



## The benefit of small-sided games for young GAA players

**Dr Niall Moyna, Head of Sport Science and Health  
at Dublin City University (DCU)**

For too long the practice in sport has been to identify and cultivate talented players and elite teams at younger and younger ages. There is a tendency to nurture the perceived best and neglect the rest. This has contributed to adult training and playing conditions being imposed on young players. Training and competition is geared for outcome and not for the process of development. For juvenile games, coaches must reassess the balance between the need to win games and cups versus the need to develop players and recognise the importance of fair play i.e. provide full participation within an environment where participants are encouraged to achieve their full potential.



Children participate in Gaelic games for a number of reasons – to have fun, to play with friends, parental encouragement, etc. Lack of fun, lack of perceived competence and an overemphasis on competitive outcomes (which usually come from coaches and parents) are major reasons for dropout.

Players can usually learn the basic skills of Football and Hurling easily. The better players who practise more often, come on faster than those who only participate in collective coaching sessions. However, players find it more difficult to develop the ability to make the right decisions – when to pass, who to pass to, where to run, etc – in full-sided games. Through small-sided games the aim is to optimise their decision-making and at the same time enhance their technical development.

Recent research conducted at DCU sheds light on the error of imposing traditional competitive models on young players who, during their formative years, are particularly susceptible to dropout. The study looked at the activity patterns and responses of children when playing small-sided games and 15-a-side games. The study found that when participating in small-sided games the children worked harder (as measured by heart rate), had more touches on the ball (catches, passes, lifts and scoring attempts), and expressed a greater level of enjoyment

and perceived competence as compared with participation in 15-a-side games.

The GAA Games Development Committee is to be commended for introducing a series of small-sided conditioned games specifically for children known as Go Games which is structured to cater for the needs and abilities of those who participate.

Research undertaken by the Dublin County Board's Games Development Department found that, when questioned, children who participated in Go Games gave the games a rating of 9.3 out of 10 for fun. 97% of children said they would like to play the games again while over 80% of children who participated in Go Games felt they got involved in the play.

The results suggest that, both in terms of technical, tactical and physical development, improvements will be greater when participating in small-sided games, while greater levels of activity, enjoyment and satisfaction clearly provide a counterpoint to the main reason for dropout among children; not having fun or not experiencing a sense of involvement and achievement!





## Go Games give practical expression to the GAA Code of Best Practice for Youth Sport

Overview by Pat Daly, GAA Head of Games

### What are Go Games?

The term Go Games has its origins in children's sport. Keen observers will recognise that when children play games amongst themselves, everyone will get a "Go" and will do so for the entire "Game". Hence the term Go Games is used in Gaelic games to identify small-sided hurling and football games called Go Hurling and Go Gaelic respectively.

Go Hurling and Go Gaelic games can be defined as small-sided skill development games – individually known as First Touch (U-8), Quick Touch (U-10) and Smart Touch (U-12) – where the playing rules and equipment are modified to ensure that participants develop the basic skills of the game and derive maximum fun and enjoyment while doing so.



### Why are they so important?

The games are the first – and most important – stepping-stone in the Pathway to Elite Performance (PEP). The Pathway has been designed to ensure that all participants *Play to Learn*, *Learn to Compete* and, in the fullness of time, *Compete to Win* as they progress through its four stages: the Recreation Stage (Fun Do); the Talent Identification Stage (Can Do); the Talent Transfer Stage (Want To) and the Elite Performance Stage (Will Do). The more confidence that players have in their own ability and the greater the level of enjoyment that they derive from developing and expressing this, the more likely they are to maintain a lifelong involvement in Gaelic games.



## Go Games make a valuable contribution to the development of young players because they:

**1**

### **Promote Full Participation**

Go Games provide playing opportunities for all children by ensuring everyone gets to play in the game and that nobody remains a substitute.

**2**

### **Propagate the Principles of Fair Play**

Go Games promote Fair Play and sportsmanship by ensuring that all participants endeavour to play by the rules and give due respect to the opposition, the match officials and the game.

**3**

### **Cater for the Developmental needs of ALL young players**

Go Games involve the use of modified playing rules and equipment that is appropriate to the age group and the ability level of participants. Players are also afforded the opportunity to play in a range of positions, ensuring they are not 'pigeon-holed' while still in the formative stages of their technical, tactical and team-play development.

**4**

### **Ensure that ALL participants derive maximum Benefit and Enjoyment from their involvement**

Go Games endeavour to ensure that ALL children have fun, make friends, keep fit and experience a sense of achievement in an environment that aids affective, cognitive and psychomotor development.

**5**

### **Implement the GAA's Code of Best Practice for Youth Sport**

Go Games give practical expression to the GAA's Code of Best Practice for Youth Sport by invoking the principles of the Code at the basic level of participation.

**6**

### **Promote a culture of Participation and Play**

Go Games endeavour to eliminate the likelihood of players succumbing to the anxieties and fears that arise when they feel they "have to win". Such fears generally emanate from a fear of losing. Go Games help players develop an understanding of the inevitability of success and failure in an environment where playing, not winning, is the name of the game.

# AN INTRODUCTION TO GO GAMES



**7**

## **Promote the Process of Development**

Go Games minimise the likelihood of outcomes, such as winning, taking precedence over the process of development. Players are at all times encouraged to learn from their mistakes and strive to achieve their full potential.

**8**

## **Provide for the selection of teams in a variety of innovative ways**

As Go Games are about play and not winning, teams can be selected based on age, physical size, school, locality or street, or many other innovative criteria.

**9**

## **Cultivate a culture of Skill Development**

The Ú-Can Awards Passport to Success scheme has been developed to dovetail with Go Games and ensure that all young players develop the prerequisite technical skills as part of an ongoing process of development. This will serve as a platform for players to go on and develop the tactical and team-play elements of performance.

**10**

## **Encourage Parental Involvement**

Parents/guardians are encouraged to take an active involvement as either mentors or supportive spectators. Positive and supportive involvement are vital elements in creating an environment where participants are encouraged to achieve their full potential.

**11**

## **Assist with the development of Life Skills**

As participants grow in maturity they are encouraged to take individual responsibility, learn to deal with adversity and develop an appreciation of the need for discipline, commitment and team cohesion.

**12**

## **Provide a basis for developing social skills and maintaining links with other units of the Association**

Go Games blitzes provide the ideal vehicle for developing and fostering links between GAA clubs on a County and cross-county basis.