



National
Coaching
Certification
Program

LONG-TERM
ATHLETE
DEVELOPMENT
INFORMATION
FOR PARENTS




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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Long-Term Athlete Development Information for Parents	1
What is LTAD?	2
Getting an “Active Start”	3
FUNdamentals	4
Learning to Train.....	5
Training to Train	6
Training to Compete.....	8
Training to Win.....	9
Active for Life.....	10
Links	11



Long-Term Athlete Development Information for Parents

The parents of the other kids on Jennifer's under-8 soccer team want me to enrol her in a really sport-specific training program. She's a pretty good soccer player, and they say it will help her make the national team in 15 years.

What are you going to do?

I don't know. What do you think? You're a certified coach.

Conversations like this probably take place around soccer pitches, in the stands at hockey arenas, and at many other sport venues across the country; and as a parent you want what is best for your child.

So what IS best for your child?

What's best is simple: Children learning skills and taking part in activities that match their stage of development. This is called Long-Term Athlete Development, or LTAD.

But what is a "stage of development"? And what does this mean for you as a parent?

Doing what is best for your child is what Long-Term Athlete Development (LTAD) is all about, and Canadian sport is working hard to develop LTAD plans for all sports. What those plans tell us is that early specialization, and early intense training in most sports just doesn't help the child develop to be the best they could possibly be.

The evidence is that too much early specialization actually prevents children from developing to their full potential.



What is LTAD?

Human development from birth to adulthood is a continuous process. To understand the process better, experts divide human development into distinct stages with specific characteristics; these are called stages of development.

In Canadian sport, experts have identified seven stages of development, each with its own physical, mental, emotional, and cognitive characteristics. This is our Long-Term Athlete Development (LTAD) model, and it's the basis for the optimal training and competition kids need to enjoy sport the most and perform their best.

Why do we need the LTAD model?

Because participation in recreational sport and physical activity has been declining and physical education programs in schools are being marginalized.

Because the international performances of Canadian athletes have been declining in some sports.

Because other sports are having trouble identifying and developing the next generation of international athletes.

Because **NOT** matching skills and activities to a stage of development has serious negative consequences, and Canadians and the Canadian sport system have been suffering from them for some time. To mention just a few of them:

- Children don't have fun;
- They develop bad habits because of the over-emphasis on winning;
- Their skill development is poor;
- They don't reach their optimal performance level;
- Many burn out and drop out of sport.

Getting an “Active Start”

Intended Ages: Males and Females - 0 to 6

This stage is all about starting children off right. Making physical activity a fun part of daily life creates the right setting for your child to learn.

Things you can do...

- 1 Keep children active: Children this age shouldn't be sedentary for more than 60 minutes at a time except when they're sleeping.
- 2 Help them learn proper movement skills. Recognizing proper movement skills isn't always easy, but there are resources that can help.
- 3 Organize some physical activities — get a group of children and parents together and go to the park to let them explore the swings, slides, and monkey bars!
- 4 Let children explore their physical environment, but keep a watchful eye on them and keep the environment safe. Let them run, jump, climb, and swing — it's important for their development.
- 5 This is a great time to get children into introductory gymnastics and swimming programs — not to create elite gymnasts or swimmers, but to provide wonderful learning opportunities in different environments.





FUNdamentals

Intended Ages: Males 6 to 9 • Females: 6 to 8

This stage focuses on learning fundamental movement skills and building overall motor skills. Fundamental movement skills are the building blocks of success in sport and life-long enjoyment of physical activity, and children who develop them are more likely to engage in activity both as children, and later as adults.

This is a time when children are probably involved in a minor sport program and have their first coach.

Things you can do...

- 1 Arrange for your children to be physically active every day. Remember that several short bursts of activity are probably better at this stage than one long training session.
- 2 Encourage your children to take part in a wide range of sporting activities. Specializing too soon in a single sport is NOT good. Trying different sports helps children work on their agility, balance, coordination, and speed.
- 3 Make sure your children choose sports that focus on running, jumping, throwing, catching, and kicking. Encourage children to build on the gymnastics and swimming activities they started in the Active Start stage.
- 4 Ask sport programs in your community to use trained or certified coaches — they can help children develop the fundamental movement skills.
- 5 Urge your child's school to have frequent physical education classes — every day is best — taught by qualified physical education teachers. Children benefit enormously when they're taught to do movement skills properly.
- 6 Talk to your children about the importance of having fun and enjoying participation. Focusing on results and over-specializing hurts rather than helps later sport performance.
- 7 Pay attention to the equipment used to improve strength. Children in this stage should use medicine balls, Swiss balls, and their own body weight, not heavy weights or weight machines.

Learning to Train

Intended Ages: Males 9 to 12 • Females 8 to 11

During this stage, children are ready to learn and refine the general sports skills they need for athletic development and participation in sport for health.



Things you can do...

- 1 Help children further develop fundamental movement skills and learn overall sports skills. Don't let them specialize too much too soon — it can have a harmful effect on later skill development.
- 2 Encourage your children to play at least three different sports they enjoy. Also encourage them to engage in unstructured play.
- 3 Make sure your children do the right kind of strength work. This includes doing activities that use their own body weight (sit-ups and push-ups, for example), working with medicine balls and Swiss balls, and hopping and bouncing. Children in wheelchairs should practice wheeling uphill.
- 4 Encourage children to develop their endurance, for example, by playing games where they move continuously or by doing relay-type activities.
- 5 Be aware that training for speed is effective in this stage. Children can develop speed through activities that focus on rapid, darting movements and on fast hand and foot movements. Rapid changes in direction are also great — think tag and dodging-type games.
- 6 Make sure your children get the right amount of competition. Children in this stage enjoy competition, but they have to train too. The goal should be 70% of activity time in training, 30% in competition. In a team sport, this means 2 or 3 practices for every game.
- 7 If your child is in a team sport, make sure he or she gets a chance to compete. This is not the time for coaches to play only the star players and leave less-developed players on the sidelines. Some of those slower developing children will some day reach the highest levels of performance in their sport.



Training to Train

Intended Ages: Males 12 to 16 • Females 11 to 15

Athletes start to specialize in the sport of their choice in this stage. While children start competing more seriously, the major focus during competition is on applying what they've learned in training — not on winning at all costs.

The Training to Train stage starts when the child's major growth spurt starts, and the timing of this growth spurt varies a lot from child to child. Some girls have their growth spurt as early as age 9, others as late as 16. The differences are just as pronounced with boys — the growth spurt can occur anywhere from 10 to 17. The point at which your child is growing the fastest is called Peak Height Velocity.

Your involvement in your child's training probably changes in this stage. Up until now, you've most likely been directly involved — helping your child learn movement skills, for example, or starting them out in a sport you enjoy. But in the Training to Train stage, your children are more independent, you're less likely to do sports with them, and your role is more an advisory one.

The focus from here on is on things you need to know as opposed to things you can do.

(CONTINUED ON PAGE 7)



Things you need to know...

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 6)

① Stamina training is essential, since the body adapts more easily to such training in this stage than at any other time.

② Aerobic training is a high priority, particularly toward the second half of this stage, after Peak Height Velocity (PHV) has occurred. But children still need to work on developing skill, speed, and strength. They also need to maintain or improve their flexibility, as this is a time of rapid growth for bones, tendons, ligaments, and muscles.



③ Strength training produces better results at some times than at other times. These optimum times are called windows of accelerated adaptation. For girls, there are two windows; the first is right after PHV, and the second starts with the onset of menstruation.

④ For males there is a single window — about 12 to 18 months after PHV.

⑤ Your child's training year should be broken into one or two cycles at some point during this stage. Each cycle is in turn broken into several phases, each with its own training focus. This approach to planning is called periodization. If you want to know more about periodization, check with a qualified coach.

⑥ Children need to learn to cope with the physical and mental challenges of competition, and integrating basic mental-preparation skills into training can pay big dividends.

⑦ Competition becomes more important, and children should spend about 60% of their activity time in training, about 40% in competition. Too much competition wastes valuable training time, but too little slows the learning of technical/tactical and decision-making skills in game conditions. Training sessions should include lots of game-like drills and situations.

⑧ Better quality equipment starts to matter more. This is especially important for athletes with a disability, who need sport-specific equipment such as athletic prostheses. Equipment that suits a child's size, strength, and ability makes things more fun and reduces the chances of injury.

⑨ Children should be starting to focus on a couple of sports (not just one), and they'll probably show a preference for certain positions or events. While you should encourage this, it's still too early for a high degree of specialization.

Training to Compete

Intended Ages: Males 16 to 23 (+/-) • Females 15 to 21 (+/-)

This stage is about the development of athletes as young adults. By this stage, they are specializing in one sport and working on event- or position-specific skills and physical demands. They're soccer goalkeepers, not soccer players, 800-metre runners, not track and field athletes.

Everything in this stage is about optimizing physical preparation. But there is a caution. Athletes must FULLY develop their Training to Train skills and physical preparation before starting Training to Compete skills and activities.

Things you need to know...

- 1 Athletes now train year-round. Training intensity is high, and training is individualized for the athlete, his or her event, and his or her position.
- 2 Athletes work on using skills developed in practice in competition conditions. They prepare for high-level competition by modelling, in training, every aspect of what to expect in competition.
- 3 Physical and mental preparation should be individualized, and optimal recovery from training should be determined for each athlete. Tactical and technical training focuses on building on the athletes' strengths and eliminating known weaknesses.
- 4 There is more competition or competition-specific training than general technical/tactical and fitness training. Athletes should spend about 40% of their activity time in training, about 60% in competition and preparation for competition.



Training to Win

Intended Ages: Males 19 (+/-) • Females 18 (+/-)

This stage is about training to win at the highest levels of sport: international competition. Only the very best and most dedicated reach this stage. Those who succeed in this stage almost always work with highly trained and qualified coaches.



Things you need to know...

- 1 This is the final stage of athlete development, and the focus is on maximizing fitness preparation and sport performance in all its dimensions under competitive conditions. These dimensions include strength, endurance, flexibility, nutritional preparation, and psychological preparation.
- 2 Success in this stage requires that the required physical, technical, tactical, and psychological skills be fully established. It also requires that the physical conditioning groundwork was completed at the developmentally appropriate times.
- 3 Athletes train to peak at major competitions, and training consists of a relatively high amount of work done at high intensity. Training is carefully planned, with the training year divided into one, two, three, or more cycles, depending on the demands of the sport and the individual athlete's strengths.
- 4 About 75% of activity time consists of competition or competition-specific training; the remaining 25% consists of more general training.

Active for Life

Intended Age: Males and females any age

This stage is all about a smooth transition from a competitive career to lifelong physical activity and participation in sports. The goal is to make the transition from competitive sports positive and to keep everyone active for life.

While this transition can occur at any age or stage, it usually occurs after the Learning to Train stage.



Things you need to know...

1

For too many people, their last experience in a competitive sport is negative: being cut from a team, not making a performance standard, etc. This causes many to drop out of sports altogether, which is bad for both sports and the individual. This needs to change.

2

Those leaving competitive sports should be encouraged to try sports where they are predisposed to train and perform well or where their activity, health, and social needs can be met. This is most likely to happen if the child mastered fundamental movement skills in the FUNDamentals and Learning to Train stages. This gives them a better chance of succeeding early in any new sports they try.

3

Those leaving high-performance competition should also be encouraged to move to less intense competition or masters events or to participate in other sports at the recreational level.

4

Careers in sport, sport management, or coaching could be explored, as could opportunities for entrepreneurial activities related to sport. And of course there is always room in sport for volunteers as coaches, officials, or administrators.

Links

Useful links for more information:

www.coach.ca

All about coaching at the Coaching Association of Canada

www.canadiansportforlife.ca

The official Long-Term Athlete Development website

www.phecanada.ca

Canada's leading advocate for quality daily physical education and qualified physical education teachers in Canadian schools

www.physical-literacy.ca

Information and tools on developing physical literacy in children and youth

