

## New Rules of Play

### Frequently Asked Questions

#### 1. Why are we changing the rules, they've worked well so far?

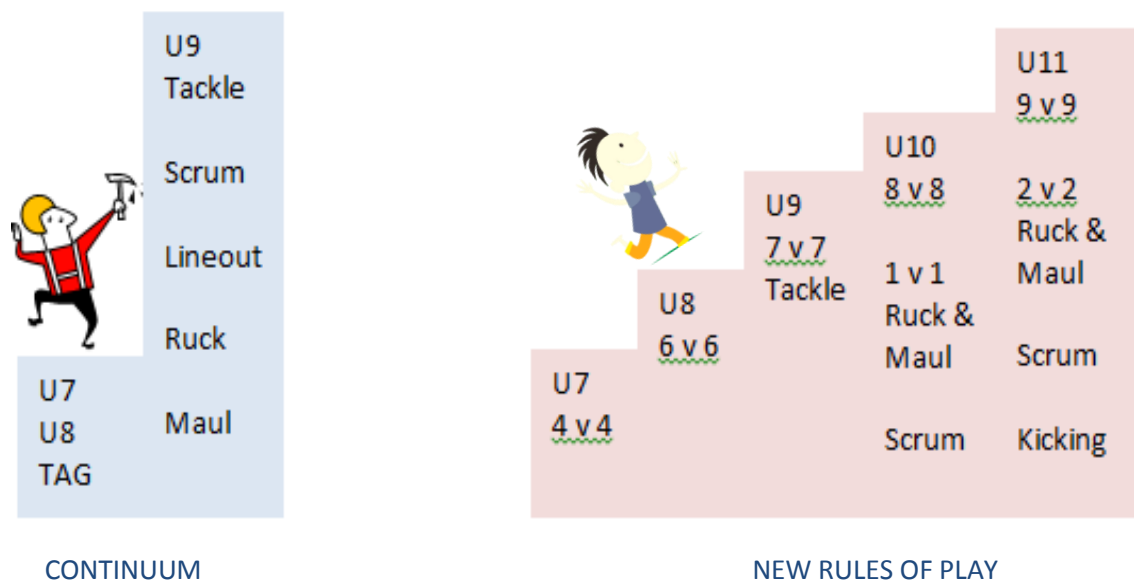
The current rules of play for mini and youth rugby were devised in 1990, over 20 years ago. Although they were quite ground breaking at the time, things have moved on since then and there is far more research evidence available.

The 'continuum', as it was previously called was formulated on the idea that the adult version of the game could be watered down to create a child version of the same game.

The New Rules of Play have a foundation in research evidence and child development expertise. This provides a game which is progressive; has a strong base in the principles of child development; and is aligned to the needs and capabilities of the child.

As in education, children are introduced to new skills and concepts on an incremental basis, which enables them to become competent in them, work hard to master them and embed them, before providing them with more progressive concepts and skills leading towards the adult game.

The New Rules of Play have clearly demonstrated more passing, running with the ball, tagging/tackling, more tries and more time in play and as a consequence more decision making in both attack and defence - core skills which are the foundation of the game.



#### 2. This is a 3 year trial, shouldn't we wait for it to finish and examine the evidence first?

There is some misunderstanding about the exact purpose of the trial. The trial has been undertaken in 3 counties (Durham, Warwickshire and Hampshire) with 59 clubs. The trial is based on research which had been undertaken in 2007 and published in 2009. Therefore the research had been completed and the principles established prior to the trial. The 3 year duration has arisen due to the RFU being able to access a full-time and dedicated PhD student from Exeter University. His remit is to monitor and evaluate the results of the trial through statistical analysis in addition to questionnaires to the key stakeholders.

Although the trial has duration of 3 years it is a little misleading to call it a 3 year trial as there are certain milestones along the way;

- Year 1 U7 and U9
- Year 2 U8 and U10
- Year 3 Under 11

Therefore the impact of the new rules for U7, U8, U9 and U10 have been analysed and have proven to be successful – more passing, more running with the ball, more tries, more manageable, greater inclusion, increased decision making, improved tackling, popular with coaches, children and parents.

“The University of Exeter is confident that sufficient data has been collected and analysed to make valid conclusions about the efficacy of the pilot study.” ( Dr Mark Wilson MEng, MSc, PGCE, PhD, CPsychol University of Exeter)

### **3. Isn't this just 'dumbing down' the rules?**

By making the rules simpler and more manageable it leaves the children to focus on the skills and game understanding they require to become better at the game. Less stoppage time means that they have more opportunity to practise them in game situations.

Small-sided games leads to more involvement in the game, and has been a tried and trusted method of coaching and education for years. It leads to greater involvement, more practice and increased decision making.

It is not unlike young children being able to learn the alphabet, form words then build sentences to short paragraphs and stories. Developing at the pace of the child – a child centred approach.

### **4. Won't children get bored with a simpler game?**

Children enjoy a challenge and in overcoming that challenge. The development of their competence helps to build confidence. If the challenge is too great they either give up completely or work on the things they are already good at.

The New Rules of Play are designed to enable all players to experience success by focussing on core skills. They also encourage those who readily grasp those skills to be challenged to do them better, which the skilful coach can assist with. Through the gradual introduction of new rules, skills and tactical challenges children can work on mastering existing skills and increasing game understanding in more digestible bite-size chunks. Evidence from the trial areas have demonstrated that children like this format and that their core skills are improving.

In addition the coaching sessions should also provide some new challenges allied with a questioning approach – what if scenarios. Kicking, tower of power, fundamentals can and should be introduced into the sessions

### **5. By taking the coaches off the pitch at Under 7 aren't the children going to be confused?**

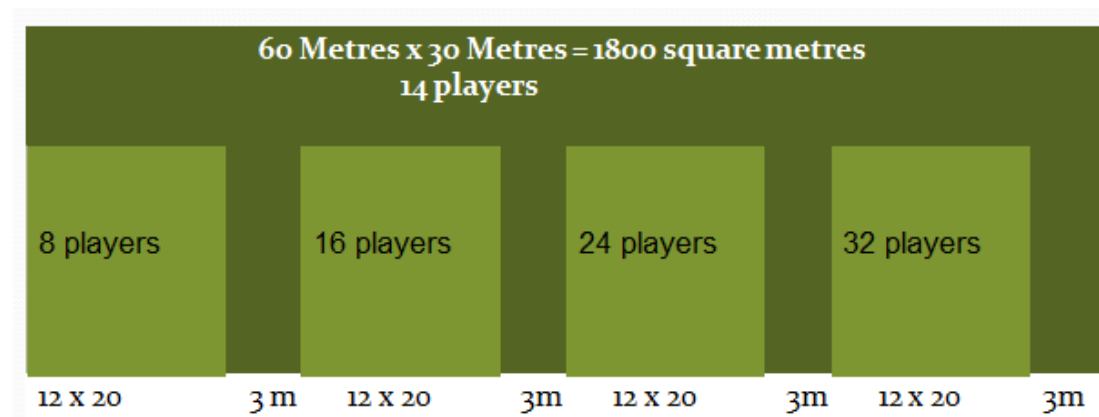
Children develop best by having a go, making decisions, making mistakes and then learning from them. The coach provides a framework for that learning, which includes the rules of play, and should advise and question to accelerate that learning. Within a game context the children should be encouraged to make their own decisions, to explore and discover. To have a coach or adult telling them when to run, pass, tag etc is not conducive to developing a confident, competent, decision making child or player. In an age where the overwhelming majority of activities for children are adult organised and supervised it is important that children have time to find out for themselves and to be encouraged to do so. They may be confused to begin with (most especially in their first game which can be a daunting experience). Trust them to sort it out

and trust yourself (the coach) that your guidance and support in the coaching sessions will prevail.

**6. With 4 – side at U7 aren't the New Rules decreasing the opportunity for players to play?**

Because the pitch size is 20m x 12m rather than the current 60m x 30m it means that more games can be played in the same space. So where there was once one pitch there can now be 4 or more. ( $60 \times 30 = 1800$  sq metres,  $20 \times 12 = 240$  sq metres  $\times 4 = 960$  sq metres).

Even where clubs have not been able to provide the maximum 7 v 7 pitch size there remains opportunity to organise two or more pitches (1 pitch = 14 players,  $2 \times 4 \text{ v } 4 = 16$  players)



**7. With more pitches we will need more coaches and referees – where will we get them from?**

Because there are no longer any coaches (other than the referee) on the pitch this provides opportunity for more children to play.

Current: One game, 14 players, one game coach & two coaches on the pitch

New Rules: 3 games 24 players, one referee per pitch

Coaches who are acting as “game coaches” (referees) have a responsibility to the game to support, encourage and coach both teams. Parents can report back on performance, or each fixture could take the shape of a mini festival with teams playing each other and coaches therefore having the opportunity to see and coach all their players. This requires a collaborative approach for the benefit of all the players.

In addition to this, a number of clubs in the trial areas have recruited parents and older players to manage the games as they are much simpler to understand and ‘referee’.

Even those clubs with larger numbers (40+) are able to provide more games for more players in less space.

**8. At Under 7, are the children allowed to knock the ball forward – isn't this encouraging them to do this deliberately?**

The children are not allowed to deliberately knock-on or encouraged to do so. They are however not penalised if they try and catch the ball but in doing so drop it or knock it forward. These are 6 & 7 year old children who are attempting to grasp a new skill. At this stage of their development the combined understanding & skills required to participate in the game are very complex. By not penalising an accidental handling error the pressure is released and children can work hard to improve without the additional ‘fear’ of the whistle going. It also helps to prevent the situation where child “A” does not pass to child “B” because s/he dropped the ball last time. The children also learn to react positively to the error by recovering the ball quickly and playing on (with either side being able to recover quickly)

**9. Are you taking contact out of the U9 game?**

No. The tackle is introduced at U9.

This gives the children opportunity to continue to embed the key skills learnt through Tag – passing, catching, support play, evasive running – whilst introducing the new technical skill of tackling. This also provides the coach with greater opportunity to give more time over to the skill of tackling without having to concern themselves with scrum, ruck, maul, lineout.

In line with the principles of child development and the building of confidence and self-esteem the tackle has also been redefined for U9s. The tackle around the legs is permitted and encouraged however should a defender hang on to the ball carrier for 3 seconds, the referee will call “TACKLE” and the ball carrier has to pass the ball and be allowed to do so. The TACKLE call will also be made if the player is tackled to ground, at which point they must pass or place the ball.

**10. If at U9 you allow shirt grabbing won't this encourage high tackling**

The rationale behind the rule change, and indeed much of the evidence from the trial area, does not support this. The “grab” tackle is actually allowed within the current rules of play, and it is a misnomer that all children in the current rules tackle low, correctly and all the time. A good number of ‘tackles’ or contacts in the current game are above the waist and either result in a second defender taking it to ground or in the formation of a maul.

The purpose of the new rules is to recognise that not all children have the competence or confidence to tackle below the waist and reward them for contributing to their team's defensive effort.

This approach has been found to reward all those involved:

- Ball carrier can still make ground (go forward) before the “Tackle” is called
- Ball carrier has to have increased awareness of support and look to off-load (increase skill)
- Tackler can still tackle below the waist to prevent forward movement
- Less confident tackler can hold on and cause ball carrier to pass –contributing to the team's defensive effort (turn-over on 7<sup>th</sup> tackle)
- The support player is going to receive a pass – increasing handling and also raising awareness of best support lines, depth etc.

The research has actually shown an increase in tackling to ground, and a very real feature of the feedback received from those clubs who have played “trial” clubs has been the quality of the tackling.

**11. Isn't this just like Rugby League?**

Rugby Union and Rugby League have many common factors, and some which tell them apart. The New Rules of Play for U9s have a tackle rule which encourages a pass out of it. Therefore attacks can get in behind defences and exploit it. The “tackle” call does not result in a stoppage in play with time for the reorganisation of defences as it does in League. It is generally a faster game. At U10 the introduction of the scrum and mini ruck and maul takes it even further away from the rules of league.

**12. Rugby is a game for all shapes and sizes, the New Rules make the game faster and penalises the bigger, slower child.**

One of the guiding principles of the New Rules is the maintenance of the integrity of the game as a game for all shapes and sizes. The coach has some responsibility for this. Often tag is held up as a game for the smaller, nippier player and the slower, bigger player feels out of place. Tag is a game for everyone IF the coach picks everyone. By including all players and focussing on performance and individual and collective improvement rather than outcome the game will be more inclusive.

In U9, U10 and U11 the New Rules provides children of different sizes and shapes challenges and outlets for success. The smaller quicker player can still evade & support; the bigger, slower player can carry the ball forward and attract two defenders or more, thus creating space for other players. All can contribute to their team's defensive effort.

**13. If one of the reasons for this approach is the retention of players, won't the loss of players be inevitable once the game becomes more complicated?**

Research strongly suggests that the introduction of new challenges in manageable bite-size chunks is more likely to keep children involved for longer. They can focus on a few new skills and work at becoming competent at them. This in turn brings success which leads to motivation and the readiness for a new challenge.

Although almost all (but not all) appear to look forward to "tackling" the reality of the tackle is slightly different to the perception. It is important for adults to separate a child's unstructured rough and tumble in the environment that they set with their friends, from the adult initiated and structured tackle practice and match situation against other children they do not know.

It is roughly estimated that about a third of children relish the tackle, a further third deal with it and a further third are put off by it (if not immediately then eventually), through their loss of confidence. By developing competence and confidence the incremental introduction (leading eventually to 15-a-side) are more likely to encourage and achieve success for children.

**14. Isn't the delay in the introduction of the scrum, and the encouragement of the nearest 3 players to participate in it at U10 going to cause safety issues and a shortage of front row players in the future?**

Rugby is a late specialisation sport. Just as all players should be coached handling, support, tackling and evasion, all should also be coached the correct technique for the scrummage being transferable to the tackle, line-out support, ruck & maul.

The introduction of the 'Tower of Power' and correct, safe scrum technique to all players combined with the delay of competitive scrum - with its inevitable temptation of early specialisation – will increase the number of players who have experienced the scrum and who are able to demonstrate safe technique.

**15. Are the New Rules voluntary or mandatory?**

The three trial Counties (Durham, Warwickshire & Hampshire) will continue to implement the New Rules for a further season. In addition a number of other Counties have also elected to implement the New Rules for U7, U8 and U9 from September 2012. Mandatory implementation for U7, U8 and U9 rules is the intention for September 2013

**16. What support will we get to help us?**

RFU professional staff will be available to provide support prior to and during the beginning of the implementation season through workshops, CPD and presentations. These will be publicised through your club CCCs, CBs and rfu.com

Additional support resources will be supplied prior to the season, and a number of documents can be found on [www.rfu.com/newrulesofplay](http://www.rfu.com/newrulesofplay)

#### **17. What about Schools – what are they doing?**

The RFU recognises the incredible contribution made by clubs and schools and also recognises that there are differences in the provision to children. Clubs often offer 1 or 2 rugby sessions a week, whilst schools offer as much as 5 rugby sessions per week, which can accelerate the children's learning.

However, the principles behind the New Rules of Play apply to all children regardless of the environment. The RFU and Independent Association of Preparatory Schools (IAPS) are working closely together to align the rules.

Irrespective of this it is recognised that children are far more able to adapt to rule changes and differences than adults. Some children will play Rugby League one day and Union the next, football in the morning, netball in the afternoon. Even within coaching sessions the games will change, and the children will adjust very quickly

Several secondary schools in one county have applied the New Rules of Play as a means of introducing players new to the game and integrating them with experienced players. This has proved to be a very successful and positive experience

#### **18. If there is accelerated learning in schools, shouldn't they be allowed to introduce the full game earlier?**

In recognising that many Independent Schools offer children greater opportunity to participate in sport, it is also important to understand that the principles of the New Rules of Play have a solid foundation in child development. A similarity may be found with Academies in most major sports. They accelerate the abilities, understanding, attributes and skill level of the individual within the context of the games and do not require a "different game" in order to do so.

#### **19. If for next season some counties adopt the New Rules and others do not, won't the children get confused? My club plays in other counties, the children won't do as well. What about safety?**

As stated previously children are far more capable of adapting and adjusting than they are given credit for. The evidence from the trial area has shown that those clubs which have entered the trial area have adjusted easily as it is a simpler game. Likewise when 'New Rules' clubs have crossed border they have competed successfully and some have reported that they have drawn complimentary comments of their style of play.

Of course some teams have lost games because the opposition have rucked or mauled more effectively, but equally they have won games because their off-loading, handling and tackling has been superior. Safety has not been an issue, as coaches have undertaken some preparation.

*".... what I have found persuasive (about the research) has been the success of our pilot rules age groups playing under continuum rules outside of county. Both our U8s and U9s at New Milton have won through to the finals of Harlequin's large 'Curtain Raiser Cup' competition beating teams from the biggest clubs in London and the South.*

*The style of rugby the shaping the game rules has produced within these 2 teams also led to a barrage of compliments from the opposing teams and has been the subject of much discussion in the week since."*

*(Unsolicited e-mail, from Laurence Doll, New Milton RFC, Hampshire)*

**20. How reliable is the evidence? Isn't it just a case of the researchers reporting what the RFU have asked them to? All this positive praise is difficult to believe**

This question is included in here as it has been a question asked on more than one occasion.

Firstly the evidence has been gathered by a full time PhD student at Exeter University. In order to gain the qualification rigorous scrutiny is undertaken with clear evidence provided with regards to the integrity of the research, the objectivity, method and process. Any suggestion of bias, influence or 'fixing' would result in a failure of the PhD and a compromising of the excellent reputation enjoyed by Exeter University.

Secondly the question to ask is why a National Governing Body would wish to go through and prolonged process of research, trialling, monitoring and evaluation and influence it to be positive just to do what it was going to do in the first place? It would have been far easier to impose the New Rules of Play in September 2010 without trial. There may have been resistance and opposition then but two years down the line this would have been forgotten. This should be recognised as a genuine attempt to seek the truth to ensure the game provides the players with what they need in order safeguard its future

The research and subsequent trial, monitoring and evaluation have taken place to examine the impact of new rules on player development and the game. Had the evidence been negative either changes would have been made or the project abandoned. Those coaches, parents and children involved in the trial (59 clubs) would have made their objections clear & loud. Thus far this has not been the case.

**21. What are other sports and countries doing?**

Rugby Union is not alone in examining whether the introduction and development of the game for children is fit for purpose. The Football Association, Cricket, Hockey and Netball, amongst others, are all fully committed to changing the game for young people to better suit their needs. The Scottish and Welsh Unions have also implemented change in their mini rules and Ireland have changed their competition structures in line with research.

**22. Where can I find more information?**

[www.rfu.com/newrulesofplay](http://www.rfu.com/newrulesofplay)

**Should this FAQ not answer the questions you were searching for please contact:**

Gary Townsend, RFU Player Development Manager  
[garytownsend@rfu.com](mailto:garytownsend@rfu.com)