Purpose

This Policy has been written to set out the requirements that all Junior players must satisfy in order to play outside of their core Age Grouping and the process that must be followed before the junior player may change Age Groups.

Background

Playing Up or Down is the term given to a junior player who is competing in an Age Group outside of that determined by their biological age, either with older players (Playing Up), or younger players (Playing Down). Playing Up is a particularly common request in junior leagues.

There are a number of perceived benefits to playing up that are often used to justify a request to play up. These can be:

- Child is “too good” to play with their age group
- Child is being “held back” by a perceived lack of competition or quality opposition
- Child will benefit by associating with an old and presumed better group of players
- Child is developmentally advanced or their age, often with regard to physical size
- Friends or siblings are in the older group

In addition to the above, in the ACT there are additional roster pressures that may lead to players offering or being asked to play up in order to fill teams, due to the small pool of players in the region.

Playing up has been reviewed extensively in the USA and Canada. Crucially these reviews have shown ***no material benefit*** to the child in playing up a classification. In fact, most studies concluded that playing up is in fact harmful to the players development. The major reasons for this are:

- The physical differences between grades, younger players simply cannot keep up, or lack the strength or stamina to compete effectively.
- Childs ability to mentally read the game is not advanced enough, leading to them not being involved in the game fully
- Conscious/unconscious bias from older players towards the younger player, leading to them being isolated and not involved in the game as much as in younger groups
- Mental impact of going from being one of the best in their group to one of the worst in another
- Children feel pressure to interact with older players in a manner beyond their development, leading to potentially harmful physical and social situations
- Children skipping ahead can miss crucial developmental coaching that is assumed knowledge in higher classifications

All of the above leads to generally the child have a substantially reduced playing time, which not only harms their development but reduces their enjoyment of the game and could lead to increased dropouts.

The American Development Model (ADM) developed by USA Hockey recommends playing up only be approved after careful consideration of each player case, where the player demonstrates superior traits to their age group in all the following areas:

- Physical development

- Skills development
- Tactical understanding
- Maturity

Only if a player is considered to be the equal of the older playing group in all these areas should the child be permitted to play up.

The Canadian Development Model (CDM) imposes similar guidelines to player advancement. Quoting from the CDM Parent Handbook:

> *"Should a player possess extraordinary skill combined with the necessary physical and mental maturity, he should be encouraged to advance to the next level. If circumstances are not favorable to the player's best interest developmentally, the player will be advised to delay advancing to the next level"*

They also impose a hard border at age 14, such that no player 14 years or younger may play with an older Age Group.

Playing up by 1 or more age groups also introduces a number of potential risks that must be considered, including:

- Increased risk of physical harm due to interactions with larger, stronger players
- Exposure to social interactions that are inappropriate for their age (eg on field language, banter and innuendo, sexually referenced discussion etc)
- Exposure to inappropriate attitudes early in their development by being in competitive leagues too early (eg disrespect to referees, anger/emotional responses, physical altercations)

Taking into account there is no discernable hockey development benefit to the child, and there is a real potential for harm to their hockey development, as well as to their physical and mental wellbeing, playing up is not a generally recommended practice.

After also reviewing various Australian and International federation policies, a consistent guideline is apparent. Universally, federations allow playing up by 1 age classification only, and this is subject to approval criteria and strict approval policies.

Policy Basis

Based on the preceding research, Ice Hockey ACT adopts the following points as a basis for its Playing Up or Down Policy:

1. Playing Up or Down will only be considered in extraordinary cases, and is not to be a standard practice
2. Playing Up or Down will only be allowed after following the Procedures laid out in this Policy
3. Playing Up or Down must be approved in writing by all responsible parties prior to any player movements
4. Playing Up or Down must not disadvantage any players or teams in either Age Group

The following sections detail the Procedure to be followed in the event that a player is to be considered to Play Up or Down.

Age Groups

In 2023 Ice Hockey ACT adopted revised Age Groups as a response to the smaller player pool within the Territory compared to other localities. These Age Groups are presented below, along with the 'standard' age groups used in the wider Ice Hockey Community.

Age (at 31 Dec)	Standard Age Group	IHACT Age Group
5	11 and Under	Junior D
6		
7		
8		
9		Junior C
10		
11		
12	13 and Under	
13		Junior B
14	15 and Under	
15		
16	18 and Under	Junior A
17		
18		

For the purposes of Age Grading, the Player's age as at 31 December in the year being considered is their reference age.

In the revised ACT age groups, the borders between groups are considered 'soft', meaning a player on the boundary age can play in either division, depending on skill and development level. For example, a 12 year old can play in either Junior B or C without further consideration or approvals required.

Also, interstate Tournaments and Nationals will continue to use the Standard Age Groups.

On occasion, junior players may be invited to play in the Senior Leagues. The Senior Leagues are to be considered as a further age group above Junior A for the purposes of this Policy. Additional requirements must be met in these cases, as outlined in following sections.

Playing Down Procedure

Playing Down will only be considered for players new to the sport in their first season. It shall only be considered if the players general skill level and skating ability is low enough as to effectively exclude them from participation in games with their peers.

A player may only Play Down if their age is within 2 years of the upper limit of the Age Group they are moving to. For example a 13 or 14 year old may Play Down into Junior C (age limit 12), but a 15 year old or older may not.

Having a player Play Down must not reduce the playing time of any players within the lower Age Group.

As there are no additional risks to the player concerned in Playing Down, a formal signoff and approval process is not required. The Head Coaches of the 2 Age Groups must agree that Playing

Down is beneficial to the development of the player concerned and does not pose a risk to the younger playing group.

A written confirmation of the arrangements must be sent to the Junior Delegate before Playing Down can commence.

Playing Up Procedures

Playing Up Within Junior Leagues

All players should commence playing in their appropriate Age Group at the start of each season, regardless of any prior season movements. After a suitable time, coaches may identify a player as a candidate for Playing Up. This process must only be initiated by the current coach of the player.

A player will only be considered to play up if their age is within 2 years of the lower limit of the Age Group they are moving to. For example a 10 or 11 year old may be considered to Play Up into Junior B (lower age limit 12), but a 9 year old may not.

The one exception to that rule is for Junior A. No player under the age of 15 will be considered to play up into Junior A.

It should be noted that while playing up when 2 years younger than the higher Age Group is possible within the bounds of this Policy, it is not encouraged and would only be considered and approved in exceptional circumstances.

Players identified as candidates to Play Up must pass through the following 3 step Procedure.

Step 1: Coach Identification and Assessment

Playing up will only be considered if a player meets the criteria set out below. To be considered for Playing Up, it must be demonstrated that the player:

1. **Possesses hockey skills that significantly exceed those of any other player within their Age Group.** This criteria must apply equally to skating and stick handling skills. This comparison is to be made to other top level players in the Age Group, not the average playing level. Simply being the best player in the Age Group alone is not sufficient reason for Playing Up.
2. **Possesses sufficient physical development to be able to cope with the additional pressures of the higher Age Group.** This is to be assessed on strength, stamina and resilience, not simply size. The player must display the ability to cope with any increase to physicality, as well as the higher speeds and longer games times of higher Age Groups.
3. **Possesses appropriate tactical understanding.** The player must display a clear and thorough knowledge of the additional tactical elements of the game that may be introduced at the higher level. This may include rule variations, game formats, positioning and team tactics.
4. **Possesses the mental and emotional maturity to cope with the higher level.** This means the player must be aware of the new environment they will be entering and able to adapt to changes in areas such as expected speed of understanding instructions, communication skills and concentration levels. They must also possess the emotional maturity to cope with the changes in culture, language and behaviour that may come with being in a higher Age Group.

Any player identified by a coach as a potential for Playing Up must be assessed against these criteria by that coach in the first instance. If the player meets these criteria in their current coaches opinion,

then the coach of the new grade should be similarly consulted for their opinion. If the coach from the higher Age Group concurs with the assessment, the process can move to the next step.

The coaches must attest to their assessment and agreement by both signing the Playing Up form.

In addition, the player who is Playing Up must not disadvantage any player or team in either Age Group. If the upper Age Group is full, a younger player may not take the place of an appropriately aged player. Similarly they must not leave the lower Age Group under-strength. It must be recognised that all players benefit from playing in a group of varying skill levels, and depriving less skilled players the opportunity to play against their better peers disadvantages their development.

Step 2: Legal Guardian Approval

Once the coaches have agreed a player possesses the attributes to Play Up, the players legal guardians must be consulted and made aware of the potential risks to the player. In particular the legal guardians must be made aware that:

1. The player may face an increased risk of injury due to being involved with players of a greater physical development than the player
2. The player may encounter topics and/or language that may be considered inappropriate for their age or emotional development
3. The player may be discouraged by no longer being the best player in their group
4. Playing Up may turn out to be detrimental to the players overall development as a hockey player

If the legal guardians of the player agree to the Playing Up after this consultation, they must attest to their agreement and acceptance of the risks by signing the Playing Up form.

Step 3: Board Approval

Once the Playing Up Form is completed in accordance with Steps 1 and 2, it must be sent to the Junior Delegate. Ultimately, all Playing Up proposals must be ratified by the IHACT Board.

However, the Junior Delegate may at their discretion provide interim approval for the player to commence Playing Up in advance of full Board Approval. In this case, the form must be tabled at the next Board Meeting for approval. If the proposal is rejected at this Board meeting, the player must immediately revert back to their core Age Group.

If the Junior Delegate does not agree to the proposal, they will communicate this back to the legal guardians and coaches immediately, and refer the proposal to the Board. The Board may choose to overrule this decision. The player may not commence Playing Up until Board approval is granted in this instance.

Playing Up into Senior Leagues

A player may be identified by the Coaches as suitable for playing in the Senior Leagues. In these cases the following criteria also apply in addition to those outlined in the ‘Playing Up Within Junior Leagues’ section preceding.

In all cases, no player younger than 15 will be considered to Play Up into Senior Leagues. Players younger than 16 will only be considered in truly exceptional circumstances, and then only if there are not enough appropriately skilled players 16 or older. These age limits apply equally to male and female players, and this Policy shall be followed in all instances.

D Grade

A Junior player may not play in D Grade, as this is not considered to be an advantage over the Junior A league.

C Grade

A Junior player may only play for the Phoenix in C Grade, and then only if selected after participating in the tryout session. The above Procedure for Playing Up within Juniors must be followed after the player is selected, and completed prior to the first participation in training or games.

The Player should be encouraged to also continue playing in their original Age Group. This encourages a diversity of experience, and provides a training benefit to the players who do no qualify for Phoenix by giving them the practice of facing players at a higher skill level. This practice is essential for tournaments where Playing Up is generally severely restricted.

The completed and approved Playing Up Form is required prior to any participation in training or games.

B Grade

A player may only play in B Grade if previously selected for Phoenix in C Grade as per the above criteria. The B Grade and Phoenix coaches must complete the Procedure as outlined in the Playing Up within Junior Leagues.

Any Phoenix player approved to play in B Grade must continue to play for the Phoenix in C Grade as well. Failure to do so will result in the approval to play in B Grade being revoked.

The completed and approved Playing Up Form is required prior to any participation in training or games.

Womens League

Female players are eligible to play Women's League from the age of 15. They may continue to play within their junior Age Group instead if they so choose, or they may elect to play the Junior league as well as Women's League at the same time.

All female players aged 18 years or younger will be considered to be Playing Up if they play in Women's League, and will therefore be bound by this Policy. All female players playing up will be required to complete a Playing Up form and have it approved before commencing any activity in Women's League.

Equipment Requirements

All players aged 18 or under must wear the full protective equipment as set out by IHACT regardless of the Grade they play in. This includes all players in C Grade Phoenix, B Grade or Women's League. This explicitly includes the requirement for all junior players to wear a full face shield and neck guard.

Approval Requirements

The Ice Hockey ACT Board is the final approving body for all Playing Up requests, and may or approve or deny Playing Up requests at their absolute discretion. The Ice Hockey ACT Board may at their absolute discretion choose to apply any conditions they deem reasonable to an Approval to Play Up, in which case the Approval is conditional on those conditions being adhered to at all times.

The Ice Hockey ACT Board may also revoke a previously granted Approval at any time for any reason it deems reasonable, including but not limited to:

1. Disciplinary and/or behavioural issues on or off the ice
2. Player safety
3. If Playing Up is having a detrimental effect on the players development
4. Failure to adhere to this Policy, or any conditions attached to the Approval to Play Up
5. Changes to Age Group numbers affecting player mix and distribution

If the Board decides to revoke Approval, the player must immediately cease playing in the higher Age Group and revert back to their original Age Group.

Conclusion

This Policy is provided to provide clarity to all parties on the requirements and procedures for Playing Up or Down in the ACT, as well as providing some background to the decisions that formed this Policy.

It does not cover any other jurisdictions, and it should be noted that invitational tournaments and other competitions will have their own rules and regulations that may differ.

No Policy can be expected to cover all eventualities. Accordingly, the IHACT Board has the power to set aside this Policy in extenuating circumstance and determine alternative processes and/or approvals in exceptional individual circumstances. Those alternative decisions must be formally approved by the Board and acknowledged as departing from this Policy, then communicated to all parties and the ACT ice hockey community with reasoning for the departures. Any such exceptional approvals should not be considered as amending this Policy in any way, or be used as a precedent in future considerations.

Policy Approvals

This Policy has been reviewed by the Ice Hockey ACT Board and approved for use as of the date of the latest signature below.

Position	Name	Signature	Date
Junior Delegate			
President			