

# FAI

## Player development plan

4v4

Under 6 / Under 7



### Implementation Booklet Phase 1 – July 2015

Implementation of a player-focused model based on enjoyment and skill development whilst reducing the emphasis on winning at all costs.

Restructuring of the playing model for underage football (boys/girls) to a clear policy on the best age-specific formats of the game to be implemented by all leagues.

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# Introduction



Over the past number of months I have met with many people from the football community around Ireland and have received very positive feedback on the recommendations the FAI has put forward to change the way we develop our young football players. There is certainly a huge appetite for change right across the country.

A Technical Advisory Group was established in 2014 which brought together experienced football people to review all aspects of how the underage game is played here in Ireland and how we can make the changes required to increase standards across the country. We set out to

develop an overall philosophy that is based on a player-focused model. This requires us to adapt the game to meet the needs of children and not change children to meet the requirements of the game. If young children enjoy their earliest experiences of football then they are much more likely to improve and to remain in the game. Young children's reasons for playing football and their expectations and values are quite different from those of adults.

The Advisory Group brought forward ten recommendations on how the game could be improved with a greater focus on player development. These recommendations were presented to the FAI Board in October 2014 and adopted as FAI policy.

Phase 1 of the Plan (implementation of Recommendations 1 and 2) will commence in September 2015 with the remaining recommendations being implemented over the following two seasons. A great deal of work has gone into putting new, uniform, playing formats in place which will see improvements at all levels of the game.

A comparison was done between the game formats in operation across a number of other countries and the various different playing formats being used around Ireland. To be successful in our objectives we need the whole football community to work together to create uniformity in what young players experience when playing our game no matter where they are in the country.

We acknowledge the good work that has been done by coaches here for many years but we are now seeking to build on those efforts so that every player can benefit, which will lead to an improvement in playing standards.

This document will help coaches, clubs, administrators, parents and others involved in the development of our young players to understand how the game will change at the different levels and how our young players will reap the benefits of our actions.

## **Ruud Dokter**

*High Performance Director,  
Football Association of Ireland*

## A player-focused philosophy

By using the experience our coaches already have and putting a clear plan in place we believe the future can be very bright for Irish football. Player development and players enjoying football is the core philosophy central to our new 'Player Development Plan'. Whilst understanding that children are naturally competitive, we need to focus on, and understand the importance of, player development versus simply winning matches. Winning at all costs inhibits player development and can lead to a sense of frustration and failure. The match result is secondary to the quality of play and the enjoyment of playing. It is essential that young players are free from the constant pressure of winning and are allowed freedom of expression on the pitch. As players get older, the process will become increasingly more team-efficient with a greater focus on results.

*Implementation of a player-focused model based on enjoyment and skill development whilst reducing the emphasis on winning at all costs. The following points are key to this.*

### 1 *Introduce a uniform playing style and coaching style in order to develop skilful and creative players.*

An attacking style of play is the best guarantee of learning and development. To develop creative players, freedom of expression is key. Players need to learn from their mistakes and should always be encouraged to try again. For example, if young players are criticised for losing the ball, or discouraged from trying something new, they will not learn.

Our philosophy sees the 4-3-3 system of play as the best format in which to develop young players. Within this formation, roles can be clearly outlined and there is a greater set of options for passing, ball retention etc. which facilitates learning and provides flexibility in attacking and defending. This system of play is recognised in many successful European countries as the best approach for player development. Coaches should encourage young players to play out from the back, through midfield, linking up with attack. Whilst the long-ball can be effective, it is no longer considered the only method of attacking play.

### 2 *Minimum playing time per game for each player.*

Players need more playing time at a young age, otherwise there is no learning, no development and little enjoyment – which may result in young players dropping out of the game. All players deserve playing time – this is how they will develop.

### 3 *Roll on / Roll off (Ro Ro) substitutes will apply at all age levels.*

This allows for more playing time for the players and more opportunities for the coach to develop the players. For example, where a player is struggling to cope with an opponent or has lost his/her discipline the coach can use the

substitution to replace the player, give him/her advice on how to deal with the situation and then bring the player back on. It creates a "live" learning environment for both coach and player.

### 4 *Mini-blitzes/Festivals in a Twin-game Format at U6-U11. League Tables will be introduced from U12.*

Twin-games means that a squad is split into two teams, who play mini-blitzes or festivals. This results in more opportunities for children to play and at their correct level. For example an Under 8 squad will consist of 12 players, for the blitz they will be split into two smaller squads of six players of similar ability as will their opponents. They will then play two 5v5 games against their opponents with both matches taking place at the same time. Both teams will have 1 substitute and roll on/roll off substitutions will apply.

League tables will not be introduced until U12 in order to take away the winning at all cost mentality and the pressure on players, coaches and parents. This will give more focus on player development at the younger ages. (Note; Leagues which currently have tables at U11 may continue with these for Season 2015/16 if they so wish. Tables will then be discontinued at this age from season 2016/17.)

### 5 *From U6-U9 guided play, referees to be introduced at U10.*

Guided play means that there is no referee involved, leaving the players to solve any problems amongst themselves (mirroring what happened in Street Football in the past). One of the benefits of Street Football was that the players organised and "refereed" games themselves, solving problems as they arose, learning mutual respect and honesty in a creative environment.

Coaches of each team remain on the sideline and watch closely how players act while a Match Supervisor will be appointed who will step in if help is required to resolve disputes. This may seem strange to some but is an approach that has proven very successful in many other countries.

Referees will be introduced at U10. It is important that players learn to respect the officials at all times, play by the rules and accept the rules.

### 6 *Parent Education Workshops.*

Coaches and parents need a good working relationship which is important in developing young players. The 'winning at all costs' mentality often emanates from coaches and parents. Workshops will be vitally important to educate parents and help them understand the philosophy behind player development, its aims, goals and objectives. There will be a parental 'Code of Conduct' which will outline parents' responsibilities.



**Restructuring of the playing model for underage football (boys/girls) to a clear policy on the best age-specific formats of the game to be implemented by all leagues.**

Currently there is no consistency across leagues in terms of pitch size, goal size, match duration etc. It is important to have a common structure implemented by all leagues, for example a player in Donegal should be playing the same format as a player of the same age in Kerry, Dublin etc.

**1 A gradual build-up towards the full game (4v4, 5v5, 7v7, 9v9, 11v11).**

It is very important to understand that each age group has its own specific requirements and characteristics. From a psychological, social and physical viewpoint players needs differ according to age. A clear structure is required, gradually building from 4v4 to the full 11v11 game. Small Sided Games are important to develop the necessary football skills. 4v4 can be considered the smallest simplification of the real game. Players have three options when they are in possession, namely to play forward, sideways or backwards. Small Sided Games allow players to have more ball contact and more involvement in the game. The focus is on scoring goals leading to greater enjoyment for the players.

Young players should have the opportunity to play in many different positions, only specialising when aged 15 or 16 and heading towards the adult game. The coach should focus on the quality of play and the development of the player rather than the result alone.

**2 Uniform pitch and goal sizes.**

Under the plan there will be consistency in terms of pitch size and goal size across leagues.

**3 One size ball, weight to be adjusted to the age group.**

From a development point of view a size 5 football will be introduced at all age levels. However the weight of the ball will depend on the age of the players (from 290 grams to 450 grams). The larger ball surface helps the player develop ball mastery (passing, receiving, dribbling, shooting etc.)

Because many clubs already have an existing stock of footballs these can continue to be used for season 2015/16 but when being replaced by the club they must restock with the new Size 5. During this transition period where clubs have an opportunity to play with the new weighted Size 5 at local level they must do so (i.e. where either team has the new weighted Size 5 ball it must be used in the match)

*From Season 2015/16 all SFAI National competitions will be played using the Size 5 weighted ball while full implementation of the new size 5 football across all leagues / competitions will take place from Season 2016/17*

**4 Uniform match playing time by age group.**

Under the plan there will be consistency in terms of playing time by age group across all leagues.

**5 Maximum number of squad players per team.**

This is required to ensure that all players are given the recommended playing time.

**6 Female players allowed to play at all underage levels.**

Female players that are currently not being facilitated in terms of age, standard or the absence of a girls' team in their own club will now have the opportunity to play on boys' teams. From U12 to U16 girls can play on boys' teams either at the girl's own age group or one year below, for example a girl, eligible to play at U14, can play on an U14 or U13 boys' team depending on which age group best serves her developmental needs as a player. As always, team selection will be based on the player's ability, not gender.



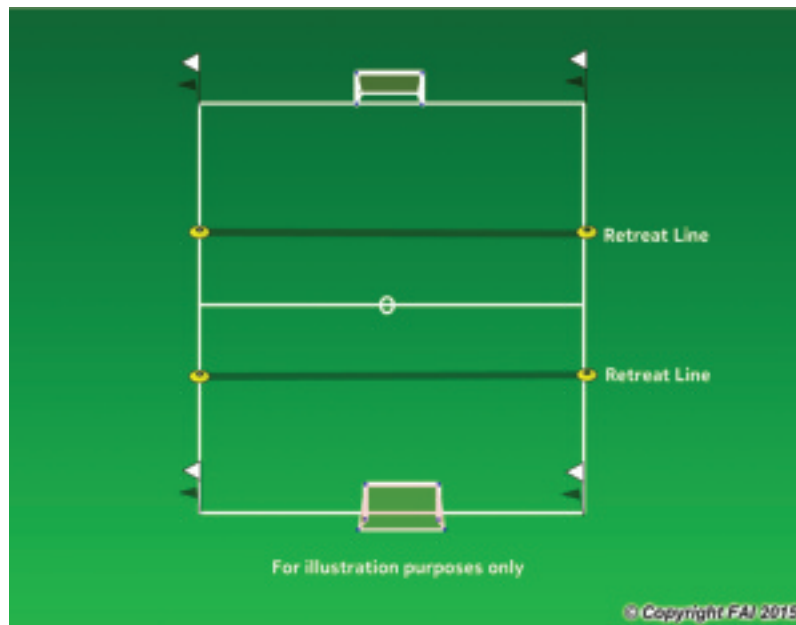
## The Retreat Line

The Retreat Line has been introduced from U6 to U11 to allow our young players to learn and gain confidence in how to play the ball out from the back and play forward to attack as opposed to the goalkeeper "sending it" aimlessly down the field.

### It's about Development!

Coaches are encouraged to work with their players on the developmental benefits of the Retreat Line and incorporate "Playing out from the back" in the playing style of their teams.

Remember, mistakes will happen but coaches and players should look at these as part of the development process and keep working with the confidence that improvement will come with time. The Retreat Line will be signified by cones – for consistency we recommend using yellow cones - supplied by the home team and placed 1/3 distance of the field from each end as shown in the diagram below:



The Retreat Line will come into effect at two points during the game:

1. When a goal is scored or the ball goes wide of the goal.
2. When the goalkeeper has the ball in his/her hands.

At these times, the "attacking" team is required to drop back to or behind the Retreat Line. The goalkeeper (or the restart player in 4v4) can then choose to pass the ball to one of his/her team-mates without the pressure of an opposing player nearby. If the game is restarted quickly to the advantage of the team with possession (before the opponents go back to the Retreat Line) this is acceptable.

Below we have listed some reminders/ clarifications regarding the use of the "Retreat Line" and this information will be updated as required.

### When can Opponents move back inside Retreat Line?

There are some differences depending on the playing format. For example in the 4v4 format (where there is no goalkeeper) if the ball goes wide of either goal, the attacking team must withdraw to the Retreat Line and are only permitted to move inside the Retreat Line once the restarter's team-mate has touched the ball or if the restarter chooses to dribble the ball back into play.

Full details are given under each specific playing format.

### Game Restart at start of each period or if a goal is scored.

Again there are some differences depending on the format. For example in the 5v5 format each period will start with a normal kick-off. However on scoring a goal the team that scores will withdraw to the retreat line and play will resume with the goalkeeper either throwing the ball out to a team-mate or passing to a team-mate within the first third of the pitch (they cannot kick long off the ground or out of their hands). The opponents cannot advance beyond the retreat line until the player receiving the ball from the goalkeeper touches the ball. Should the opposing team enter inside the Retreat Line too soon the Referee / Match Supervisor will remind the coaches that the players must retreat.

Full details are given under each specific playing format.



## 4 v 4 – applies to U6 and U7 players

### 1. The Field of Play.

Minimum: 30m x 20m

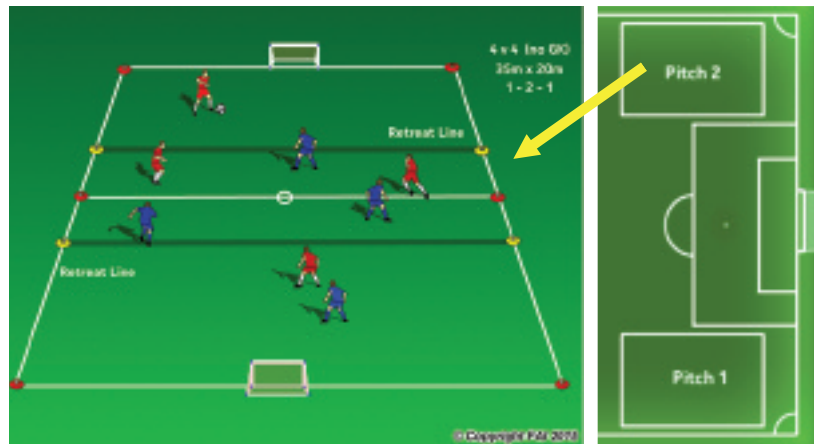
Maximum: 35m x 20m

Goal Size: 3m x 1m (10ft by 3ft).

If such a goal size is unavailable use the 5 metre x 2 metre goals, turn over and place poles 3 metres apart (this will create a goal size of 3 metres x 1 metres approximately) or alternatively poles can be used as goalposts. Use disc cones in place of corner flags and to signify the half-way line.

Retreat Line: Disc Cones (Yellow) should be used to divide pitch into thirds (signifying retreat lines).

There should also be a centre mark at the midpoint of the halfway line.



### 2. The Penalty Area.

There is no Penalty Area in this format.

### 3. The Ball.

A size 5 ball (weight 290 grams) must be used if available. If a size 5 ball of this weight is unavailable then use the current size ball, however, from August 2016 the Size 5 ball (290 grams) must be used. For Leagues playing Calendar season football the 290 gram ball must be used from start of season 2016.

### 4. The Number of Players.

Squads will consist of 10 players and matches will be played in a Twin Format where pitch availability allows (see layout below).....



In this format the squad is split into two smaller squads of 5 who will play against their opponents in the 4v4 matches with 1 substitute. There are no goalkeepers in this format, as position specialisation is not required at younger age groups. Two matches will go on at the same time if the pitch size allows, and if not then play games consecutively. If you have a bigger squad size e.g. 12 players then split the squad into two smaller squads of 6, play 4 v 4 with 2 substitutes. It is important to be flexible to ensure that players receive the maximum possible game time.

### 5. Team formation.

As per diagram 1-2-1 (recommended) although, at this age, the main focus should be on letting the children play and not on formation or fixed positions on the pitch.

### 6. Match Duration.

Matches will consist of 4 x 10 minute periods.

### 7. Match Supervisor.

A match supervisor shall be a club official or adult approved by both sides and will not be allowed to coach either team. It is important they let the children play and make their own decisions. The match supervisor will position themselves at the side of the pitch and only become involved where players cannot agree. Any intervention made by the supervisor shall be briefly explained in a helpful, friendly and instructive manner to the coaches.



## 4 v 4 – U6/U7 continued

### 8. Substitutions.

Roll on/off substitutions will apply throughout the match. The Coach shall make substitutions at the half-way line (the match supervisor need not be informed) and players who have been substituted may return to the field of play as often as necessary. All players must play at least 30 minutes (75% of match time) for example, 3 of the 4 ten minute periods, regardless of squad size. It is the responsibility of the coach to give all squad players the minimum game time indicated.

### 9. League Tables.

There are no League Tables at these age groups.

### 10. The Players' Equipment.

Coaches must ensure that all players wear shin guards.

### 11. The ball out of play.

If the ball goes out of play at the sideline, then, the nearest player will recommence play as quickly as possible by dribbling or passing the ball back into play (opponent must retreat 3 metres).

If the ball goes wide of either goal all opposition players must withdraw to the retreat line (marked by the yellow cones). The defending player will restart the game from the side of the goal by either dribbling directly into play or passing to a teammate. Once the player commences the dribble or his/her team-mate receives the pass the opponents can again move forward.

### 12. The Start and Restart of Play.

Each period will start with a normal kick-off. However on scoring a goal the team that scores will withdraw to the retreat line and a player from the team conceding the goal will restart the game from the side of the goal by either dribbling directly into play or passing to a teammate. Once the player commences the dribble or his/her team-mate receives the pass the opponents can again move forward.

### 13. The Method of Scoring.

Normal rules apply.

### 14. Offside.

There is no offside rule.

### 15. The Back Pass.

Not applicable.

### 16. Fouls and Misconduct.

Normal rules apply. Team coaches should immediately substitute any player showing unacceptable behaviour.

### 17. Free Kicks.

All free kicks are indirect, opposing players must be 3 metres from the ball.

### 18. The Penalty Kick.

There are no penalty kicks.

### 19. The Corner Kick.

Normal rules apply except that opposing players must be 3 metres away.

### General.

- Team coaches will stand on the same side of the pitch. Parents should stand on the opposite side of the pitch and only encourage players and uphold fair play.
- Team coaches should rotate players so that they experience different positions on the pitch.
- Players must have the freedom to express themselves in this format and once the game begins the Coach should just let them play and not "direct" the play.
- At the start and end of every game, team coaches and players will line up and shake hands with each other.
- Leagues/Clubs and coaches are not permitted to post results from these matches on to any website, social media platform or newspaper.



## Playing Format Summary

Age Group	Squad Size	Team Size	Match Format	Match Duration	Referees	Playing Time	League Tables	Pitch Size (m) Min/Max	Goal Size	Ball Size & Weight
U6	10	4 v 4 (no GK)	Twin	4 x 10 mins	No	75%	No	35m x 20m max * 30m x 20m min	1m x 3m	5 (290 gms)
U7	10	4 v 4 (no GK)	Twin	4 x 10 mins	No	75%	No	35m x 20m max * 30m x 20m min	1m x 3m	5 (290 gms)
U8	12	5 v 5	Twin	4 x 12 mins	No	75%	No	45m x 25m max * 40m x 25m min	2m x 5m	5 (290 gms)
U9	12	5 v 5	Twin	4 x 12 mins	No	75%	No	45m x 25m max * 40m x 25m min	2m x 5m	5 (320 gms)
U10	16	7 v 7	Twin	2 x 25 mins	Yes	50%	No	65m x 40m max * 60m x 35m min	2m x 5m	5 (320 gms)
U11	16	7 v 7	Twin	2 x 25 mins	Yes	50%	No*	65m x 40m max * 60m x 35m min	2m x 5m	5 (320 gms)
U12	16	9 v 9	Normal	2 x 30 mins	Yes	25% to 50%	Yes	Box to Box, see page 24 of full booklet	2m x 5m	5 (370 gms)
U13	16	11 v 11	Normal	2 x 30 mins	Yes	25% to 50%	Yes	Full	Full	5 (370 gms)
U14	16	11 v 11	Normal	2 x 35 mins	Yes	25% to 50%	Yes	Full	Full	5 (370 gms)
U15	16	11 v 11	Normal	2 x 35 mins	Yes	25% to 50%	Yes	Full	Full	5 (450 gms)
U16	16	11 v 11	Normal	2 x 40 mins	Yes	25% to 50%	Yes	Full	Full	5 (450 gms)

Roll on/Roll of Substitutions apply at all ages

\* Leagues who have league tables at U11 may continue to have league tables for season 2015/16. League Tables at this age will be discontinued from season 2016/17





## Player Centered Approach

Ideally no football team would play a game without a qualified coach appropriate for that level. You are essentially a teacher when working with young people and specific skills are required. The Coach needs to learn and develop the skills required to coach children to maximise their potential.

Players need coaches whose focus is on player development. Helping to build confidence, motivation, freedom of expression will create a positive learning environment, making playing and training enjoyable for the player.

Coaches who dictate to players all through the game undermine their confidence, hindering development. Young players must learn to play as part of a team according to simplified guidelines when attacking (e.g. creating space, building up play and creating scoring opportunities) and when defending (e.g. defend together to win the ball back quickly). They must learn to deal with all elements of the game; team-mates, opponents, the officials, the laws of the game, weather conditions, the score etc.

The task of the coach is to facilitate the players, to help them learn, play and enjoy the game.

### Key principles in coaching:

Motivate your players, whilst coaching always in a positive way. This helps to build self-confidence and self-motivation.

Praise and encourage your players to have the freedom to express themselves.

Let the players make their own decisions on the pitch. Constantly instructing them on what to do does not help their development. Coaches must accept that mistakes are part of the game and part of player learning and development.

Focus on the quality of play (when attacking, defending and in transition) rather than on winning games.

Set development 'goals' in what you want to achieve with your team/players. For example, "Today we will be focussing on attacking play."

Engage with your players by asking questions. Talk and discussion will help create improved awareness in their role, on and off the field.

Use language that is simple and age appropriate.

Encourage your players to show respect for the opponents and match officials (no comments) and to play by the rules.

Encourage your players to work together and achieve team objectives.

Allow players to be involved in decision making processes.

## In promoting good practice and creating a child/player centered approach coaches should:

- Act as good role models.
- Encourage and be positive during sessions so that players leave with a sense of achievement, always finish with a positive.
- Set challenging, realistic but achievable goals.
- Plan and prepare each session appropriately and ensure proper levels of supervision.
- Ensure that all activities are inclusive and allow all players to participate in an enjoyable way.
- Put the welfare and enjoyment of players first and strike a balance between this and winning or achieving results.
- Enforce the principles of fair play, treating each player equally, with dignity and respect and ensure that all players play within the rules.
- Ensure that your players shake hands with their opponents before and after the game, regardless of the result, as it is the right thing to do.
- Ensure that you cater for different learning styles within your squad, for example you could use your team talk- or a white board- or a demonstration or use players to demonstrate.
- Be aware of the developmental stages and needs of players.
- Avoid over training and over emphasis on competition.
- Involve parents/guardians and other club members in what you do.
- Be qualified and up to date with the latest coaching knowledge and skills.
- Always follow best practise with reference to the FAI Child Welfare Policy.



## Appendix 2

### Guide for Parents/Guardians

Parents / guardians play an important role in promoting children's happiness and success in football and sport in general. Parental expectations and behaviour have a significant bearing on children's attitude and behaviour while participating in football.

Parents / guardians need to be aware of why children want to play football. Children want to learn new skills, make new friends, be part of a group, to win and be successful, experience challenges, excitement and action.

While winning is important, it must be remembered that winning at all costs does not meet the needs of players. Results are not necessarily a good indicator of coaching effectiveness or ability, the improvement of players and their level of enjoyment is.

#### **Support and encouragement from parents / guardians will contribute to children having:**

- A sense of personal achievement.
- An enjoyment of football.
- Improved physical fitness.
- Higher self-esteem.
- A greater level of skill.
- Improved social skills.

**It is important for parents / guardians to find out what their children want from football and help them to set realistic targets to achieve this. This may involve controlling their own aspirations and avoiding the desire to force their own dreams or unfulfilled ambitions on them.**

#### **It is important to:**

- Encourage but not force children to be active.
- Know when he / she is ready to play.
- Encourage healthy lifestyle habits.
- Attend training and games where possible.
- Promote and teach FAIR PLAY.
- Teach your child to treat referees, other players, coaches, officials and spectators with respect regardless of race, creed, colour, gender or ability.
- Help children to set realistic targets.
- Help children with decision making.



#### **Parents/Guardians should not:**

- Ignore or dismiss complaints or concerns expressed by a child which relate to his/her involvement in football.
- Ridicule or shout at a child for losing a game or making a mistake.
- Treat any club as a child minding service.
- Take safety for granted.
- Put undue pressure on any child to please or perform well.

#### **Most importantly parents / guardians should: "LEAD BY EXAMPLE"**

#### **Parent / Coach Cooperation**

It is important that parents / guardians establish contact with the individual responsible for coaching their child.

#### **In addition, parents / guardians should:**

- Give the coach help when asked and show appreciation for a job well done.
- Volunteer to assist the Coach, for example putting up posts and nets, assisting at training, matches etc.
- Support the coach's and referee decisions. These individuals are only doing the best they can and they need support not anger.
- Refrain from contacting the coach unless it is necessary, respect they have a private life.
- Inform the coach about any illness, injury, holidays, etc.
- Make an effort to attend training and games.
- Communicate any concerns you may have to the coach.
- Make sure the child has appropriate equipment/clothing/refreshments.
- Encourage fair play at home and do not instil a "win at all costs" attitude in children.
- Be positive or be quiet, negative comments are counter-productive.
- Conduct themselves in such a way which promotes fair play.
- Be prepared to be asked to leave by officials or club personnel if behaviour is contrary to fair play.

## Appendix 2

### Guide for Parents/Guardians (continued)

#### Parents / Guardians should never:

- Insult players or club personnel.
- Argue with, or shout abuse at officials and they should actively discourage children or young players from doing likewise.
- Suggest or encourage cheating, aggressive or "dirty" play.
- Place undue or inappropriate criticism on a player, causing the player unnecessary or unhealthy levels of stress.
- Behave with physical or verbal aggression towards another person (actually use force or threaten the use of force)
- Engage in any "harassment" type of behaviour.

**Sport for young people is about fun and participation, best effort and fair play in a safe environment**

#### Everyone involved in the organisation of football should:

- Encourage participation and fun.
- Promote the development of skills as opposed to winning at all costs.
- Emphasise and praise effort.
- Act as a good role model.
- Insist on fair play.
- Be realistic with expectations.
- Be aware of children's feelings.
- Teach players to respect different cultures.

## Appendix 3

### Code of Ethics Safe Sport App



The Irish Sports Council Safe Sport app is based on the Code of Ethics & Good Practice for Children's Sport. It is an information and guidance tool for everyone involved in sport for children and young people. The app is aimed at creating greater awareness and understanding about safeguarding and best practice principles in children's sport. There are four key areas of the app which can be accessed from the home screen:

- Leader/Coach
- Parent/Guardian
- Club/Organisation
- Child/ Young Person

Within each section information and guidance is provided on "fair play", "good practice", "a child centred approach" and "should or should not". The app addresses how to report child welfare and protection concerns of suspected child abuse to TULSA Child and Family Agency and poor practice to the Club Children's Officer or National Children's Officer.

One of the features of the App is a 'Travel Tracker' function. This allows parents and coaches who are driving someone else's child/children home, for example after a training session, to permit the child's parent or guardian to view and have oversight of their location for a specified period of time while they are travelling on a journey. There is also a references section for instant access to useful websites and policies.

The app is presented in two formats and you can choose to read or listen to the information. It will also be available on IOS and Android platforms and will function on iPads and iPhones and smartphones. This cross platform approach will ensure the app wide range of users.

Visit the Apple App Store or Google Play to download.

The online ISC Code of Ethics Manual can be accessed / downloaded at [www.irishsportsCouncil.ie/Participation/Code\\_of\\_Ethics/](http://www.irishsportsCouncil.ie/Participation/Code_of_Ethics/)







For any queries on the FAI Player Development Plan please email [pdp@fai.ie](mailto:pdp@fai.ie)