

**CANADA SOCCER**

**SKILL CENTRE MANUAL  
AND DEDICATED PLAYER PROGRAM**

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## SECTION I: INTRODUCTION

Every person involved in soccer in Canada deserves an enjoyable experience with the game, regardless of the role they play, their age, their level of experience or their ability. For young players, an enjoyable experience means that they have access to high-quality programs where they can have fun with their friends, learn new skills and play the game in an appropriate format. Clubs play an important role in this, as they are the primary providers of the soccer programs where young players experience the game in Canada.

Canada Soccer has created the Skill Centre and Dedicated Player Programs to guide clubs towards best principles

in player development by taking a nationally coordinated approach to developing young soccer players. Skill Centres and Dedicated Player Programs provide a challenging, enjoyable environment for players to develop and nurture the skills required to succeed in the game of soccer.

By taking a structured, long-term approach to player development – based around the principles of Long-Term Player Development (LTPD) – our young players will develop the foundation of fundamental skills required to succeed at whatever level of the game they aspire to reach.

## SECTION II: SKILL CENTRE AND DEDICATED PLAYER PROGRAM GOALS

Canada Soccer Skill Centres and Dedicated Player Programs are aligned to the best principles of player development from around the world. The underlying aim of Skill Centres and

Dedicated Player Programs is to provide the best environment possible to as many young players as possible for as long as possible.

### GOAL 1

- ▶ Keep more young players involved in the game for longer by providing them with an enjoyable experience with the game.

### GOAL 2

- ▶ Produce clear training guidelines for clubs so that they can deliver the best possible environment for young players in their region.

### GOAL 3

- ▶ Produce better players across Canada by increasing opportunity and access to better training and competition for more young players.

## SECTION III: SKILL CENTRE AND DEDICATED PLAYER PROGRAM PRINCIPLES

To ensure that a holistic development environment exists for players and coaches, Canada Soccer Skill Centres and Dedicated Player Programs will be guided by the following principles:

### 1. Contact time with a ball will be high

For Canada to produce a consistent stream of high calibre players, we must create more environments where players can develop their skills and comfort with a ball. Relevant, game-realistic skill development should be the outcome of all training sessions. This means that coaches should design challenging sessions that involve players manipulating the ball under various game-like conditions and tasks.

### 2. Training will resemble the game

Skills are not developed in isolation; for skill development to be most effective, the training environment must resemble the game. This means that the four moments of the game (attacking; defensive transition; defending; and attacking

transition) must be present. This does not mean that coaches simply organize games; rather, the training session must involve game-like conditions and tasks that allow players to solve problems through perception-action coupling (the relationship between what a player sees and how he/she decides to act). This relationship is best developed through activities that closely resemble the game.

### 3. Training will be fun for everyone

When young soccer players were asked recently why they play soccer<sup>1</sup>, the number one response was “I like playing the game because it’s fun.” Other reasons that children gave included “I like scoring or stopping goals”, “I like to show my skills” and “It’s important to be with my friends.” This information is important to adults because it must be used to create environments that will keep kids involved and engaged in soccer. Skill Centres and Dedicated Player Programs must be operated with the principle that training should be fun and enjoyable for everyone –

<sup>1</sup> Ontario Soccer, *Grassroots Player Survey*, 2014

not just for a chosen few. This means that coaches must work equally with all players, encouraging them to develop their skills and to be creative in finding solutions to the challenges presented by the game.

#### **4. Skill Centres and Dedicated Player Programs will be accessible**

One of the key ingredients in any successful player development program is opportunity – young players need to have access to good environments and good coaches. To ensure that all players have this opportunity, player registration for Skill Centres and Dedicated Player Programs can be done in two ways: By invitation, where players are invited to register for a Skill Centre or Dedicated Player Programs; and by open registration, where all players have access to register for the program on a first-come, first-served basis. No more than 50% of the places in a Skill Centre or Dedicated Player Program can be allocated to players by invitation (at least 50% of the places

must be allocated to players by open registration). Within the Skill Centre and Dedicated Player Program training sessions themselves, coaches have the discretion to periodically group players based on competency, as appropriate, but coaches are strongly encouraged to design sessions that focus on developing all players, regardless of ability.

#### **5. All players and parents will receive meaningful feedback from coaches**

Parents have a crucial role to play in the development of their children in soccer. By clearly communicating the objectives of the Skill Centre and Dedicated Player Program to parents and by providing them with meaningful feedback about the development of their children, coaches will develop a network of player development allies. By engaging the players in this process, they will develop a growth mindset, which is important for them to overcome the inevitable ups and downs of development in soccer.

## **SECTION IV: WHY DO WE NEED SKILL CENTRES AND DEDICATED PLAYER PROGRAMS?**

The traditional model of team selection in Canadian youth soccer revolves around choosing a select number of players at a specific moment in time based on their current performance level, then having them compete against other teams to determine who is better. Unfortunately, this method of talent identification and development is flawed in several ways:

- ▶ It does not accurately predict potential or future performance;
- ▶ It can often turn away players who might have high potential but who are simply inexperienced at that moment relative to their peer group;
- ▶ Early selection prior to physical maturation implies early exclusion of the majority and can discourage players who might otherwise have become as good, or better, a little later if given the chance to develop;
- ▶ The characteristics that define “talented” athletes in early age are not the characteristics that define elite athletes later in their career.

*Unfortunately*, this approach only serves to identify players who are advanced in relation to their peers *at that specific moment in time*, rather than identify players who have potential to develop into a proficient player if given the opportunity. This is

exacerbated by the fact that the selection-based approach alienates a significant percentage of our player base and pushes kids away from the game.

Canada Soccer Skill Centres and Dedicated Player Programs will address these challenges by taking a holistic, player-centred approach to player registration. Rather than basing registration on performance – usually assessed over a short period of time or via a “tryout” process – Skill Centre and Dedicated Player Programs registration will be done via two methods: invitation and open registration.

**Invitation** — Clubs may invite players to register for a place in their Skill Centre or Dedicated Player Program. This allows Clubs to offer a place in the program to players whom they feel would benefit from the opportunity and experience. Tryouts are not permitted in a Skill Centre or Dedicated Player Program, and no more than 50% of the places in the Skill Centre or Dedicated Player Program can be offered via invitation.

**Open Registration** — At least 50% of the places in a Skill Centre Program must be available via open registration. This provides players who are keen to learn the game with an opportunity to register for a place in the Skill Centre or Dedicated Player Program.

## SECTION V: HOW WILL SKILL CENTRES WORK?

Many clubs in Canada currently offer development programs that are aimed at players who want a higher level of training and/or competition. These development programs can go by a variety of names, including Academy Program, Prospects Program or Advanced Development Training, to name a few. Clubs who agree to replace their current U8-U12 development programs with the Canada Soccer Skill Centre Program will be awarded a Canada Soccer Skill Centre Licence.

Skill Centre Licence Holders will be permitted to register their players to play in local, district or regional leagues. Given the nature of some of the Skill Centre Guidelines — specifically, open rosters and freedom of movement of players — it is strongly recommended that PTSOs work closely with their leagues and/or districts to revise league rules to mirror the Skill Centre Guidelines. This will allow both traditional, selection-based Clubs and Skill Centre Licence Holders to participate in the same league.

To illustrate how this will work in practice, consider the following example:

### Existing Program

*Club A currently runs a development program, called the “Club Academy Program”, for its U8-U12 players. In each age group and gender, Club A holds tryouts and selects the best 30 players for the program. In the U10 age group, for example, Club A divides these players into three teams — Team A, Team B and Team C — based on the competency of the players. i.e. The “best” 10 players are on Team A, the next best 10 players are on Team B with the final 10 players on Team C. There is no movement of players between teams, and players, parents and coaches are aware that Team A is considered to be the “best” team.*

*Training is structured so that each team is sequestered and trains as an independent unit; Team A trains together, Team B trains together and Team C trains together. The 30 players rarely, if ever, train as a group, and there is little interaction between teams or coaches.*

*Club A competes in its district development league, which is tiered into two competitive categories — Tier 1 and Tier 2. Club A registers Team A and Team B to play in Tier 1 and Team C to play in Tier 2. Results vary from week to week — in some weeks the games are competitive, while in other weeks the teams are*

*unevenly matched. Players are not permitted to move between teams, as they are required to be rostered to a specific team for the duration of the season. Games are scheduled in a traditional league format, where two teams are scheduled to play against each other on a specific day at a specific location, making roster movement impractical.*

### Skill Centre Program

*Given its current coaching capacity and infrastructure, Club A has the ability to offer 30 places in its Skill Centre Program in each age group and gender. In the U10 age group, for example, Club A invites 15 players to register for a place in the Skill Centre, based on the Club’s ongoing evaluation of the players and their interest in the program. Club A opens the other 15 places in the program to players interested in participating.*

*Training is structured so that all 30 players train together. The coaching staff — which is led by two coaches who hold the Canada Soccer Children’s Licence — work as a group to develop all of the players. The coaches start every session by allowing the players to group themselves to play small-sided games. This allows the players to play with their friends and with players of a similar calibre. From session to session, the coaches have the flexibility to group the players as required, allowing players to work with different players and coaches over the duration of the season.*

*Club A registers three teams to participate in its district development league, placing two teams in Tier 1 and one team in Tier 2. Club A provides the district league with the names of the 30 players who are registered in its Skill Centre Program, and informs the league that Club A will roster the teams accordingly each week depending on the competition.*

*The league structure is for all teams to play its games each week at a central location, in a Festival Format. This means that all 30 players play their game(s) at the same field, on the same day. Club A rosters its three teams each week so that each team has an equally-matched, competitive game.*

Many clubs in Canada are already operating their development programs in a similar way to the Skill Centre Program described above. Changes to league rules may be required — specifically to league rules surrounding player registration and player movement — but these changes are essential as they put the needs of the player ahead of all else.

## SECTION VI: WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A SKILL CENTRE AND A DEDICATED PLAYER PROGRAM?

The Skill Centre designation represents the highest level of recognition for a grassroots program by Canada Soccer. This designation requires delivery against a demanding set of standards that will not be possible for all organizations. As outlined in this manual, Canada Soccer believes that every young player deserves the opportunity to participate in an environment that aligns to the best principles of player development.

In supporting a more inclusive and accessible, high-quality, playing environment, Canada Soccer has also developed standards for the Dedicated Player Program designation. A Dedicated Player Program has the same goals and aligns

to the same principles as a Skill Centre but requires a less demanding set of standards. The Dedicated Player Program targets organizations that believe in the best principles of player development and support the approach being promoted by Canada Soccer in this manual but may not have the capacity to deliver against the Skill Centre standards. A Dedicated Player Program operates in the same way as a Skill Centre. A robust network of Dedicated Player Programs across Canada will ensure more young players have a positive developmental environment, enhancing the opportunity to fulfill their potential and support long-term participation.

## SECTION VII: SKILL CENTRE STANDARDS

SKILL CENTRE STANDARDS	
Age Groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ U8/U9, U10/U11, U12</li> <li>▶ Players loosely grouped by age</li> <li>▶ Players can move between groups as required</li> </ul>
Playing Format	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ U8/U9: 4v4 (no goalkeeper) or 5v5 (with goalkeeper)</li> <li>▶ U10/U11: 7v7</li> <li>▶ U12: 9v9</li> </ul>
Coaching Requirements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Lead Coach (two per club, one each for boys / girls)                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▷ Canada Soccer Children's Licence (2021 – in training; 2022 – certified)</li> </ul> </li> <li>▶ Assistant Coach (as per player to coach ratio)                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▷ Learn to Train (2021- trained)</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Player to Coach Ratio	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ U8/U9 (8:1)</li> <li>▶ U10/U11 (10:1)</li> <li>▶ U12 (12:1)</li> </ul>
Number of Players in a Skill Centre Program	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Guided by the player to coach ratio and field availability</li> </ul>
Player Registration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Invitation: Club invites player to participate</li> <li>▶ Open: First-come, first-served registration</li> <li>▶ <b>*Note*</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▷ Tryouts are not permitted</li> <li>▷ No more than 50% of registration is permitted to be by invitation</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

**SKILL CENTRE STANDARDS (continued)**

<b>Game Day Roster Guidelines</b>	Open rosters: Any player participating in a Skill Centre Program at a club is permitted to participate on any of its Skill Centre teams Clubs are strongly discouraged from selecting 'set' teams; i.e. the same players grouped together permanently
<b>Game Day Roster Size (maximum roster size)</b>	U8/U9: 8 players per team U10/U11: 10 players per team U12: 14 players per team
<b>Competition Days Per Week</b>	One (1) competition day per week
<b>Competition Format</b>	Competition may be festival format (two games in one day) or single-game format
<b>Minimum / maximum rest between festival games</b>	Minimum = duration of one game / maximum = 120 minutes
<b>Training Session Frequency</b>	2-3 training sessions per week (not including competition day)
<b>Training Session Duration</b>	U8/U9: 45-60 minutes U10/U11/U12: 60-75 minutes
<b>Program Duration</b>	Training block duration: 10-22 weeks Annual duration: 30-44 weeks Minimum time between training blocks: 2 weeks
<b>Field regulations</b>	See Canada Soccer Grassroots Standards

## SECTION VIII: DEDICATED PLAYER PROGRAM GUIDELINES

DEDICATED PLAYER PROGRAM STANDARDS	
Age Groups	▶ U8/U9, U10/U11, U12
Playing Format	▶ U8/U9: 4v4 (no goalkeeper) or 5v5 (with goalkeeper) ▶ U10/U11: 7v7 ▶ U12: 9v9
Coaching Requirements	▶ Lead Coach ▶ C Licence (certified) ▶ Assistant Coach (as per player to coach ratio) ▶ Learn to Train (trained)
Player to Coach Ratio	▶ U8/U9: 8:1 ▶ U10/U11: 10:1 ▶ U12: 12:1
Number of Players in a Dedicated Player Program	▶ Guided by the player to coach ratio and field availability
Player Registration	▶ Invitation: Club invites players to participate ▶ Open: First-come, first served registration ▶ <b>*Note*</b> ▶ Tryouts are not permitted ▶ No more than 50% of registration is permitted to be by invitation
Game Day Roster Guidelines	▶ <b>*Recommendation*</b> ▶ Open rosters: Any player participating in a Dedicated Player Program at a club is permitted to participate on any of its Dedicated Player Program Teams ▶ Clubs are strongly discouraged from selecting 'set' teams; i.e. the same players grouped together permanently
Game Day Roster Size (maximum roster size)	▶ U8/U9: 8 players per team ▶ U10/U11: 10 players per team ▶ U12: 14 players per team
Competition Days Per Week	▶ One (1) competition day per week
Competition Format	▶ Competition may be festival format (two games in one day) or single-game format
Minimum/Maximum Rest between festival games	▶ Minimum = duration of one game / Maximum = 120 minutes



**DEDICATED PLAYER PROGRAM STANDARDS (continued)**

<b>Training Session Frequency</b>	1-3 training sessions/week
<b>Training Session Duration</b>	U8/U9: 45-60 minutes U10/U11/U12: 60-75 minutes
<b>Program Duration</b>	Training block duration: U8/U9: 6-16 weeks U10/U11/U12: ≤22 weeks (recommended 10-22 weeks) Annual duration: U8/U9: ≤32 weeks U10/U11/U12: ≤44 weeks (recommended 30-44 weeks) Minimum time between training blocks: 2 weeks
<b>Field Regulations</b>	See Canada Soccer Grassroots Standards