



POSITION STATEMENT FOR CHILDREN PARTICIPATING IN ATHLETICS

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Introduction

As a foundation sport, athletics is uniquely positioned to develop fundamental movement skills and make a vital contribution to the development of physical literacy in all children. Positive sport and physical activity experiences delivered to children in their formative years act as a significant determinant of physical activity levels and overall health in adulthood. It is therefore imperative that athletics provides a positive first sport and physical activity experience for Australian children.

For many of Australia's nearly four million school children, their first structured sporting experience is through the delivery of athletics within the school setting. The current offering for primary school children is inconsistent. For athletics, the provision of a nationally consistent approach to the delivery of the sport provides an opportunity to have a profound impact upon the development of the whole of the child.

Athletics Australia is the recognised governing body for the sport of athletics by both the Australian Government and the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF). Athletics Australia, with the support of Little Athletics Australia, led a process that consisted of a review of domestic and international research, consultations with industry and experts, consideration of models of best practice, and the review of community submissions. The output of this process was the development of a position statement aimed at ensuring a child's participatory experience in athletics is safe, developmentally appropriate and delivered by appropriately trained personnel.

The *Position Statement for Children Participating in Athletics* is aimed at ensuring athletics products and activities are best practice, align with holistic child development principles, and provide a clear framework for the delivery of athletics within schools and the broader community. The six areas considered important for the experience for children in athletics in Australia are:

1. Holistic child development, safety, health and wellness
2. Coaching and the role of the coach
3. The role of parents and guardians
4. Age appropriate activities and competitions
5. Athletics in schools and the role of the teacher
6. Meeting the changing needs of families and society

In essence, children's participation in athletics should focus on their holistic development; be conducted in such a way that it is safe, fun, and inclusive; consist of age and developmentally appropriate activities; and be delivered in a way that reflects the evolving needs of participants and society more broadly. The following sections explore this in more detail.

1. Holistic Child Development, Safety, Health and Wellness

Sport can provide development across the four domains of physical literacy. These are:

- Physical
- Psychological
- Social
- Cognitive

As a foundation sport, children's participation in athletics should be focussed on development across the entire physical literacy standard. All athletic experiences should have the development and welfare of the child at the centre. Environments should be conducive to creating fun, safe, and inclusive experiences. Providers of athletics must create an environment that is free from abuse, criticism or pressure. Athletics experiences for children should be delivered with consciousness of the physical effects, as well as the short and long-term mental health effects for children.

Children must not be subjected to training and/or competition loads that are inappropriate for their biological or chronological age. It is widely recognised by health professionals that excessive training loads can have a negative effect on the physical development of the child, impeding the proper development of muscles, bones, ligaments and tendons. It can also affect a child's progression through puberty and impact on their physical health through adulthood. Excessive training and competition loads can deter children from continued involvement, impair physical performance in both the short and long term, and impact negatively upon their overall health and wellbeing. Decisions on the training and competition loads of children must therefore take in to account the full activity load of the child both within athletics and other formal and informal physical activity. It is also imperative that children have regular rest days from structured training and competition.

Children should be encouraged to engage in numerous other physical activities. Research shows that it is critical for children to sample a variety of sports as it allows them to find activities they enjoy, improves the full range of skill development, minimises the likelihood of injury and can improve the possibility of adult sporting success in a chosen sport. The sport of athletics takes seriously its responsibility to deliver a sporting environment that is caring, nurturing and safe. In creating this environment, we are committed to keeping children and young people safe from abuse and neglect. Athletics Australia and its partners, including Little Athletics Australia, have policies and procedures in place that individuals and organisations in our sport must abide by. In delivering athletics activities to children at all levels, their safety and welfare is of foremost consideration and of paramount importance.

2. Coaching and the Role of the Coach

The importance of the role of a coach in facilitating a fun, safe and inclusive environment for a child's participation in sport cannot be understated. Through the activities they provide, junior athletics coaches often play a critical role in framing a child's future participation in sport and can therefore positively or negatively influence lifelong participation in physical activity.

Athletics coaches should be provided with the support to understand the fundamental movement skills that underpin the sport of athletics and how these contribute to the overall development of physical literacy in children. Coaches should also be provided with education and supporting resources that assist them in understanding the different learning styles of children and how to best plan activities that engage and motivate groups of individuals. In order to maximise the holistic developmental outcomes for the child, it is important that coaches understand the importance of planning and have the tools to assist them in delivering age and developmentally appropriate athletics experiences.

Athletics coaches have a responsibility to promote enjoyment. Coaches are the “shopfront” of athletics and are one of the key influencers of a child's enjoyment, development and long-term health. Formal and informal education courses and resources should assist in emphasising this message and the understanding of the significant lifelong impact that coaches of children can have. It is vital that all athletics coaches have been exposed to appropriate education in a face to face or online format so that they have the skills and knowledge to ensure that athletics is delivered with a primary focus on the holistic developmental needs of the child and not on developing early performance success.

3. The Role of Parents and Guardians

Parents/guardians are the ultimate decision makers of the sporting environment in which their child engages. It is important therefore that parents/guardians are supported and educated to understand holistic child development and the importance of appropriate training and competition loads, appropriate coaching, and how best to encourage their child's continued involvement in sport and physical activity.

Parents and/or guardians are traditionally in a position of permanent and consistent influence of a child's experience and understanding of sport. Parents/guardians should be conscious of how their attitudes, behaviours, and actions will impact and influence their child's experience of sport as well as other children within a sporting environment. This includes how they support individuals and teams, how they engage with officials and coaches, and whether they emphasise the importance of learning, personal growth and development, and having fun over winning.

4. Age Appropriate Activities and Competitions

“Children are not small adults”. The primary motivators for children participating in sport and physical activity are the emotional aspects of having fun, being with friends, and not being bored ².

Universal design principles should guide how we consider our offerings for children ³. Athletics should be a sport that can be enjoyed regardless of ability, gender identity, location, religion, or access to facilities or equipment. All children should be afforded access to participation in athletics.

Competition is one of the key tenants of sport and can be highly beneficial and enjoyable for children. Consideration should be given as to whether age and gender is an appropriate determinant of competition segmentation in order to promote positive engagement and enjoyment for all children.

Whilst competition is seen as a key motivator for some children and facilitates social interaction, the performance of a child is not a clear indicator of future adult performance, especially when considering that the majority of athletes within the sport of athletics will not peak until their mid to late twenties. Therefore, there should not be an emphasis on the performance of children as it relates to future potential ⁴.

It has been identified that there can be negative repercussions for children when exposed to competition environments where the focus is on performance rather than fun and development. Providers should be encouraged to organise competition opportunities or carnivals for children that promote fun, development, and opportunities to interact with other children locally, inter/intra jurisdictionally or even internationally.

Notwithstanding that children will naturally develop preferences for particular athletics disciplines, children should have the opportunity to continue to participate in the various run, jump, throw and roll components of athletics. They should not be specialising in an event at a young age. Athletics competitions for children should also have an emphasis on team, rather than individual results, and team-based formats should be used wherever possible.

5. Athletics in Schools and the Role of the Teacher

Outside of parents and guardians, few people have the same opportunity to influence the development of children than teachers. Schools and teachers face an increasing number of demands and time pressures, including an increasingly crowded curriculum, which has seen the importance of sport and physical education as a key learning area eroded.

Athletics in primary schools must be positioned as a key foundation activity that provides a positive first structured physical activity experience for children. Athletics programs for children must contribute to the development of the whole of the child with a focus on physical literacy, be aligned to the curriculum, and support the achievement of the broader national educational outcomes.

School athletics carnivals support the development of community, citizenship, social cohesion, and physical literacy within primary school children. Athletics is fully supportive of these events continuing and is committed to supporting schools and teachers in the delivery of the carnival experience they provide to children.

6. Meeting the Changing Needs of Families and Society

The way in which Australians are engaging with sport and structured physical activity has changed and continues to evolve.^{7, 8, 15} This is in direct response to broader social changes and influences. Traditional sports delivery through the club network, has generally experienced a decline in participation rates, with an emerging preference for unstructured or casual participation. Athletics must respond to these changes by diversifying its offering to children (and adults) in order to increase accessibility and maintain relevance to Australian consumers.

Athletics must consider new offerings for children and families that meet their needs and motivations for participation. Athletics must also consider new, innovative and relevant channels to deliver its products and activities to complement the traditional club offering. This includes a suite of products that offer flexibility with respect to time, location, frequency, price, and the need for facilities and equipment, as well as catering for the motivations, age, and abilities of the child.

Research Links

1. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3761756/>
2. [https://www.clearinghouseforsport.gov.au/research/smi/market_seg/market_segmentation - children](https://www.clearinghouseforsport.gov.au/research/smi/market_seg/market_segmentation_-_children)
3. <http://sport.vic.gov.au/our-work/participation/inclusive-sport-and-recreation/universal-design>
4. https://www.clearinghouseforsport.gov.au/knowledge_base/sport_participation/community_engagement/junior_sport_framework
5. https://www.ausport.gov.au/participating/physical_literacy
6. <http://mosmanlittleathletics.com/2018/02/middle-distance-running-guidelines-must-read/>
7. <https://publications.csiro.au/rpr/pub?pid=csiro:EP131275>
8. https://www.ausport.gov.au/nationalsportsplan/downloads/Intergenerational_Review_of_Australian_Sport_2017.pdf
9. <http://sportandsociety.be/spliss/>
10. <https://www.sportanddev.org/en/learn-more/sport-education-and-child-and-youth-development>
11. https://www.ausport.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0011/639371/IOC_consensus_statement_on_youth_athletic_development.pdf
12. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/sporting-future-a-new-strategy-for-an-active-nation>
13. https://www.ausport.gov.au/supporting/clubs/club_health_check
14. [https://www.clearinghouseforsport.gov.au/Library/archive/digital_archive/asc_programs/asc_programs - sport market insights research/Playing for Life Full Report - Published.pdf](https://www.clearinghouseforsport.gov.au/Library/archive/digital_archive/asc_programs/asc_programs_-_sport_market_insights_research/Playing_for_Life_Full_Report_-_Published.pdf)
15. https://www.clearinghouseforsport.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0008/564083/ABS_C

childrens Report - Athletics Final.pdf

16. <http://www.activehealthykidsaustralia.com.au/report-cards/>
17. <https://sma.org.au/sma-site-content/uploads/2017/08/childrensafetyguidelines-fulldoc.pdf>
18. https://www.ausport.gov.au/supporting/top_10_tips_for_parents
19. https://www.ausport.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0009/661788/Teacher_Professional_Learning_Guidelines.pdf
20. <http://bjsm.bmj.com/content/51/3/142>
21. http://tasathletics.org.au/Portals/51/Coaching/The%20pathway%20to%20the%20top_Key%20factors%20and%20influences%20in%20the%20development%20of%20Australian%20Olympic%20and%20World%20Championship%20Track%20and%20Field%20athletes.pdf
22. <http://tasathletics.org.au/Portals/51/Coaching/An%20examination%20of%20training%20profiles%20and%20injuries.pdf>
23. Coté and Mallett (2012): Review of Junior Sport Framework Briefing Paper: Positive Youth Development Through Sport
24. Phillips and Macdonald (2012): Review of Junior Sport Framework Briefing Paper: Historical, Cultural and Social perspectives.
25. Bailey, Engstrom and Hanrahan (2012): Review of Junior Sport Framework Briefing Paper: Growth and Maturation
26. Mallett and Rynne (2012): Review of Junior Sport Framework Briefing Paper: Role of Adults in Junior Sport
27. Williams, McDonald, Hay (2012): Review of Junior Sport Framework Briefing Paper: Providers of Junior Sport Beyond the ASC Network
28. <https://www.icoachkids.eu/icoachkids-literature-review.html>
29. https://www.ausport.gov.au/nationalsportplan/home/second_row_content/have_a_say2/Sport_2030_-_National_Sport_Plan_-_2018.pdf

Next Steps

The *Position Statement for Children Participating in Athletics*, published in October 2018, is the precursor to a series of future actions, including the development of a number of resources, that will translate the position statement in to tangible outcomes. At the time of publication, the following eleven action items have been identified:

1. Develop guidelines for parents, coaches and other athletics deliverers (including Event Directors) on appropriate training, recovery and competition loads for children
2. Review current coach education courses to ensure an appropriate emphasis on holistic development of the child and that supporting resources are provided
3. Develop, acquire or signpost coaches to formal and informal development resources and opportunities to build their capability in delivering age appropriate athletics experiences for children
4. Develop, publish, and disseminate resources and tools for parents that promote positive attitudes and behaviours
5. Review athletics programs for children against the Australian Government's Physical Literacy Standard
6. Work with stakeholders to review the current competition framework and pathways for children
7. Provide curriculum aligned programs for schools
8. Provide teacher professional development that is aligned to the Australian Institute of Teacher Standards and Learning Framework
9. Work with stakeholders, including schools, to develop and offer a team-focussed athletics carnival product that meets the needs of schools and focuses on the holistic development of the child
10. Review current program offerings against contemporary research into the needs of Australian children and families and make modifications to better meet those needs
11. Work with stakeholders to develop supporting resources for clubs and centres that assist in broadening their athletics product offerings to their community