report is to develop good practice, based on published research that can be disseminated to coaches and teachers. The Working Group, set up by the CGB, to undertake this work has also reviewed relevant policies and regulations to ensure they align with good practice.
2. As a basis, the Working Group took note of 4 pieces of research. Firstly, the Working Group took cognisance of the recent RFU's Age Grade Player Survey, involving some, 11,500 youngsters, where over 60% of respondents rated playing rugby with friends and having fun as the most important factor as to why they played rugby. The Working Group gave significant weight in formulating its recommendations to the views of youngsters in the Age Grade Player Survey, supporting the principle that age-grade rugby should be player-centred. a group of world-renowned experts, gathered by the RFU, who considered the benefits of bio-banding. This is the practice of grouping young players according to biological characteristics (eg taking account of physical maturity, body weight or ability to produce force) while taking into consideration psychological and emotional maturity, and technical ability. However, the experts concluded there is no evidence that banding children by any other measure, rather than age, is more effective. Consequently, we should continue to band children by age, with those born in the school year from 1 September until 31 August being in the same age band.
3. Secondly, a group of world-renowned experts, gathered by the RFU, who considered the benefits of bio-banding. This is the practice of grouping young players according to biological characteristics (eg taking account of physical maturity, body weight or ability to produce force) while taking into consideration psychological and emotional maturity, and technical ability. However, the experts concluded there is no evidence that banding children by any other measure,

rather than age, is more effective. Consequently, we should continue to band children by age, with those born in the school year from 1 September until 31 August being in the same age band.

4. The 2 final pieces of research that the Working Group used, firstly, were the NHS Guidelines on physical activity needed to maintain a reasonable level of health in youngsters. Secondly, in June 2014 the International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics published a summary of the evidence-based studies on youth sport. This précised the various athlete development models that have been proposed over the past 30 years, and highlighted the common findings among them. These include that youngsters benefit from: experiencing a large number of sports; no one should specialise too early; the length of playing season should be limited to between a third up to a maximum of half a year; youngsters learn more by experiencing rather than being told what to do (good guidance is the key); and while there needs to be competitive structures, winning should never be emphasised.
5. Simply, the purpose of age-grade rugby is for youngsters to have fun, to teach the fundamental skills and understanding of rugby, to contribute to their personal development and to motivate them to play rugby regularly in adulthood. First and foremost, it is a developmental tool in preparation for playing and enjoying participating in rugby regularly as an adult. Coaches, teachers and parents need to understand the primary purpose of age grade rugby, the purpose of a match and the role of training, which should include small-sided games, and the distinction between “streaming” and “differentiation”.
6. Clearly, coach and teacher education is paramount. The central theme for all coach and teacher education for age grade rugby is that it is player-centred, development-driven and competition supported. This provides the basis on which all course and CPD opportunities should emphasise the responsibility each coach and teacher has to the Game. The RFU’s approach to rugby training for children is that the primary coaching vehicle should be the use of small sided and adapted games, supported by recommended coaching interventions. Clubs, colleges and schools should recognise their responsibilities as important providers of child development opportunities by ensuring coaching practice is supported through education and training.
7. The Working Group has also defined the terms with a “match” as fixture between 2 clubs, colleges or schools **and** a fixture between 2 teams from the same club, college or school. In all cases the coach/ teacher / referee has little opportunity to dictate or control the situations that arise except by applying the laws. On the

other hand, the Working Group defines a “game” as a conditioned and managed rugby activity by the coach / teacher. Whether all the players come from the same club, same college or same school or not, has no relevance. It provides an opportunity for coaches and teachers to introduce skills and techniques by devising and controlling situations to best develop individual players. It is also suggested that sevens is considered as an adaptive game, and that while there is very little research on the physical impact of age grade sevens that a sevens tournament should be equated to a match. There is also much confusion among coaches and teachers about the terms “streaming” and “differentiation” and whether they are appropriate for age-grade rugby. The streaming of players into graded squads (such as A&B), based on perceived ability is inappropriate. Whereas, differentiation in small-sided games is appropriate, by dividing a large group for a particular challenge into small groups of 5 or even 3 then the level of success can be appropriately set for each group.

8. The Working Group also considered the issue of the balance of matches and training, and the impact of playing and training loads. The questions are often asked how many matches an individual (currently regulated at a maximum of 35 per season), a college, school or club should play in a season, and how often an individual should play each week. Unfortunately, there is no easy answer to these questions and little evidence to support giving actual optimum numbers. They are difficult to track and, therefore, impractical to enforce. Consequently, they should be deleted from regulation. Instead, coaches and teachers (and parents) need to better understand the principles of development (as listed at **Annex A**) and how to: balance training (the major developmental tool) and matches (confirmation of development); the effect of over-playing and over-training, as well as under-playing; and the concentration span and physical limits of youngsters that will determine the optimum length of a training session. The Working Group recommends that: the optimum number of 15-a-side matches a club, college or school should arrange for each age group in a 35 week season is 16; and the current National competitions (such as the NatWest competitions) should be reviewed to ensure that such highly competitive fixtures do not drive negative behaviours in player development.
9. From the Age Grade Player Survey around 20% from U12s to U18s reported that they are playing in excess of 30 matches in a season. We know that many players are training regularly with their school or college as well as their club and then will have DPP sessions, CB and Regional Academy training sessions. Often there is very little co-ordination between coaches to ensure a balance in contact sessions (either playing or training), which are likely to be the greatest source of injury. To counter this, coaches, teachers and parents should be encouraged to hold regular meetings to review and plan the rugby programme of players who

are susceptible to over playing and training. In addition, for all England Academy Players that it be a formal requirement to hold such meetings. In addition, the Working Group recommends the RFU conduct 2 trials. Firstly, where youngsters are limited to rugby activity once in every 72 hour period to identify if there are benefits in better controlling the concentration of rugby activity; this idea is emerging from some RFU research being conducted with Leeds Beckett University. Secondly, “half a game” is guaranteed in a match for all squad members, particularly in the 15-a-side game, where underplaying and overplaying is probably more prevalent; this is an idea that has been successful in New Zealand.

10. The Age Grade Player Survey also found that getting injured was the thing youngsters disliked most about rugby. Injury risk and the fear of injury are significant issues, therefore, facing the age grade game. Statistics show that injury risk and particularly, the risk of concussion is associated with the amount of exposure to contact. A culture of putting player welfare at the centre of the game is essential in making progress in this area, through wider awareness and implementation of the RFU RugbySafe scheme. Consequently, the Working Group recommend that the CGB support the adoption of the principles of injury/concussion risk management developed by the RFU, and that they are considered, evaluated, adopted and integrated, where appropriate, into all Age Grade Regulations, and coach and teacher education and development.
11. In looking at out-of-season activity, the current regulations allow a significant amount of rugby activity. This is contrary to the published principles of good youth sports programmes that limit the length of season to 6 months and encourages youngsters to try other activities out-of-season. Consequently, the Working Group recommends amendment of the regulations so that the age-grade season in England normally runs from the 1st Saturday in September until the 1st Bank Holiday Monday in May, and so that out-of-season activity is limited and much more closely defined.
12. The Working Group also considered the issues of playing and training out of age group. Many find the regulations difficult to understand and apply in a combined and consistent way. Without doubt, they create the greatest number of enquiries to the RFU about interpretation of age grade regulations. The Working Group explored the rationale behind the regulations, which it found to be sound. However, the Working Group recommends that RFU Regulations 15.3 and 15.4 be reviewed to provide consistency and a more easy to interpret and apply format, and that the RFU to provide an explanation of the rationale behind the specific regulations of playing and training up and down. Even so, there will still be circumstances in clubs, schools and colleges that do not fit the regulations

without impacting negatively on some individual children. The RFU should provide advice on what can be done in these exceptional circumstances, together with some practical examples.

13. Throughout the report the Working Group did not differentiate between male and female age-grade players, except where it is appropriate to do so. In particular, the Working Group sought and found evidence to justify that teenage female rugby is based on a range of age groups rather than the year groups that apply to males. Coaches and teachers (of both male and female age grade players) should be made more aware of the rationale and research that justifies this difference. The Working Group also noted an anomaly in the regulations as to when females and males are able to play and train with adults. Therefore, the Working Group recommends that consideration should be given to having a combined regulation about males and females playing and training with adults that accords with the principle of equality.
14. The Working Group was cognisant that when children should begin to play and train with adults is a matter for the 14 -19 Commission to consider. The Working Group is also aware that the RFU is currently conducting some research to examine the impact on player safety of the current regulations. However, this work will not be concluded for another 12 months. The report sets out the pros and cons for the current system that applies to males and, similarly, for delaying it until **the season after** an individual attaining 18 years of age, when legally they become an adult, as is currently the case for females. The Working Group encourages the Commission to analyse the pro and cons and base any decision on what is best for young players. Often it is made to ensure that an adult team in the club can field 15 players; this is absolutely the wrong reason for allowing a player to play adult rugby.
15. The principal findings and recommendations of the Working Group are listed at the start of each section of the report. They fall into the following categories:
 - Those that confirm assumptions of the Working Group or set the scene for the principal findings of the report.
 - Those that recommend regulation amendments.
 - Those that the Working Group consider good practice and need to be communicated to coaches, teachers and parents of age grade players.
 - Some specific recommendations made to an explicit group or propose that a more appropriate group consider the issues.

16. The major purpose of this Working Group was to highlight evidence-based good practice that can be communicated to coaches, teachers and parents to help them better understand the purpose of age grade rugby, the rationale behind the regulations, and their roles in ensuring that good practice is followed. Previously, the RFU has issued guidance in support of regulation, which often can be ignored in that it is not considered obligatory. The Working Group explored the concept of a Code of Good Practice. While a code has no more authority than guidance, the Working Group suggests that a Code of Good Practice may be perceived to have greater credence and, therefore, adhered to. Consequently, the Working Group recommends that the RFU builds upon the Age Grade Rugby Guidance issued in July 2016 by developing an Age Grade Code of Good Practice aimed at coaches, teachers and parents. It should be evidence-based and incorporate the principal findings found in this report. Moreover, it is recommended that a clear, integrated communication plan is created using a number of traditional and social media channels to circulate widely the information emanating from this Working Group.

INTRODUCTION

1. The recent Age Grade Competition Review provided a framework that puts the development of the player as the focus of rugby activity. The Age Grade Competition Review established:
 - a. The format of the game played at various levels.
 - b. The types of competition that various age groups should experience.
 - c. The very clear principle that rugby for youngsters should be:
 - Player-centred.
 - Development-driven.
 - Competition-supported.

2. However, while this framework is in place there is little **evidence-based** documented advice for coaches and teachers on the type and frequency of training, and how to control the amount of rugby activity an individual should undertake, both during the season and out-of-season. Youngsters can be involved in rugby with their club, their educational establishment, Constituent Body (CB) age grade representative teams, and in the Developing Player Programme (DPP). Instances have been quoted of young players playing well in excess of 40 games a season, and of mini-teams training throughout the summer using non-contact rugby activities and summer camps. Many clubs are running activities twice a week for their youngsters; playing or training on a Sunday and training midweek. However, many also play (once or twice a week) and train at school and may be attending DPP and / or age grade representative sessions, as well as being involved in other physical activities at school / college or with other sports clubs. Consequently, we need to consider carefully whether this is in their best interest. All of this rugby activity, both in and out-of- season, is permissible under RFU Regulation 15. Playing and training overload can increase the likelihood of injury, not only because of the frequency of contact rugby, but also because of fatigue and non-contact over-use. This can be exacerbated where there is little or no communication between coaches and teachers organising the various activities.

3. It is absolutely correct that rugby activity for youngsters should be player-centred and competition-supported, to enhance their development, but the type and frequency of activity must also take account of the long-term aim of retaining these youngsters so that they continue to play regularly when they are adults. Moreover, both player development and long-term retention must be overlaid by player welfare to minimise the risk of injury. Player welfare must be paramount for parents, head-teachers and their governing bodies, club coaches

and administrators, and the youngsters themselves to breed confidence in rugby as a sport to be enjoyed and as a valuable development tool (socially, emotionally and physically).

4. Many of the sub-committees of the Community Game Board (CGB) have been examining various aspects of this challenge to retain the correct balance between development, long-term retention and player welfare. To bring better co-ordination to this work, the CGB endorsed the formation of a Working Group to review policy and then develop good practice for youngsters playing and training, both in-season and out-of-season, for all ages (U6 – U18) or sets of age groups.
5. The terms of reference of this Working Group are at **Annex A**, together with details of those who served on the Working Group. You will note that they are a mix of individuals involved with age grade rugby at community clubs, at schools and colleges, in Academies working with the potentially most talented older boys, and RFU staff responsible for all aspects of age grade rugby. To all those members of the Working Group much thanks is due for their time, their commitment, their ideas and being prepared to challenge the norm, their knowledge and study of evidence, and their teamwork in developing the recommendations in this report.

AGE GRADE PLAYER SURVEY ANALYSIS

PRINCIPAL FINDING

1. The Working Group will give significant weight in formulating its recommendations to the views of youngsters in the Age Grade Player Survey, in support of the principle that age-grade rugby should be player-centred.

6. The Working Group had cognisance from the outset of the newly commissioned annual Age Grade Player Survey. Respondents were aged between 7 and 18 years of age, and were contacted via their teacher, club coach or social media. Some 11,500 responded to some part of the survey of which nearly 6,500 completed the full survey. Of those, 40% played rugby at both club and school or college, 8% were female, and 98% played rugby in the 2015/16 season. The responses ranged across the age groups from 5% being under U7 rising steadily so that U10s accounting for 8% of the respondents and all older age groups each having around 9% of respondents. Moreover, the responses from females, although much smaller in total number, were spread across all age groups. Similarly, all 6 RFU Areas had a significant number of respondents ranging from Area 6 (Cumbria, Durham, Northumberland & Yorkshire) with 12% and Area 3 (Essex, Kent, Surrey & Sussex) with 22%. Therefore, it is concluded that the survey is fully representative by age, gender, rugby environment (club, school & college) and region.
7. The youngsters were asked to identify what are the 3 most important things to them about playing. There were some 17 possibilities (including the option to define others of their choice) and the 4 most important were:
- 1st Being part of a team – 44%.
 - 2nd Enjoyment of the game – 39%.
 - 3rd Having fun – 35%.
 - 4th Playing with friends – 25%.

It might be argued that “being part of a team” and “playing with friends” is one and the same thing. Similarly, “enjoyment of the game” and “having fun” is the same. Therefore, having fun playing rugby with friends is overwhelmingly the most important factor for youngsters continuing to be involved in the game. This is especially so when noting that the remaining factors were considered

important by 19% or less and that “winning” was only rated by 14% as in their top 3 factors of importance.

8. The youngsters were also asked to list which 3 of those 17 possibilities they considered the least important factors (which also validated the most important factors) to them playing rugby. The least important factors were:

- 1st** Post-match food – 76%.
- 2nd** Scoring tries - 31%.
- 3rd** Winning - 30%.
- 4th** Being good at it - 21%.

“Winning”, therefore, is not relatively un-important to children. Playing rugby with friends for enjoyment is the essential thing to encourage them to continue in the game.

9. Similarly, the youngsters were asked to rate the 3 things they disliked about rugby; the top 4 factors were:

- 1st** Getting injured - 67%.
- 2nd** Poor refereeing - 63%.
- 3rd** Distance travelled to matches - 39%.
- 4th** Scared of making mistakes – 33%

None of the remaining answers scored more than 16%. It is not surprising that players do not like being injured; no one does. This emphasises the need to prioritise player safety and welfare as a vital ingredient of being player-centred. Care should also be taken in interpreting the factor “poor refereeing”. Such a factor features in all sports and among all ages and levels; 60% of elite cricketers scored poor umpiring as their greatest dislike in cricket.

10. The youngsters were also asked to estimate how many games they played in the 2015/16 season; the results are shown in **Figure 1** below:

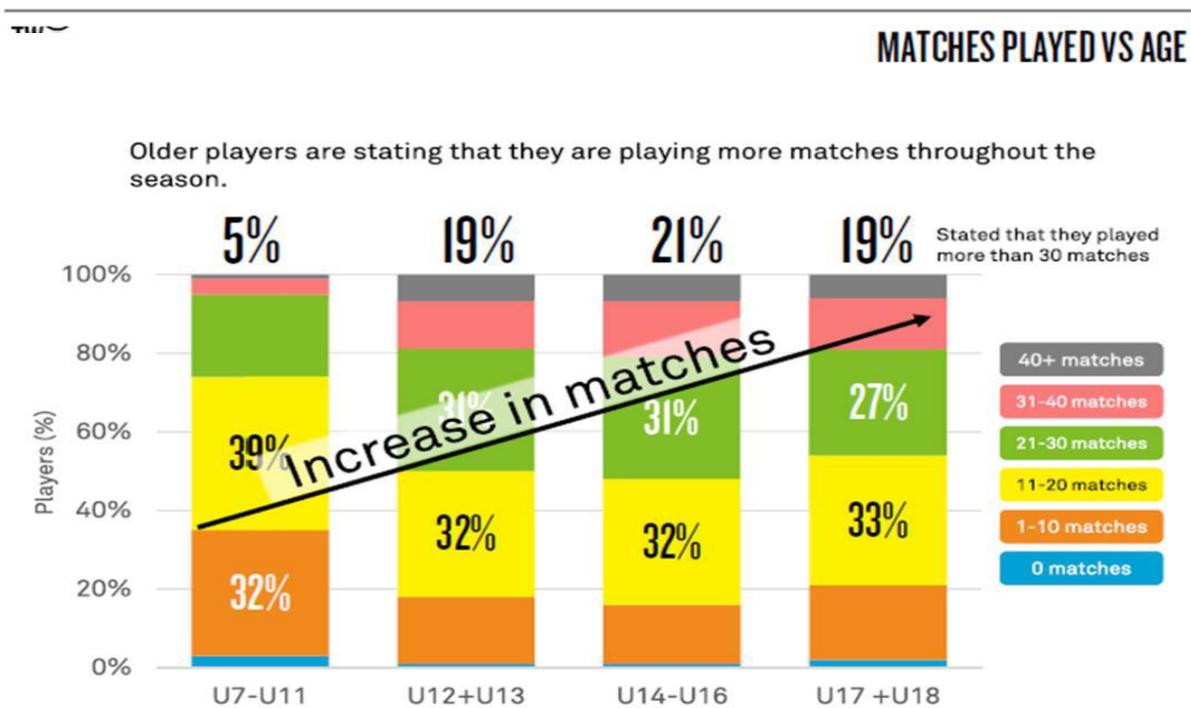


Figure 1

11. One in 5 players of secondary school age suggest they play more than 30 games per season with a number suggesting they play in excess of 40 games per season, despite the RFU regulation (15.14.1) stating that club, college and school officials must ensure that no player currently exceeds more than 35 matches in a season. Not surprisingly, the majority stated they wanted to play more rugby (only 2% stated they played too much). Undoubtedly, those playing few games each season are likely to make such a statement. Indeed, those playing 30 games or more per season may say the same, because they enjoy playing the game. However, youngsters have little regard to the long-term, and the impact of overload on the chances of injury and their long-term retention into the adult game. It is for adults to determine the proper balance between development opportunities and playing matches.

12. That said, the Age Grade Competition Review established the principle that age grade rugby should, firstly, be player-centred. Therefore, the Working Group will give significant weight in formulating its recommendations to these views of youngsters.

BANDING BY AGE

PRINCIPAL FINDINGS

2. There is no evidence to support that it is more effective and has player development and welfare benefits to routinely band children by measures other than age.
3. Rugby in England should continue to band children (up to 18 years old) by age, with those born in the school year from 1 September until 31 August being in the same age band.

13. Traditionally, rugby in England for youngsters in clubs, schools and colleges has always banded by age matching the school years. However, while banding by age is common across many sports, in recent years, some sports have explored bio-banding in their talent pathways and some regions in New Zealand have introduced weight banding in certain matches in response to concerns over significant physical differences between their ethnic populations. Bio-banding is the practice of grouping young players according to selected biological characteristics (eg taking account of physical maturity, body weight or ability to produce force) while taking into consideration psychological and emotional maturity, and technical ability.

14. Consequently, the RFU last year formed a small group¹ of experts within the field to consider the benefits to rugby of bio-banding. The group acknowledged that the scientific evidence is poor, but that in practice good coaches use variations on the bio-banding theme in their coaching as a matter of course. In rugby union, weight banding has been employed in Auckland with both weight restricted and unrestricted competitions played. There is no published evidence regarding the benefits and possible drawbacks of weight banding in this environment. However, anecdotal reports indicate that where there is the potential for significant mismatches between Caucasian and Islander players (something that is not replicated in England), then playing in restricted weight categories can have benefits in terms of enjoyment and continued participation

¹ Working Group membership consisted of: Chair, Dr Mike England (RFU), Stuart Armstrong (Head of Coaching, Sport England UK), James Bunce (Premier League), Dr Sean Cumming (University of Bath), Dr Tom Dompier (Datalys Center for Injury Surveillance and Prevention, USA), Robin Eager (Gloucester Rugby), Neil McCarthy (Gloucester Rugby), Dr Jon Oliver (Cardiff Metropolitan University) & Prof Keith Stokes (University of Bath).

and possibly for injury prevention. The most robust evidence relating to the potential effect of employing weight categories in contact sports comes from American Football. In a two-season study involving 210 teams, there was no difference in injury risk between youth players involved in leagues organised by age only compared with those arranged by age **and** weight (Kerr et al. 2015)².

15. The experts concluded that in rugby it might be more important to consider aspects such as the ability of a player to produce force than it is to consider size or maturation status. Even then, given the wide variety of position-specific demands, it is difficult to identify the most appropriate way to group players other than by age. The key issue is that it is recognised that certain players do benefit from playing out of their biological age group, but this should be considered on an individual basis. It is also recognised that coaches and teachers are more confident in making decisions about players based on physical attributes than psychological attributes, because they are much easier to see and to measure.
16. The experts concluded that there is currently no evidence that altering the way that youth rugby is structured to banding by maturation or weight (ie bio-banding) would have any benefit in terms of injury prevention or player development. **Therefore, the group concluded that banding by age, although not perfect, is currently, the best and most practical to use in rugby.**
17. The experts also observed that a much bigger challenge in relation to managing youth players is the demand placed on them in terms of number of matches, the multiple training and playing environments, and the current competition structures. The working group opined that competition to win tournaments and festivals should be de-emphasised. Moreover, if the intention is to develop players, then more time should be spent in training and less time spent in competitive matches. The group recognised and applauded the work that has been done to introduce the Age Grade Competition Review. However, the current National competitions in youth rugby should be scrutinised and given careful consideration as such highly competitive fixtures will tend to drive negative behaviours in player development. Examples of such potentially negative behaviours include:

- a. Emphasis on winning at all costs.

² Kerr, Z.Y., Marshall, S.W., Simon, J.E., Hayden, R., Snook, E.M., Dodge, T., Gallo, J.A., McLeod, T.C.V., Mensch, J., Murphy, J.M., Nittoli, V.C., Dompier, T.P. (2015) Injury rates in age-only versus age-and-weight playing standard conditions in American youth football. *The Orthopaedic Journal of Sports Medicine* 3(9), 2325967115603979

- b. Overplaying of early maturers and talented players.
- c. Underplaying of the perceived less able players.
- d. Too early specific specialisation.
- e. Over structured / limited approaches to training and playing.
- f. Deteriorating behaviour on the pitch and touchline.

18. Therefore, as there is no evidence to support from a player development and welfare perspective a different approach, the Age Grade Good Practice Working Group confirms that rugby in England would continue to band children (up to 18 years old) by age, with those born in the school year from 1 September until 31 August being in the same age band.

PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AND THE ROLE OF RUGBY

PRINCIPAL FINDING

4. Coaches, teachers and parents need a greater understanding of the principles of development and the role of rugby in a balanced youth sports development programme to provide a strong framework to achieve the aims of a player-centred, development-driven and competition-supported sport.

19. NHS Guidelines on physical activity advise that to maintain a reasonable level of health youngsters aged 5 to 18 need to engage in:

- At least 60 minutes of physical activity every day. This should range from moderate activity (walking, playground activities, cycling on level ground) to vigorous activity (running, cycling fast or on hilly terrain and sports such as football, gymnastics and rugby).
- Three days a week these should involve activities to strengthen muscles (including activities such as sit-ups and press-up, swinging and climbing on equipment and sports such as gymnastics, tennis and rugby) and activities for strong bones (such as dance, running and jumping and sports such as gymnastics, football, martial arts and rugby).
- A wide variety of activities that are appropriate for their age and stage of development.

20. Moreover, in June 2014 the International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics published a summary of the evidence-based studies on youth sport. This article précised the various athlete development models that have been proposed over the past 30 years and highlighted the common findings among them; these include:

- Early experience of a wide variety of sports has very positive implications for long-term sport involvement. Numerous studies have supported the theory that the physical and psychological benefits of varied involvement in sports from an early age increase the chances of long-term involvement in sport (ie helps to avoid dropout). Moreover, many studies have demonstrated that high amounts of “deliberate

play” rather than “organised sport” during the early years (including the first few years in primary school) provide the motivational foundation that is so important to long-term continued participation in sport into adulthood.

- Early experience of a wide variety of sports does not hinder elite sport participation where peak performance is reached after maturation, which is the case in rugby which is described as a “late maturation” sport. The evidence from several studies suggest that elite athletes, who experience a wide variety of sporting experiences can still reach an elite level of performance in one sport and, indeed, for team ball sports (such as rugby) , a mixture of sporting experiences seems to be more prevalent among the most successful athletes.
- Many studies have shown that late adolescence (around 16 years of age) is an appropriate age to have developed the physical, psychological, social, emotional and motor skills needed to concentrate efforts in specialised training in one sport and limiting (not ending) involvement in other sports. Moreover, research into sports where specialisation occurs before this age of 16 has indicated several negative outcomes such as more injuries and less enjoyment.

21. The article then provides a number of common themes for youth sports programmes that try to integrate and balance the principle objectives of: participation for the majority; performance for the most talented and the minority; and personal development (social skills, communication, sportsmanship, leadership and teamwork) for all. These common themes for youth sports programmes are:

- Regulate the length of season to 3 or 4 months with a maximum of 6 months.
- Limit lengthy travel to organised competitions and matches.
- Allow children, particularly younger ones, to regularly experience a variety of sports.
- Particularly in primary school-aged children promote “deliberate play” rather than “organised sport”.
- Provide competitive opportunities, but do not emphasise winning and long-term outcomes such as tournaments and championships until the adolescent years.
- Allow youngsters to play in all positions in a given sport.

- Discourage early specialisation in a given sport and only implement a selection process of the more “talented” at about 16 years of age.
- Design activities that focus on fun and short-term rewards.
- Understand youngsters’ needs and do not “over coach”.

22. The Working Group noted that the RFU’s recent Age Grade Competition Review included many of those themes, but perhaps a greater understanding of the rationale is needed by coaches, teachers and parents, as well as some further amendments to Regulation 15, to provide a strong framework to achieve the aims of player-centred, development-driven and competition-supported sport.

23. The Working Group also asked a small group of stakeholders, representing the age-grade game, together with individuals from the RFL, the FA and the ECB, to review published evidence to agree a set of development principles for talented U13s –U15s. There were 20 individuals in the stakeholders group and each of the principles listed received at least 75% support. While much of the published literature and research involves those **perceived** as talented youngsters, what became clear is that the majority of these principles apply to **all** youngsters; this is not surprising given that rugby is a late maturation sport. Those principles that apply to all youngsters are at Annex B.

PURPOSE OF AGE GRADE RUGBY

PRINCIPAL FINDING

5. Coaches, teachers and parents need to understand the primary purpose of age grade rugby, the purpose of a match and the role of training, which should include small-sided games, and the distinction between “streaming” and “differentiation”.

24. Simply, the purpose of age-grade rugby is for youngsters to have fun, to teach the fundamental skills and understanding of rugby, to contribute to their personal development and to motivate them to play rugby regularly in adulthood. First and foremost, it is a developmental tool in preparation for playing and enjoying participating in rugby regularly as an adult.
25. **Purpose of a Match.** The terms “match” and “game” are often used in the same way and are inter-changeable. This can lead to confusion when explaining their purpose. Therefore, there would be benefit in differentiating between the 2 terms and then using them consistently in all RFU documentation about age grade rugby. The Working Group defines a “match” as fixture between 2 clubs, colleges or schools **and** a fixture between 2 teams from the same club, college or school (eg inter-house matches). In all cases the coach/ teacher / referee has little opportunity to dictate or control the situations that arise, except by means of applying the laws of rugby or the regulations that relate to the playing of matches at that age group. Such matches may be one-offs, or part of a tournament or festival.
26. As such, ball-in-play is limited and, therefore, matches are not a major development tool. It is an opportunity to confirm skills, tactical, technical and rugby understanding, as well as to observe youngsters’ personal abilities (including social skills, communication, sportsmanship, leadership and teamwork). Therefore, if the primary purpose of age grade rugby is developmental, then matches should not form the majority of rugby activity that youngsters experience.
27. **Purpose of a Game.** The Working Group defines a “game” as a conditioned and managed rugby activity by the coach / teacher. Whether all the players come from the same club, same college or same school or not, has no relevance. It provides an opportunity for coaches and teachers to introduce skills and techniques by devising and controlling situations to best develop individual

players and, through experience, for players to improve their tactical and technical understanding of rugby. As such, small-sided and adapted games are the major developmental tool to be used by age grade coaches and teachers of rugby in training sessions. There is a place for drills (or skill zones as they should now be called – **see para 32 below**) when introducing technique, but they have limited value, because children can easily become bored by repetition. However, youngsters enjoy small-sided and adapted games, have fun, learn by experience, and they are a vehicle for children to develop agility, balance and co-ordination (the building blocks of physical literacy that help to minimise injury) through opportunities to run, jump, catch and change direction. The learning environment in which training games takes place should be player-centred, encourage self-organisation, adaptability, decision-making and resilience.

28. **Streaming & Differentiation.** There is also much confusion among coaches and teachers about the terms “streaming” and “differentiation” and whether they are appropriate for age-grade rugby. The streaming of players into graded squads (such as A and B), based on perceived ability is inappropriate. All young players must be provided with equal opportunities to play, train and develop alongside their friends in an open and transparent manner. Streaming means that they may not be with their best friends, one of the most important factors for children. Some coaches and teachers are too quick to stream, instead of, as good coaches, to provide appropriate challenges for the more-able to encourage teamwork and to promote the game’s values.

29. On the other hand, differentiation in small-sided games is appropriate, as is taught on the various RFU coach qualification courses. If a coach sets the same challenge to a large group of players at what level does he or she set success; that of the most-able, that of the least-able or somewhere in the middle? By dividing a large group for a particular challenge into small groups of 5 or even 3 then the level of success can be appropriately set for each group. Of course, when looking at another task or challenge then the make-up of each small group should change to reflect each individual’s ability at achieving that task. This is, of course, more challenging for coaches and teachers, but it is also more stimulating for them.

COACH AND TEACHER EDUCATION

PRINCIPAL FINDING

6. Clubs, colleges and schools should recognise their responsibilities as important providers of child development opportunities by ensuring coaching practice is supported through education and training.

30. The central theme for all coach and teacher education for age grade rugby is that it is player-centred, development-driven and competition supported. This provides the basis on which all course and CPD opportunities should emphasise the responsibility each coach and teacher has to the Game.

31. The RFU's approach to rugby training for children is that the primary coaching vehicle should be the use of small sided and adapted games, supported by recommended coaching interventions. National Governing Bodies for team sports in the UK and worldwide have adopted this approach as the best way to deliver whole child development through their sport. Rugby Union has adapted this approach and created a sport specific delivery model, It is described as "The Components of the Game", as shown in **Figure 2** below:

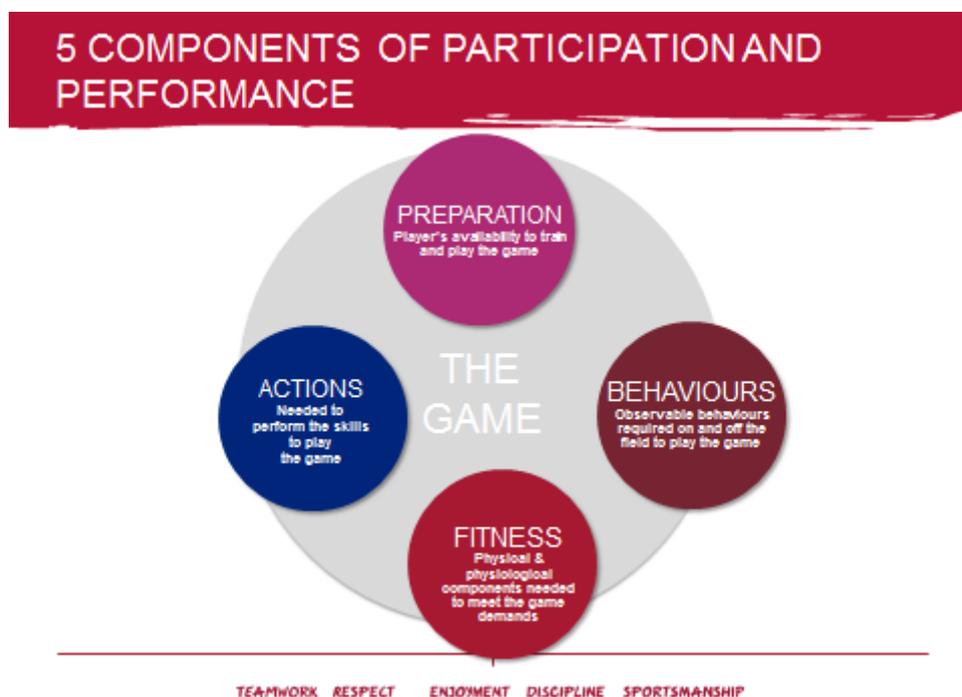


Figure 2

32. A number of coaching interventions are recommended to coaches and teachers to embed learning during initial training, including use of a “Skill Zone” where small numbers of players can receive differentiated and appropriate support. Interventions will be around the child’s ability to execute basic skills required to play the game; behaviours needed to play the game; or having the physical or physiological elements required to play the game.
33. The RFU recognises the challenges facing novice and volunteer coaches in devising appropriate practices within this framework. To help the RFU has developed the “Gamechanger” series as a digital resource which provides best practice models for coaches. Supporting this, the RFU is developing a bank of “Skill Zone” activities around the components as a digital resource. Response to “Gamechangers” has been positive and indicates growing understanding of the model. The Working Group endorses age grade coaches delivering all aspects of training using the “Game Zone/Skill Zone” approach, supported by an appropriate understanding of the “Components of the Game”.
34. Ideally, as standard practice every coach teacher and referee working with age grade players should have a current DBS certificate an appropriate RFU qualification and have undertaken some appropriate CPD including player safety courses, such as “Headcase”. However, good practice would mean that the individual, as well as fulfilling the requirements of standard practice, demonstrates a commitment to ongoing development and meeting the requirements of the England Rugby Referees Association or the England Rugby Coaches Association. Furthermore, clubs, schools and colleges should recognise their responsibilities as important providers of child development opportunities by ensuring coaching practice is supported through education and training. Those adopting best practice would:
- Have specialist age group rugby coaches and teachers who build expertise at an age group.
 - Have a bank of coaches with experience in specific areas of child development to observe, mentor and model best practice.
 - Clearly articulate how the Kids First philosophy will be applied in their club, college or school
 - Ensure that coaching and playing opportunities offer equal development time for every child
 - Monitor and manage the behaviours and expectations of all stakeholders.

BALANCE OF MATCHES AND TRAINING, AND THE IMPACT OF PLAYING AND TRAINING LOADS

PRINCIPAL FINDINGS

7. RFU regulation 15.4.1 states the maximum amount of time a player should be involved in matches (35) during a day (as part of a festival or tournament) and the maximum number of matches an individual should play in a season. These are difficult to track and, therefore, impractical to enforce. Consequently, they should be deleted from regulation.
8. Instead, coaches and teachers (and parents) need to better understand the principles of development (as listed at Annex B) and how to: balance training (the major developmental tool) and matches (confirmation of development); the effect of over-playing and over-training, as well as under-playing; and the concentration span and physical limits of youngsters that will determine the optimum length of a training session.
9. The optimum number of 15-a-side matches a club, college or school should arrange for each age group in a 35 week season is 16.
10. The current National competitions in youth rugby (such as the NatWest competitions for schools and colleges, and the National U17s competition for clubs) should be reviewed to ensure that such highly competitive fixtures do not drive negative behaviours in player development, particularly in coaches and teachers.

35. The questions are often asked as to how many matches an individual (currently regulated at a maximum of 35 per season), a college, school or club should play in a season, and how often an individual should play each week. Unfortunately, there is no easy answer to these questions and little evidence to support giving actual optimum numbers. Currently, RFU regulations (15.4.1) state that clubs schools and colleges must ensure that no age-grade player plays more than 35 matches per season; sets times for the maximum length of each half of a match by age group; and the maximum time, again by age group, a player should be involved in matches during any one day as part of a tournament and a festival. In addition, the regulation refers to guidance of the recommended duration of a training session in a day by age group, ranging from 60 minutes for U7s & U8s though to 2 hours for those aged U12 and older.

36. While stating the maximum length of a match-half for each age group is necessary and easily enforced, the other 2 aspects of the regulation (maximum time a player should be involved in matches during a day and the maximum number of matches in a season) are difficult to track and, therefore, enforce. Consequently, these aspects should be removed from regulation.
37. Instead, the Working Group is of the opinion that it would be more effective if coaches and teachers (and parents) understood how to: balance training (the major developmental tool) and matches (confirmation of development); the effect of over-playing and over-training, as well as under-playing; and the concentration span and physical limits of youngsters that will determine the optimum length of a training session.
38. There is evidence (the Age Grade Player Survey) that a significant number of young players, particularly teenagers, are exceeding that 35 per season maximum and many who play in less than 10 per season. The latter may be, because their coach recognises there is little developmental value in playing matches and, therefore, concentrates on providing enjoyable developmental training sessions or, and we suspect more likely, that the less-able players are not given the same playing opportunities by their coaches and teachers as their more-able team mates, particularly among the oldest age groups. Without doubt, those who play the most matches per season are more susceptible to injury (the most disliked aspect of rugby among youngsters according to the Age Grade Player Survey), if only because they are more frequently exposed to contact and situations where injuries occur than their counterparts who play less matches in a season. Unfortunately, there is little conclusive research on the susceptibility to injury from fatigue due to over-frequent rugby or physical activity. However, there is some evidence emerging from research being undertaken by Leeds-Beckett University, on behalf of the RFU, that it takes 72 hours for youngsters to recover fully from a match or an hour of training activity and then benefit fully from another period of training. However, this needs much more research before any definitive conclusions can be drawn.
39. It is also recognised that there is little difference among the younger age groups (probably U8s and younger) between a match **(as defined in para 25 above)** and a training small-sided game **(as defined in para 27 above)**, particularly if coaches and referees are intervening appropriately to make a training point. Therefore, in terms of U8s and younger the Working Group are of the opinion that there is no requirement to define the number matches played in a season, but instead coaches and teachers of these age groups should provide a balanced programme, as per the NHS Guidelines and International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics, mixing rugby activity, with the opportunity to experience other sports and

deliberate play. At these age groups primary schools are likely to have the best oversight of the amount of physical activity that a child of these ages is experiencing each week, inclusive of match and game activities. Therefore, clubs should limit themselves to holding one rugby session per week during the season, probably lasting about an hour, given that the attention span of children of these ages is relatively limited and, therefore, there is no benefit from spending longer experiencing and learning about rugby.

40. As children get older then training sessions and matches can be more structured and there needs to be a balance between the number of training sessions and the number of matches. There are some principles that coaches and teachers should always have at the forefront of their thoughts, particularly when planning training and matches; these are:

- Through to U13s the purpose of age-grade rugby is to learn the fundamentals, develop the necessary understanding of rugby, and mature as an individual to play the 15-a-side game.
- Until the U14 age-group training should focus entirely on the development of the individual and there is little, if any, need for team organisation training.
- From U14s upwards the primary purpose of training should still be individually-centred with some, increasing as the players join an older age group, team training. However, if the principle of player-centred is to be adhered to, then the amount of team training should never exceed the amount of individually-centred training.

41. While no specific number can put on the number of matches a school, college or club should have in a season for an age group, remembering that a match has limited developmental value, while a training session, using small-sided and adapted games, is the primary developmental tool for age grade rugby, it is suggested that **a school, college and club should not organise more than 16 matches over the 35 weeks of the season for each age group**. This means for a club that has one rugby session per week with each age group, then training sessions will form the majority of rugby activity in the season. Moreover, if schools, colleges and clubs adhere to that advice, a player who plays both for his club and school or college should not exceed 32 games per season, although those who play representative rugby will have further opportunities to play matches. However, it easier for coaches and team managers of representative

sides to manage the smaller number of players involved and ensure that those playing both at school or college, as well as for a club, are not over-played.

42. Of course, this advice about schools, colleges and clubs does not provide any information on the timing of these matches. That said, the new Youth Playing calendar encourages constructive discussions between clubs, schools, colleges and CBs to ensure undue demands are not made of players. Clearly, at the beginning of the season, colleges, clubs and schools should concentrate on training sessions until, at least, the new skills and techniques for a particular age group have been taught and reasonably established. This may mean that for a club that has an age group together once a week, it may be 2 or 3 weeks (or longer) into the season before they should hold their first match to determine how well those skills and techniques have been established, and what additional training is required by all players to develop those skills and techniques further. For schools and colleges, where rugby activity may be more frequent than once per week, then the first match in a season for an age group may be much earlier. There are many things for coaches and teachers to consider when arranging training or matches with other clubs, schools and colleges. Some issues (although not an exhaustive list) that colleges, schools and clubs should consider when arranging matches or training with others are listed at **Annex C**.
43. For the majority of age grade players there is no easy way to regulate for the amount of training and matches an individual undertakes weekly and through a season. Consequently, coaches and teachers (and parents) need to better understand the principles of development (as listed at **Annex B**) and how to: balance training (the major developmental tool) and matches (confirmation of development); the effect of over-playing and over-training; and the concentration span and physical limits of youngsters that will determine the optimum length of a training session. Coaches and teachers should also apply the principles (**listed in para 40 above**) when planning training and matches. Moreover, colleges, schools and clubs should not organise more than 16 matches over the 35 weeks of the season (**for reasons set out in para 41 above**).
44. In addition, while not specifically within the remit of the Working Group, it was cognisant that some national age-grade competitions do not encourage the principles of player-centred, development-driven and competition-supported. Indeed, the bio-banding experts' report, as outlined earlier, while applauding the work of the Age Grade Competition Review, suggests that consideration be given to reviewing the current National competitions in youth rugby. The report

suggested that such highly competitive fixtures drive negative behaviours in player development including:

- a. Emphasis on winning at all costs.
- b. Overplaying of early maturers and talented players.

45. Therefore, the Working Group recommends that the current National competitions in youth rugby (such as the NatWest competitions for schools and colleges, and the National U17s competition for clubs) should be reviewed to ensure that such highly competitive fixtures do not drive negative behaviours in player development, particularly in coaches and teachers.

THE IMPACT OF OVER PLAYING AND TRAINING, AND UNDERPLAYING

PRINCIPAL FINDINGS

11. Coaches, teachers and parents are encouraged to hold regular meetings to review and plan the rugby programme of players who are susceptible to over playing and training (likely to be those playing at college or school, local club and involved with the DPP, a CB squad and/or the Regional Academy). In addition, for all England Academy Players that it be a formal requirement to hold such meetings.

12. The RFU to conduct 2 trials, namely:

- a. Where youngsters are limited to rugby activity once in every 72 hour period to identify if there are benefits in better controlling the concentration of rugby activity.
- b. “Half a game” guaranteed in a match for all squad members, particularly in the 15-a-side game, where underplaying and overplaying are probably more prevalent.

46. **Over Playing & Training.** From the Age Grade Player Survey around 20% from U12s to U18s reported that they are playing in excess of 30 matches in a season; as stated earlier this is at the top-end of the numbers necessary, remembering that matches have little value as a developmental tool and time would be better spent training, albeit based on small-sided games. We are also aware that some children in these age groups are playing in excess of 40 matches per season (which cannot be justified), and we know that some children play matches on consecutive days for their school or college and then club, as well as representative rugby for their CB and Regional Academy.

47. Moreover, we know that many players are training regularly with their school or college as well as their club and then will have DPP sessions, CB and Regional Academy training sessions. Often there is very little co-ordination between coaches to ensure a balance in contact sessions (either playing or training), which are likely to be (although not exclusively) the greatest source of injury, if only because of the frequency of exposure. Currently, there is little research on this. The Leeds Beckett Study (**referred to in para 38 above**) suggests that it takes 72

hours for youngsters to recover fully from a match or an hour of training activity and be able to benefit fully from another period of training.

48. Given the Leeds Beckett Study, the Working Group proposes that the RFU conduct a larger trial (probably in conjunction with Leeds Beckett University) where youngsters are limited to rugby activity once in every 72 hour period to identify if there are benefits in better controlling the concentration of rugby activity.
49. Invariably, the majority of age-grade players who are involved in significant over-playing and over-training are likely to be involved with a college or school **and** a club, together with one or more of: a DPP; a CB squad; and a Regional Academy squad. Regular and early engagement between all the stakeholders (parents and all the player's coaches/teachers) is paramount to ensure that the development principles (**listed at Annex B**) are being adhered to and that the player's programme is balanced. The question is who is responsible for ensuring this engagement takes place. The answer is that all the stakeholders are and, if any one of them becomes aware that any of those 10 principles is being compromised then, they should arrange a meeting of the stakeholders to resolve the issue. While all the stakeholders have that responsibility, it is likely to be a DPP, CB or Regional Academy coach would be the instigator.
50. Because of numbers the above arrangement will be relatively informal although vitally important. However, the Working Group felt that for England Academy Players (EAP), there should be a formal system. Consequently, the Working Group recommends that, **as part of the requirement to be an EAP**, there should be a regular (probably every 3 months) meeting of all stakeholders (player, parent(s)/guardian(s), college/school coach, local club coach and Academy staff), led by the latter, to review and plan the EAP's rugby programme.
51. **Under Playing.** While for the reasons just set out, over playing and training is poor practice for some age-grade players, others suffer from under-playing. About 18% in the age group U13 and older reported to the Age Grade Player Survey (**see Figure 1 in para 10 above**) that they played in less than 10 matches per season. This may be for a number of reasons – injury; the college, school or club concentrates on training (the major development tool) rather than matches; or some players are just not chosen for what coaches and teachers perceive as the more important matches. If for the latter reason, that has a very detrimental effect on those players; their worth to their friends is diminished, their opportunities to learn are reduced, and it is unlikely that rugby will remain their leisure activity in the future. The Working Group learnt of a scheme in New

Zealand whereby all squad members are guaranteed to play for a minimum of a half in every match (whether that is a single match on a day or series of shorter matches on a particular day as part of a festival). While better equalising the opportunity for all to have a reasonable amount of match time during the season, it also means that coaches cannot necessarily play who they consider their most able players (who probably suffer from over-playing and training) throughout every game. The beauty of such a scheme is that it can be “self-policed” by players and their parents to minimise any unscrupulous practices. Therefore, the Working Group recommends that the RFU trial “half a game” for all match day squad members, particularly in the 15-a-side game, where underplaying and overplaying is probably more prevalent.

INJURY PREVENTION IN AGE GRADE RUGBY

PRINCIPAL FINDINGS

13. A culture of putting player welfare at the centre of the game is essential in making progress in this area, through wider awareness and implementation of the RFU RugbySafe scheme.

14. The Working Group recommend that the CGB supports the adoption of the principles of injury/concussion risk management developed by the RFU, and that they are considered, evaluated, adopted and integrated, where appropriate, into all Age Grade Regulations, and coach and teacher education and development.

52. The Age Grade Player Survey found that getting injured was the thing youngsters disliked most about rugby. Injury risk and the fear of injury are significant issues, therefore, facing the age grade game. Statistics show that injury risk and particularly, the risk of concussion is associated with the amount of exposure to contact. RFU and other studies show that up to 70% of suspected concussions occur in the tackle. Limiting exposure is an effective means of reducing the risk in this vulnerable group of players.

53. The following is an extract from the World Rugby Laws Manual:

“Rugby Union is a sport which involves physical contact. Any sport involving physical contact has inherent dangers. It is very important that players play the Game in accordance with the Laws of the Game and be mindful of the safety of themselves and others.

It is the responsibility of players to ensure that they are physically and technically prepared in a manner which enables them to play the Game, comply with the Laws of the Game and participate in accordance with safe practices.

It is the responsibility of those who coach or teach the Game to ensure that players are prepared in a manner which ensures compliance with the Laws of the Game and in accordance with safe practices

It is the duty of the referee to apply fairly all the laws of the game in every match except when an Experimental Law Variation (ELV) has been authorised by the World Rugby Council.

It is the duty of the Unions to ensure that the game at every level is conducted in accordance with disciplined and sporting behaviour. This principle cannot be upheld solely by the referee; its observance also rests on Unions, affiliated bodies and clubs”.

54. Consistently, across rugby and other sports, it has been shown that injury risk in sports increases with age and the level of play. The comparative injury rates for all time loss injuries (over one week) and for concussion/suspected concussion, from RFU injury surveillance studies are shown below in **Figures 3&4**.

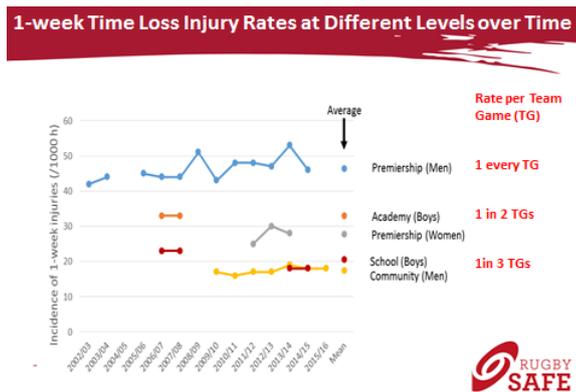


Figure 3

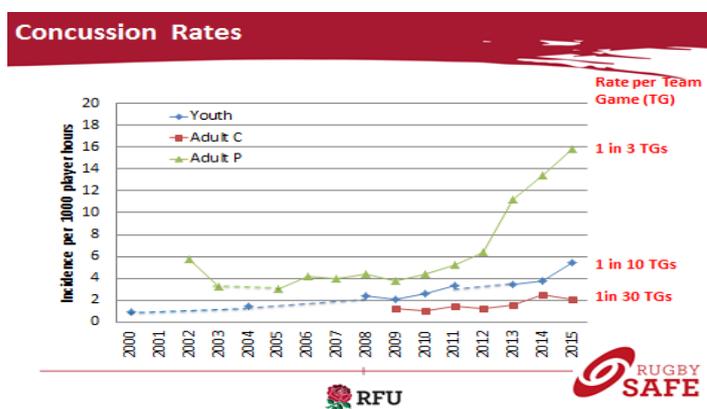


Figure 4

55. A culture of putting player welfare at the centre of the game is essential in making progress in this area, through wider awareness and implementation of the RFU RugbySafe scheme.

56. The Working Group recommend that the CGB support the adoption of the principles of injury/concussion risk management developed by the RFU, and that they are considered, evaluated, adopted and integrated, where appropriate, into all Age Grade Regulations, and coach and teacher education and development.

These are shown in **Figure 5** below.

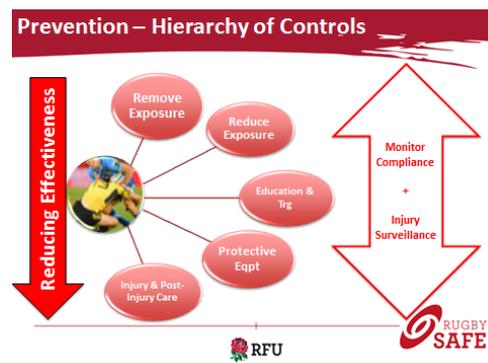


Figure 5

57. The principles and examples of their potential application follow those developed for health and safety risk management. These principles are about taking reasonably practicable steps to protect players while maintaining the fundamental nature of rugby. Taking a sensible approach to risk management is about:

- a. Ensuring that players are properly protected.
- b. Ensuring that those organise rugby activities manage them responsibly.
- c. Providing overall benefit to participants by balancing benefits and risks, with a focus on reducing significant risks - both those which arise more often and those with serious consequences.
- d. Ensuring that players understand that in a contact sport they have to exercise responsibility.

They are not about³:

- a. Reducing protection of people from risks that cause real harm.
- b. Scaring people by exaggerating trivial risks.
- c. Stopping important recreational and learning activities for individuals where the risks are managed.
- d. Creating a totally risk-free society.
- e. Generating useless paperwork mountains.

³ Health and Safety Executive – Sensible Risk Management. <http://www.hse.gov.uk/risk/principles.htm>

OUT-OF-SEASON ACTIVITY

PRINCIPAL FINDINGS

15. Amend the regulations so that the age-grade season in England normally runs from the 1st Saturday in September until the 1st Bank Holiday Monday in May with no extension for U12s – U18s, as allowed by Regulation 15.6.5. Instead, there should be a note to the regulations setting out any exceptional circumstances where the RFU might grant permission for matches or events after the 1st Bank Holiday in May.

16. Amend the regulations to better define activity that can be held in clubs, schools and colleges out-of-season.

58. The current regulations allow a significant amount of rugby activity out-of-season; this includes: non-contact training; summer camps; school games events organised by County Sports Partnerships; Tag and Touch; Sevens events; and pre-season matches and contact training. While the regulations do limit some of these activities for younger age groups and the timing of pre-season activity, overall, there is the potential for children to be involved in rugby activity 12 months of the year. Indeed, the Working Group heard anecdotally of minis training throughout the summer months! It was said, that was what the children wanted to do and enjoyed it, but what effect will incessant rugby activity have on the children's long-term retention into the adult game? It is for coaches, teachers and parents to look to the long-term; children, particularly, the younger ones only consider the here and now. We leave readers of this report to draw their own conclusions on the long-term effect of this.

59. One of the common themes (**set out in para 21 above**) for good youth sports programmes is that try to integrate and balance the principle objectives of:

- Participation for the majority;
- Performance for the most talented (the minority) and;
- Personal development (social skills, communication, sportsmanship, leadership and teamwork) for all.

60. Furthermore, such programmes limit the season length to a maximum of 6 months. Moreover, one of the principles of development (**in Annex B**) is that age-grade players should be encouraged to participate in a number and variety

of different sports. Consequently, out-of-season should provide one of those opportunities by minimising the amount of rugby activity.

61. In order to reflect these good practice youth sports programmes, the Working Group proposes a number of amendments to the regulations about the length of the season and what rugby activities can be held out-of-season, namely:

- a. The age-grade season in England should normally run from the 1st Saturday in September until the 1st Bank Holiday Monday in May. Recently, a regulation was added (15.6.5) so that the season for U12s – U18s could end, in effect, on the 2nd Bank Holiday in May. This extension of the season was to cover finals of competitions that had been cancelled earlier due to poor weather and for youth matches /events held in support of high profile matches such as the Premiership Final, and the School Games held in conjunction with the County Sports Partnerships, without the need to seek RFU approval. The Working Group felt that this extension applying to all youth failed to match the good practice for youth sports. Instead, it is felt that a note to the regulation could set out exceptional circumstances where the RFU might grant permission for matches or events after the 1st Bank Holiday in May.
- b. For those aged 6 – U13s (those not yet playing the 15-a-side game) their out-of- season should be limited to physical activity /literacy from end-of season until beginning of next season, but **no specific** rugby activity. This would also mean that no rugby tours for these age groups could be held in those summer months. However, the RFU's permission for such tours has been sought on less than 10 occasions per annum (and mainly U13s to either Wales or France) in the last few years. Therefore, not allowing tours for these age groups over summer months will not impair what is common practice. Physical activity / literacy sessions can be held in rugby clubs, while colleges and schools will no doubt concentrate on other sports and activities during the summer months. To ensure that clubs, schools and colleges hosting such events follow such principles the RFU should develop a framework for such activity. It is also recommended that those running such activity must be required to obtain the relevant CB's / County Schools Union's (CSU) permission to hold such events. This should be based on a demonstration that the event is in accordance with that RFU endorsed framework. In some cases, when part of a National scheme (eg PRL summer camps), the RFU could endorse the scheme nationally so that CBs and CSUs can be confident that the event will be in

accordance with the framework and, while it would still need the CB's / CSU's permission, the level of scrutiny is easier.

- c. For those aged U14 – 18s (those playing 15-a-side rugby), again, the Working Group recommends that rugby activity for these age groups should be limited over the summer months to allow them to rest and experience other sports and activities. However, the Working Group recognises that some clubs, schools and colleges may wish to prepare for the following season in August, many organise summer camps, and some DPP activity is currently often organised. However, the CGB has recently endorsed a new DPP framework where all activity is held between September and April. Therefore, in future there will be no DPP activity in summer months. Consequently, the Working Group recommends that the regulations be amended so that activity in the summer months for U14s – 18s be limited to:

May: Non-contact rugby activity in accordance with a framework developed by the RFU. Any club, college or school hosting such activity should be required to obtain the relevant CB's / CSU's permission, which should be based on demonstrating that the activity accords with the RFU framework. CBs and CSUs should also ensure that holding the activity will not impact on those undertaking public exams at that time of the year.

June: No rugby activity whatsoever.

July: As per May.

August: Clubs, colleges and schools can begin pre-season contact training from 1 August, but cannot play any matches (either internally or against other clubs, schools and colleges) until 14 days before the start of the season.

For those aged U14 – 18s clubs, schools and colleges may wish to hold physical activity / literacy sessions similar to those described for U6 -13s (**set out in para 50b above**). To do so, the Working Group proposes that the same process should be set out in the regulations for these older age groups.

PLAYING AND TRAINING OUT OF AGE GROUP

PRINCIPAL FINDINGS

17. Review RFU Regulations 15.3 and 15.4 to provide consistency and an easier to interpret and apply format. (The ongoing research outlined in **para 67 below** will also impact on this).
18. Amend regulations so that the youngest age at which children are allowed to participate in organised rugby activity is when they reach the U7 age grade (Year 2 at school).
19. The RFU to provide an explanation of the rationale behind the specific regulations of playing and training up and down.
20. There will still be circumstances in clubs, schools and colleges that do not fit the regulations without impacting negatively on some individual children. The RFU should provide advice on what can be done in these exceptional circumstances, together with some practical examples.

62. RFU Regulation 15.3 is entitled “playing with other age grades” and Regulation 15.4 is entitled “restrictions on playing down”. They cover the various ages that:

- Individuals that can play matches out-of- age group (up and down).
- When individuals can train with other age groups (which may or not be different from playing matches).
- Who has to authorise playing and training out-of- age group.
- When a male player can play and train with adults (the female equivalent regulation is in RFU Regulation 15.5).
- The exceptions from the majority outlining who England Academy players can play and train with.

Many find the regulations difficult to understand and apply in a combined and consistent way. Without doubt, they create the greatest number of enquiries to the RFU about interpretation of age grade regulations.

63. The Working Group explored the rationale behind the regulations. They are primarily based on the need for those aged 6 - U13s to progress systematically and consistently through the various stages of development that is based on the “New Rules of Play”. The regulations were also designed to allow age grades to

combine on occasions. The type of occasion includes when part of a particular age grade is at a fixture and there are still some other players at that age group who want to train. Another example is when a particular age group has a lot of players unavailable perhaps due to injury or holiday. Consequently, it based on occasional rather than regular activity. In addition, the regulations are intended to enable clubs, schools and colleges with small numbers at a particular age group to be able to field a mixed age grade team. Finally, the regulations recognise that player safety may be compromised if individuals are small in stature compared to their contemporaries, have development or behavioural issues, or are in a younger academic year at school than their birth year would normally mean, in such circumstances, these individuals can play and train with a younger age group.

64. The Working Group noted:

- A number of inconsistencies among the age groups when considering different parts of Regulation 15.3 and 15.4 (particularly around 12 - 14 year olds).
- There is no provision for player safety when an individual's physical ability (combined with their emotional maturity) is much greater than one would normally expect within their natural age group.
- While the regulations to help clubs, schools and colleges with very small numbers in a particular age group work in general, but in some circumstances they do not.
- There is no consistency in authorising playing or training out-of-age group.

65. Unfortunately, there is little research about the impact on the individual and others about playing and training out-of-age group. Moreover, the Working Group was advised that it would take a significant amount of time to train an individual to assess all relevant aspects of a child's capability / need to play and train out-of-age group, and to evaluate the impact on the player safety of others. Moreover, a cadre of such experts would be required around the country. Therefore, there is no practical way to deal in an evidential manner with the exceptions of children whose maturity is well-outside the norms expected for his / her age group. Furthermore, it is not practical to regulate for every circumstance of numbers in a particular age group that a club, college or school experiences.

66. Therefore, the Working Group recommends that:

- a. RFU Regulations 15.3 and 15.4 be reviewed to provide consistency and an easier to interpret and apply format. In doing so:
 - i. The principle is maintained for those aged U6 - U13s to progress systematically and consistently through the various stages of development that is based on the “New Rules of Play”.
 - ii. In particular, consider how best to manage playing and training up and down between U13s (in their last year of “New Rules of Play”) and U14s (in their first year of the 15- a-side game).
 - iii. Where appropriate, set up a procedure to authorise **regular** mixed age group playing and training; this is probably for CBs or CSUs to be able to authorise.
 - iv. Consider how to deal with the individual who for a variety of reasons does not fit the norm. Examples include: physical capability well-outside the norm for his / her age group; and intellectual / behavioural maturity where the individual is not in the normal school age group for his or her biological birthday. This will mean considering playing and training up or down within the college / school year group, or alternatively with friends from the same year group in a club.
 - v. Consider having a separate (combined) regulation about males and females playing and training with adults.
 - vi. Similarly, separate out the regulation that applies to England Academy Players.
- b. The youngest age at which children should be allowed to participate in organised rugby activity is when they reach the U7 age grade (Year 2 at school). As with all other age grade rugby, the first “band” should be based on a school year group. This would then aid the simplification of Regulation 15.3.1, which is currently confusing and allows players to play with those up to 2 age grades older than them; a very wide-range of physical, technical and emotional capabilities. This recommended change would narrow that range, create far greater clarity, and support coaches to plan, differentiate and develop players proactively through the season.
- c. Even after this rationalisation of the regulations, they may still be complex. Consequently, the RFU should provide an explanation of the rationale behind the specific regulations of playing and training up and down. In addition, undoubtedly there will still be circumstances in clubs, schools and colleges that do not fit the regulations without impacting negatively on

some individual children. The RFU should provide advice on what can be done in these exceptional circumstances, together with some practical examples.

67. The Working Group also noted Regulation 15.3.6 where in colleges and schools, in particular (but it could also occur in clubs), 15 year olds (as U16s) can be playing with 18 year olds (as U18s) and even 19 year olds (as U19s) who are playing down in accordance with Regulation 15.4.3. This did give some disquiet given the significant range in physical, emotional and intellectual maturity; even those, close to maturity, playing with others 2 years older was questioned. The Working Group was advised research is underway to discover the frequency of this happening and to consider the potential risks. However, numbers are relatively small which means that it will take time to obtain significant meaningful evidence. That said, the Working Group would encourage that this work be completed as soon as possible and, if necessary, the regulations amended.

FEMALE AGE GRADE RUGBY

PRINCIPAL FINDINGS

21. Coaches and teachers (of both male and female age grade players) should be made more aware of the rationale and research that justifies the RFU organising teenage female rugby as it does by combining year groups.
22. Consideration should be given to having a combined regulation about males and females playing and training with adults that accords with the principle of equality.

68. Throughout this report the Working Group has not differentiated between male and female age-grade players, except where it is appropriate to do so. In particular, the Working Group sought evidence to justify that teenage female rugby is based on a range of age groups (U15s including 12 - 15 year olds and then U18s including 15 – 18 year olds), whereas teenage male rugby is based on single year groups. The Working Group heard that there is much evidence to support these arrangements. The normal range in physical capability between girls aged between 12 and 15 years of age is relatively small and akin to the difference found in boys whose ages only differ by 12 months within the same age groups. Similarly, the normal range in physical capability between girls aged between 15 and 18 years of age is akin to the difference found in annual age groups of boys. Therefore, the RFU organising teenage female rugby as it does by combining year groups can be justified in that it does not increase the risk of physical mismatches compared to teenage boys rugby where rugby is generally organised on a single year group. The Working Group recommends that coaches and teachers (of both male and female age grade players) should be made more aware of this.

69. The Working Group also noted an anomaly that boys are able to play and train with adults on attaining 17 years of age (with some restrictions) in accordance with Regulation 15.3.7., whereas girls have to be 18 years of age (Regulation 15.5.6). Without making any judgment on which is the best age to transit to adult rugby, there should at least be parity between the sexes. Therefore, consideration should be given to having a combined regulation about males and females playing and training with adults that accords with the principle of equality.

PLAYING ADULT RUGBY

PRINCIPAL FINDING

23. The 14-19 Commission is strongly encouraged to consider carefully whether players (both female and male) should be allowed to play and train with adults from the age of 17 (as is currently the case for males with certain limitations applied), or whether it should be delayed until **the season after** an individual becomes 18 years old, when legally they become an adult. In doing so, the Commission is encouraged to analyse the pro and cons and base any decision on what is best for young players.

70. The Working Group was cognisant that when children should begin to play and train with adults is a matter for the 14 -19 Commission to consider. The Working Group is aware that the RFU is currently conducting some research to examine the impact on player safety of the current regulations. However, this work will not be concluded for another 12 months.
71. Putting aside the fact that currently the regulations for males and females are different (**see para 69 above**) and the need to make them the same for both sexes, there are pros and cons for the current arrangements where males (with certain limitations) can start to train and play with adults on attaining the age of 17. Equally, there are pros and cons for delaying it until **the season after** an individual becomes 18 years old, when legally they become an adult, as is currently the case for females.
72. There are some players, who because of their physical maturity and technical development are ready and benefit from playing adult rugby at the earlier age; however, many are not. Moreover, well informed players and parents are able to make the right decision for those players. However, the Working Group questions whether the decision is often made to ensure that an adult team in the club can field 15 players; this is absolutely the wrong reason for allowing a player to play adult rugby.
73. Analysis of the Age Grade Player Survey showed that the major motivation for over 60% of youngsters is being part of a team / playing with friends. The current regulation for males fails to recognise this motivation in allowing individuals to start playing adult rugby at many different times over 2 seasons.

An individual who is 17 on 1 September can start playing adult rugby. His team mate who is 17 on 1 May and in the same school or college year group cannot play adult rugby until the following season.

74. Therefore, the 14-19 Commission is strongly encouraged to consider carefully whether players (both female and male) should be allowed to play and train with adults from the age of 17 (as is currently the case for males with certain limitations applied), or whether it should be delayed until **the season after** an individual becomes 18 years old, when legally they become an adult. In doing so, the Commission is encouraged to analyse the pro and cons and base any decision on what is best for young players.

SEVENS

PRINCIPAL FINDING

24. With little research on the physical impact of age grade sevens, it is suggested that age-grade sevens is considered as an adapted game. Therefore, used as a development tool, where smaller numbers on the pitch create an environment where good core skills, as well as tactical understanding, are under greater examination than in the 15-a-side game. As such, coaches should consider that a sevens tournament equates to a 15-a-side game and a similar recovery period is required before further physical activity is undertaken.

75. The Working Group was advised that there were over 110 school sevens events for a variety of age groups held annually. Currently, there are no figures for equivalent club sevens events, but it is thought they would not be so numerous. Particularly, the school events are held in February, March and early April.
76. Currently, there is very little research on the playing load and the effect of irregular short periods of exertion on age grade players as experienced through sevens. Therefore, there is little definitive good practice that the Working Group could identify. One might consider age-grade sevens as an adapted game, used as a development tool, where smaller numbers on the pitch create an environment where good core skills, as well as tactical understanding, are under greater examination than in the 15-a-side game. In terms of playing load, without definitive evidence, coaches should consider that a sevens tournament equates to a 15-a-side game and a similar recovery period is required before further physical activity is undertaken.
77. In developing the strategy for the Sevens game in England, the RFU should consider the role, impact and resulting alignment of age grade sevens. This will ensure that there is clarity of purpose and priority. Consequently, the most practical application, as outlined above, can be promoted and communicated.

COMMUNICATION METHODS AND CODE OF GOOD PRACTICE

PRINCIPAL FINDING

25. It is Group recommends that the RFU builds upon the Age Grade Rugby Guidance issued in July 2016 by developing an Age Grade Code of Good Practice aimed at coaches, teachers and parents. It should be evidence-based and incorporate the relevant principal findings found in this report

26. It is recommended that a clear, integrated communication plan is created using a number of traditional and social media channels to circulate widely the information emanating from this Working Group.

78. The major purpose of this Working Group was to highlight evidence-based good practice that can be communicated to coaches, teachers and parents to help them better understand the purpose of age grade rugby, the rationale behind the regulations, and their roles in ensuring that good practice is followed. Previously, the RFU has issued guidance in support of regulation, which often can be ignored in that it is not considered obligatory. The Working Group explored the concept of a Code of Good Practice. While a code has no more authority than guidance, the Working Group suggests that a Code of Good Practice may be perceived to have greater credence and, therefore, adhered to.

79. Consequently, the Working Group recommends that the RFU builds upon the Age Grade Rugby Guidance issued in July 2016 by developing an Age Grade Code of Good Practice aimed at coaches, teachers and parents. It should be evidence-based and incorporate the relevant principal findings found in this report

80. A key factor for the success of any regulation change and code of practice is the ability to ensure that practitioners and administrators delivering Age Grade Rugby have full awareness of any changes, rationale and implications for them. It is, therefore, vital that a robust communication plan is in place to ensure that the work and recommendations of this Good Practice Working Group are disseminated effectively to the game.

81. In doing this, it is important to recognise the vast and varied preferences that those involved in the game have for receiving and digesting information which need to be reflected within any communication plan. Traditionally, RFU communications, either by email, post or newsletter (including Touchline) have

been targeted at either the club secretary or teacher in charge of rugby (or named contact) asking them to forward on to practitioners. This method is reliant on an individual, most often a volunteer, forwarding on to their contacts and, then, that the contents are in a format which suit the individual recipient. Many coaches and teachers, for example, may not read a 'wordy' email or the relevant part of Touchline and, therefore, any message becomes lost.

82. To adapt to the varied preferences of those involved in the game, a number of communication platforms have been more frequently utilised, used such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram alongside the more traditional methods. These platforms ensure that recipient can access the information in a medium that suits them, when it suits them, and that they receive the information directly not being reliant on being forwarded it. Due to the nature of social media these recipients can then forward to their followers resulting in a larger reach with a specific message – the age grade article in September 2016 was viewed over 250,000 times on Facebook, for example, and age grade tweets (example below in **Figure 6**) were viewed by over 760,000 England Rugby Twitter followers.



Figure 6

83. These social media mediums also have also changed the way people receive their information, much more in-line with their preferences and dictated by their busier life-style. These messages are provided in a clear, concise and more memorable format. The recipient does not therefore need to read lengthy documents and can be directed through to a website or document providing more detail if required.

84. Another practical demonstration of the need to adapt to the need of the audience is the “Game Changers” to support coach education and continual professional development (CPD). In analysing that coaches found it difficult and time consuming to attend a 3 hour CPD session, a series of 2 minute best practice videos was launched and promoted via Twitter – receiving over 150,000 impressions, far exceeding the reach of any programme of CPD.
85. To ensure that the work of this Good Practice Working Group is widely understood and implemented in the Age Grade game it is recommended that:
- A clear, integrated communication plan is created using a number of traditional and social media channels to circulate the information widely, using external partners to support.
 - Within the plan a clear approach to targeting practitioners and parents is in place
 - That key information from regulatory changes and code of practice is presented in a number of formats, including imagery, video and text making it easily digestible.

PRINCIPAL FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

86. The principal findings and recommendations of the Working Group are listed at the start of each section of the report. They fall into the following categories:

- Those that confirm assumptions of the Working Group or set the scene for the principal findings of the report.
- Those that recommend regulation amendments.
- Those that the Working Group consider good practice and need to be communicated to coaches, teachers and parents of age grade players.
- Some specific recommendations made to an explicit group or propose that a more appropriate group consider the issues.

87. **Setting the Scene.** The Working Group :

- a. Has given significant weight in formulating its recommendations to the views of youngsters in the Age Grade Player Survey, in support of the principle that age-grade rugby should be player-centred (**Principal Finding 1 - on page 1010**).
- b. Found that there is no evidence to support that it is more effective and has player development and welfare benefits to routinely band children by measures other than age (**Principal Finding 2 – on page 1313**).
- c. Recommends that rugby in England should continue to band children (up to 18 years old) by age, with those born in the school year from 1 September until 31 August being in the same age band (**Principal Finding 3 - on page 1313**).
- d. Suggests that a culture of putting player welfare at the centre of the game is essential in making progress in this area, through wider awareness and implementation of the RFU RugbySafe scheme (**Principal Finding 13 – on page 31**).
- e. Recommends that a clear, integrated communication plan is created using a number of traditional and social media channels to circulate widely the information emanating from this Working Group (**Principal Finding 26 - on page 45**).

88. Proposed Regulation Amendments. These are matters for the Schools & Youth Governance Sub-Committee to consider and to endorse any proposed amendments. To that end, the Working Group:

- e. Notes that RFU regulation 15.4.1 states the maximum amount of time a player should be involved in matches during a day (as part of a festival or tournament) and the maximum number of matches an individual should play in a season. These are difficult to track and, therefore, impractical to enforce. Consequently, they should be deleted from regulation **(Principal Finding 7 - on page 23)**.
- f. Recommends amending the regulations so that the age-grade season in England normally runs from the 1st Saturday in September until the 1st Bank Holiday Monday in May with no extension for U12s – U18s as allowed by Regulation 15.6.5. Instead, there should be a note to the regulations setting out any exceptional circumstances where the RFU might grant permission for matches or events after the 1st Bank Holiday in May **(Principal Finding 15 - on page 34)**.
- g. Recommends amending the regulations to better define activity that can be held in clubs, schools and colleges out-of-season **(Principal Finding 16 - on page 34)**.
- h. Recommends that a review RFU Regulations 15.3 and 15.4 be undertaken to provide consistency and an easier to interpret and apply format. (The ongoing research outlined in **para 67 above** will also impact on this). **(Principal Finding 17 - on page 37)**.
- i. Recommends amending regulations so that the youngest age at which children are allowed to participate in organised rugby activity is 6 years of age. **(Principal Finding 18 - on page 37)**.
- j. Recommends that consideration should be given to having a combined regulation about males and females playing and training with adults that accords with the principle of equality. **(Principal Finding 22 - on page 41)**.

89. Good Practice Findings and Advice. The major purpose of this Working Group was to highlight evidence-based good practice that can be communicated to coaches, teachers and parents to help them better understand the purpose of age grade rugby, the rationale behind the regulations, and their roles in ensuring

that good practice is followed. The Working Group recommends that the RFU builds upon the Age Grade Rugby Guidance issued in July 2016 by developing an Age Grade Code of Good Practice (**Principal Finding 25 – on page 45**) aimed at coaches, teachers and parents. It should be evidence-based and incorporate the following principal findings found in this report:

- k. Coaches, teachers and parents need a greater understanding of the principles of development and the role of rugby in a balanced youth sports development programme to provide a strong framework to achieve the aims of a player-centred, development-driven and competition-supported sport (**Principal Finding 4 - on page 16**).
- l. Coaches, teachers and parents need to understand the primary purpose of age grade rugby, the purpose of a match and the role of training, which should include small-sided games, and the distinction between “streaming” and differentiation” (**Principal Finding 5 - on page 19**).
- m. Coaches, teachers and parents need to better understand the principles of development (as listed at Annex B) and how to: balance training (the major developmental tool) and matches (confirmation of development); the effect of over-playing and over-training, as well as under-playing; and the concentration span and physical limits of youngsters that will determine the optimum length of a training session (**Principal Finding 8 – on page 23**).
- n. The optimum number of 15-a-side matches a club, college or school should arrange for each age group in a 35 week season is 16 (**Principal Finding 9 - on page 23**).
- o. Coaches, teachers and parents are encouraged to hold regular meetings to review and plan the rugby programme of players who are susceptible to over playing and training (likely to be those playing at college or school, local club and involved with the DPP, a CB squad and/or the Regional Academy) (**Principal Finding 11 - on page 28**).
- p. The RFU to provide an explanation of the rationale behind the specific regulations of playing and training up and down (**Principal Finding 19 - on page 37**).
- q. There will still be circumstances in clubs, schools and colleges that do not fit the regulations without impacting negatively on some individual children. The RFU should provide advice on what can be done in these

exceptional circumstances, together with some practical examples.
(Principal Finding 20 - on page 37).

- r. Coaches and teachers (of both male and female age grade players) should be made more aware of the rationale and research that justifies the RFU organising teenage female rugby as it does by combining year groups
(Principal Finding 21 - on page 41).
- s. With little research on the physical impact of age grade sevens, it is suggested that age-grade sevens is considered as an adapted game, used as a development tool, where smaller numbers on the pitch create an environment where good core skills, as well as tactical understanding, are under greater examination than in the 15-a-side game. As such, coaches should consider that a sevens tournament equates to a 15-a-side game and a similar recovery period is required before further physical activity is undertaken **(Principal Finding 24 - on page 44).**
- t. Clubs, colleges and schools should recognise their responsibilities as important providers of child development opportunities by ensuring coaching practice is supported through education and training **(Principal Finding 6 - on page 21).**

90. The Working Group makes some specific recommendations to an explicit group or proposes that a more appropriate group consider the issues. These include:

- u. The current National competitions in youth rugby (such as the NatWest competitions for schools and the National U17s competition for clubs) should be reviewed to ensure that such highly competitive fixtures do not drive negative behaviours in player development, particularly in coaches and teachers. **(Principal Finding 10 - on page 23).** It is suggested that this work be instigated by the RFU's Head of Rugby Development.
- v. Further to the principal finding at sub-para 89o, where coaches, teachers and parents are encouraged to hold regular meetings to review and plan the rugby programme of players who are susceptible to over playing and training, it is recommended by the Working Group that for all England Academy Players (EAP) that it be a formal requirement to hold such meetings **(Principal Finding 11 - on page 28).** The RFU's Head of Regional Academies is strongly encouraged to require that all relevant stakeholders attend such regular meetings is a condition of an individual being an EAP.

- w. The RFU conduct 2 trials (**Principal Finding 12 - on page 28**), namely:
- i. Where youngsters are limited to rugby activity once in every 72 hour period to identify if there are benefits in better controlling the concentration of rugby activity.
 - ii. “Half a game” guaranteed in a match for all squad members, particularly in the 15-a-side game, where underplaying and overplaying is probably more prevalent.

Again, it is suggested that these trials be instigated by the RFU’s Head of Rugby Development. The Working Group does not envisage the need for a temporary regulation amendment for these trials to be conducted. However, if successful in achieving their aims, consideration should be given to including them in regulation.

- x. The CGB supports the adoption of the principles of injury/concussion risk management developed by the RFU, and that they are considered, evaluated, adopted and integrated, where appropriate, into all Age Grade Regulations, and coach and teacher education and development (**Principal Finding 14 – on page 31**).
- y. The 14-19 Commission is strongly encouraged to consider carefully as whether players (female and male) should be allowed to play and train with adults from the age of 17 (as is currently the case for males with certain limitations applied), or whether that it should delayed it until **the season after** an individual attains 18 years of age, when legally they become an adult. In doing so, the Commission is encouraged to analyse the pro and cons and base any decision on what is best for young players (**Principal Finding 20 - on page 42**).

TERMS OF REFERENCE AND WORKING GROUP MEMBERSHIP

1. The Working Group is to:
 - a. Using evidence and published research, review policy and then develop good practice for all ages (U6- U18s) or sets of age groups, both male and female, on the frequency and type (in the case of training) for playing and training:
 - a) Immediately prior to the start of the season (as preparation for the season).
 - b) During the season.
 - c) During the remainder of the out-of-season period, including the impact on overseas (as well as to Wales and Scotland) tours.
 - b. Consider the case, again using evidence and published research, for allowing children (up to 18 years of age) to play and / or train out of their chronological age group, because of their early or late development emotionally, physically and technically. In doing so, examine the practical issues that clubs and schools might have in implementing any regulations in this area. Develop policy and good practice accordingly.
 - c. Cognisant that the U14 – U19 Commission is considering when a player can to start to play adult rugby (RFU Regulation 15.3.7), take account of its conclusions that impact on related aspects of this policy review and development of good practice.
2. In determining policy and good practice in the above areas balance both player development and long-term retention, overlaid by player welfare to minimise the chance of injury.
3. Work closely with U14 – U19 Commission, who will have primacy in policy development impacting on U14s – U19s.
4. Determine any control mechanisms that the RFU and CBs could employ so that good practice is complied with by clubs and schools.

5. Identify any amendments needed to Regulation 15 (and any others, if appropriate) to reflect the policy and good practice developed⁴.
6. **Timing.** To ensure that the policy and good practice is supported by appropriate regulation(s) for 2017/18 season, it will need to be approved by the RFU Council at its June 2017 meeting. Before that, it would have to progress through the Governance Standing Committee's process for amending regulation. Therefore, the Working Group should complete its report by 31 Jan 2017 to be considered by the CGB at its meeting on 23 Feb 2017. However, in completing its work the Group will need to work closely with U14 – U19 Commission, who will have primacy in policy development impacting on U14s – U19s. The intention would be that any amended regulation would need to be considered at the Governance Standing Committee at its meeting on 3 May 2017. This timescale is tight and, therefore, some advance work may have to be undertaken by the RFU legal staff and the Schools & Youth Governance Sub-Committee.
7. **Membership of the Working Group.** The Working Group comprised of:
 - a. **Chair:** Nigel Gillingham - Game Development Sub Committee Chair.
 - b. Fred Batchelor – ERFUSU RFU Council Member and Schools & Youth Governance Sub-Committee Member.
 - c. Adam Cottingham – RFU's Kids First Development Manager.
 - d. Ross Cowie - Chair of Eastern Counties Mini & Youth Sector.
 - e. Annie Davis – RFU's Safeguarding Manager.
 - f. Stuart Dixon - RFU Player Development Officer (Durham, Cumbria, Northumberland & Yorkshire).
 - g. Dr Mike England – RFU's Community Rugby Medical Director.
 - h. Mike Hynard – Premiership Rugby's Head of Regional Academies & Community Club U10 Coach.
 - i. Alun Powell – RFU's Head of Regional Academies.
 - j. Andy Rock – Bath Rugby Academy Manager.
 - k. Mark Saltmarsh – RFU's Head of Education Development.
 - l. Nick Scott – RFU's Coach Development Manager.
 - m. Robin Websdale – Chair Staffordshire Youth & Education Sector.
 - n. Chris Sigsworth – RFU's Schools Operations Manager (and also provided administrative support).

⁴ This does not mean re-write or amend the regulation(s); this is the responsibility of the Governance Standing Committee and its relevant sub-committee and RFU legal staff. At this stage, identify areas of the regulation(s) that need to be reviewed to reflect the policy and good practice.

DEVELOPMENT PRINCIPLES FOR RUGBY

1. It is very clear from a wealth of evidence now that the emphasis across all levels of children's sport, including talent pathways, needs to be on enjoyment and development, over performance and winning^[1].
2. Age-grade players should be encouraged to participate in a number and variety of different sports, including invasion games, striking & fielding and physical literacy based activities, which have been shown to be beneficial to longer term development as well as continued participation^[1].
3. As part of this, coaches, teachers and parents need to recognise and manage the competing demands made on young players from their education, other sports and family/social life^[1,2&3].
4. Training sessions should be carefully planned and designed to balance the provision of deliberate practice activities to develop skill alongside opportunities for informal (pick-up) games to maximise player enjoyment and learning^[3].
5. There should be no positional focus until the U16 age group. This will enable players to develop a wider range of skills and be exposed to game situations that provide greater opportunities to develop the full range of skills needed by the modern player such as decision making, different types of running, the range of passes and the ability to kick the ball^[3&4].
6. Coaches and teachers should encourage and support a wide participation base and, thus, keep the pool of players as broad as possible to accommodate variations and fluctuations in interest in the game and development^[1]. This will provide opportunities for all children to participate and enjoy the game, especially those that are new to the game, who may be wary or put off by the full contact version, or have other priorities at particular time (e.g. school work), or are returning from injury.^[5]
7. Coaches and teachers should adopt an integrated approach to physical development within "rugby" sessions that also focus on body management and movement literacy patterns^[6].

8. It is important that coaches, teachers and parents understand what demands (physical and psychological) players are facing and work towards an agreement that players should ideally not be exposed to two high intensity activity days in succession^[3,7,8&9].
9. Players' activity/load, injury status, mental health and well-being should be monitored appropriately for their age, to support early intervention when issues arise.
10. All competitions need to have a clear and beneficial purpose to the participants involved. Competitions should always provide learning opportunities, and logistical pressures and travel times should be minimised because, they that can negatively impact on enjoyment^[2,3&10].

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TRAINING OR PLAYING MATCHES AGAINST OTHER CLUBS, COLLEGES AND SCHOOLS

There are many things for coaches and teachers to consider when arranging training or matches with other clubs, schools and colleges; these include (although not necessarily an exhaustive list):

- Need to establish a common aim for the event (is it a training opportunity or a match to confirm developmental progress).
- Combining with other clubs, colleges or schools for training does increase numbers at a particular age group, allowing players to be more easily differentiated into equal ability groups.
- Combining with other clubs, colleges or schools for training provides opportunities for players to experience different coaches, and coaches can learn from each other.
- Holding matches and training sessions with other clubs, colleges or schools provides new social skills development opportunities.
- Consider the time and distance to travel to the venue. If an isolated club, college or school developmental time is being wasted when travelling. According to the Age Grade Player Survey (**see para 6 above**), distance and time travelled to rugby is the 3rd most disliked aspect. Furthermore, among the common themes of the most effective youth sports programmes (**see para 21 above**) limit the time and distance travelled to organised competitions and matches.