

Valley Royals Track and Field Club Junior Development Athlete Stages:

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Learn to Train

During the Learn to Train stage (females 8-11, males 9-12), children should be converting their fundamental movement skills into fundamental sport skills. This stage is “The Golden Age of Learning” for specific sport skills. Children in the Learn to Train stage are ready to begin training according to more formalized methods. However, the emphasis should still be on general sports skills suitable to a number of activities. As well, a greater amount of time should be spent training and practicing skills than competing.

It may be tempting to specialize at this age through excessive single sport training or early position specialization in team sports. This should be avoided in most sports.

Inappropriate or premature specialization can be detrimental to later stages of athlete development if the child is playing a late specialization sport. Premature specialization promotes one-sided development and increases the likelihood of injury and burnout.

There are a few sports that are recognized as early-specialization sports, such as gymnastics, figure skating, and diving. It is appropriate to provide more training hours and concentrated focus in these activities.

Train to Train

During the Train to Train stage (females 11-15, males 12-16), young athletes need to build an aerobic base and consolidate their sport-specific skills. Towards the end of the stage, they need to focus on strength and the anaerobic alactic energy system. Increased training hours are needed at this stage to develop each athlete’s long-term potential.

The ages that define the Train to Train stage are based on the approximate onset and end of the adolescent growth spurt. This period is generally defined as ages 11 to 15 years for females and 12 to 16 years for males.

At this stage, athletes are ready to consolidate their basic sport-specific skills and tactics. It is also a major fitness development stage.

The Train to Train stage makes or breaks the athlete. Athletes may exhibit special talent, play to win, and do their best, but they still need to allocate more time to training skills and physical capacities than competing in formal settings. To maximize their long-term potential, winning should remain a secondary emphasis.

This approach is critical to the long-term development of top performers and lifelong participants. To ensure their program is following the correct training-to-competition ratio, along with other guidelines that describe training design and competition objectives at each LTAD stage, coaches and parents should consult the sport-specific LTAD plan from their sport’s national organization.