Modified Rules in Junior Sport Development: The Impact of a Modified Rules Program on Sport Involvement and Psychosocial Outcomes

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There is increasing evidence that children benefit from playing sport that is modified to make it appropriate for their developmental age (Cote, Lidor, Hackfort, 2009; Eime, Casey, Harvey, Charity, Young, Payne, 2015). Using modified rules in youth sport (where the adult values of competition and winning are de-emphasised) can be an important component of broader sport development objectives (Bowers & Green, 2013; Green & Chalip, 1997; Eime et. al., 2015). A well-designed and delivered modified sport program can attract young people into a sport; provide a safe, supportive, and non-competitive environment where the key skills of the sport can be progressively learned; and decrease the incidence of injury (Emery, 2002; Romiti, Finch, & Gabbe, 2007). However, there is little research that examines the efficacy of modified rules programs in increasing involvement and participation. The Australian Football League (AFL) Junior Football Match Guide is a modified rules program for junior competition in Australian Football for participants aged 8 – 12 years. This research evaluated the impact of the AFL Junior Match Guide modified rules program on player participation (through involvement in play) and psychosocial measures of perceptions of enjoyment, competence and competition and winning.

458 players (Under 9 and Under 10) from three junior AFL leagues in the Australian state of Victoria participated in the study. Leagues were classified into one of three ‘types’ depending on the extent to which they chose to adopt the AFL modified rules program (high, medium and low adopters). High adopters implemented all of the 26 rule modifications contained in the AFL Junior Match Guide program compared with low adopters who implemented only one of the modified rules in the program. Notational video analysis (using Dartfish easy tag) and field observations were completed at 33 games to examine involvement measured by possessions, disposals and other interactions in the game such as touches, tackles, and time that play occurred across different zones of the field. Notational analyses were undertaken using Dartfish software. Further, participants completed a self-report questionnaire at the conclusion of each game which containing three validated scales to measure their perceptions of enjoyment of the game; perceived competence in the sport; and perceptions of competition and winning. Data analysis from questionnaires was conducted in STATA.

Significant differences were found between the three types of modified rules adopters in terms of involvement. Players in leagues that were high adopters of the modified rules program experienced over on-third more involvements per game than those who played in leagues that were medium or low adopters of the modified rules program. Further, significant positive associations were found between number of involvements and perceived competence, as well as perceived enjoyment. No significant associations were found between number of involvements and perception of competition and winning.

This research found that when the AFL Junior Match Guide was implemented fully (by high adopters) more participants were involved more often in the sport during games and this was positively associated with psychosocial outcomes. That is, the use of modified rules increased participant involvement in the sport, and in turn, was associated with increased perceptions of enjoyment of the sport experience and perceived competence in the skills of the sport. This research suggests that leagues who are high adopters of modified rules programs such as the one studied in this research provide their participants with greater involvement in games. This has implications for sport development in terms of providing opportunities for skill development as well as the potential for retention in the sport through greater enjoyment and perceived competence. Adults who deliver and support participation in modified rules programs need to be educated and informed of the importance of modified rules programs in broader sport development objectives (Bowers & Green, 2013) beyond mere skill development. The implications for
marketing of modified sport programs, and management and education of stakeholders who deliver them will be discussed.