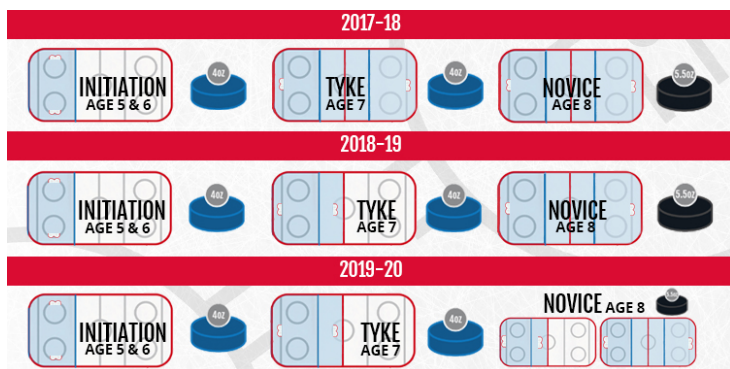


Hockey changing for youngest players



Hockey Canada, the Ontario Federation of Hockey and the OMHA are introducing new ice dynamics for the three youngest age groups in the game. / SUBMITTED

By Sarah Sobanski

The game is changing for young hockey families. Initiate level, tyke and novice players won't be returning to the same ice dynamics they remember for the next few years.

Canada's hockey regulators are changing the size of the ice surface to match the size of the player. Initiation players, ages five and six, are now playing cross-ice with nets on each faceoff circle on a width up to the first blue line.

Next hockey season tykes will place half-ice. The year after that, novices will play half-ice and transition to full ice over the course of the season.

[Ontario Minor Hockey Association](#) executive director Ian Taylor said the change is two-fold, one to increase skill development and two, to better engage players.

“The kids being able to touch the puck, be involved in the play and improve their skills if they do all these things they're more likely to continue playing, come back the following year and learn to love the sport,” he said.

The OMHA made an official announcement of the new guidelines in partnership with **Hockey Canada** and the **Ontario Federation of Hockey**. They suggest studies show the new game sees players have twice as many puck touches, pass attempts, shot attempts and change of direction play. There's also five times more passes received and puck battles, shots per minute increasing from .45 to 1.75, nearly three times more shots on goal and 10 per cent increase in skating acceleration.

“In a lot of cases you'll have a player perhaps who's a little better, played a little more. That person gets the puck and they're gone,” said Taylor. “[There will be] a little less chasing the play.”

He said the soon-to-be nationwide guidelines take cues from hockey programs across the world and other sports that modify their games for new players.

“We've seen really every other sport implement something like this. Soccer has done it for many years, whether it's mini-fields or across the field. We've seen a new initiative from tennis playing cross-court, baseball [has] shorter bats, base paths [and] basketball has shorter nets,” said Taylor. “We're just scaling it to the size of the players.”

The guidelines have been around in Canada for more than two decades, used at the discretion of hockey associations.

“Hockey for kids eight and under will look like this no matter where you go,” he said.

Playing this way could mean more games on an ice surface happening at the same time, said Taylor. Or two opposing teams could split into groups of two or three and face against each other at the same time.

“The idea there is that the kids will get on the ice more often, they'll be on the ice every other shift,” he said.

Taylor said parents had mixed feelings about the changes but the overall response was becoming more positive as the new guidelines were set in place.

“Initially there was some pushback. It was different. It's not the way their parents, their moms or dads if they played hockey grew up playing. Change is change,” he said. “Once we get through these three years of implementation, a child starting hockey, they won't know any different. This will be the new normal and that's how they'll start the game.”

New guidelines for initiates to novices will be implemented by the end of the 2019-2020 season.