



U9

A VOLUNTEER
GUIDE FOR
MINOR HOCKEY
ASSOCIATIONS

Small **ICE**  **BIG** Development 





Why This Matters

At the U7 and U9 age levels, hockey is about **learning, confidence, fun and long-term development.**

Hockey Canada's approach to small-ice hockey (cross- and half-ice) and small-area games is rooted in one simple idea:

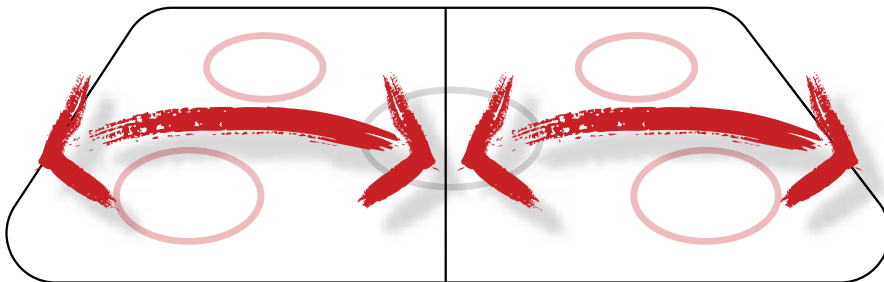
Kids have fun and learn the game best when they are involved in the play, not watching it.

And this is not only for beginners—small-ice hockey is also **best for developing high-performing players.**

As a volunteer, you may be asked why U7 and U9 hockey looks different than what adults remember. This guide will help you explain **the why**, not just the rules.



HALF-ICE



Hockey Canada's Development Philosophy at Young Ages

At U7 and U9, the goal is to:



Have fun, get active



Create a positive experience for every child



Learn and build strong fundamental skills



Develop hockey sense and decision-making



Develop and refine basic motor patterns



Practice cooperation and fair play



Support long-term participation, not early specialization

Small-ice hockey and small-area games are age-appropriate and have proven to better support these outcomes than full-ice play at these ages.

Why Small-Ice Hockey & Small-Area Games?

The benefits of playing in a **reduced space with less players**, instead of 5-on-5 on a full-ice playing surface include:

- *Increased engagement and fun atmosphere*
- *Faster and improved decision-making*
- *More chances to develop and practice skills in real game situations*

These benefits **mirror what the game looks like at higher levels**, where the majority of play happens in smaller areas of the ice versus end-to-end rushes.



The Biggest Benefits for Players

1. Every player is more involved

Compared to full-ice hockey, cross- and half-ice play result in:

3X

more puck touches

Players are close to the play and can touch the puck more often, meaning opportunities to be engaged offensively are tripled.

2.5X

more pass attempts and completions

Players pass and attempt to pass the puck more often – with and without the puck, they are closer to the game. When passes are shorter (5 to 10 feet), accuracy improves and players have more success receiving the pass. All of this leads to more confidence and skill development.

4X

more shots on goal

Players are much closer to the net, skate shorter distances and have increased opportunities to create offence.

4X

more puck battles and recoveries

Smaller ice equals players being closer to the puck and engaging in more puck contests. Constantly engaged, gaining or losing possession leads to making quicker decisions which leads to overall development.

2X

more ice time

More action, more engagement, less waiting on the bench. Adjusting team size allows for more ice time which leads to more development.



This means **every child gets more chances to learn, compete and develop** through increased involvement in game play.

2. Faster learning and improved hockey sense

Smaller playing areas require players to:

- *Read and react quickly*
- *Learn spacial awareness and protect the puck in traffic*
- *Change direction more often*
- *Find open ice and support teammates*



These situations happen constantly in games as children get older, and **playing in small spaces creates more of them, every shift.**

3. Builds confidence for all skill levels

Small-ice hockey:

- *Prevents early dominance by a few advanced players*
- *Gives developing players more time with the puck*
- *Encourages creativity, mistakes and problem-solving in tight areas*
- *Compresses time and space, forming good habits for the future*



This helps **build confidence**, including both developing and advanced players.

4. Enhances skating development

A smaller ice surface:

- *Emphasizes acceleration, agility and balance*
- *Requires quick stops, turns and edge control*
- *Results in shorter but more intense bursts*

Rather than focusing on straight-line speed, all players will be challenged to **develop critical small-area skating skills**, which are foundational to game play at higher levels.

5. It's a Fun Environment

Small-ice hockey creates:

- *More action*
- *More goals*
- *More engagement*
- *Less waiting on the bench*

When kids are having fun, they are more likely to stay in the game longer and develop a lifelong love of hockey.



How This Supports Goaltender Development

At U9, Hockey Canada recommends rotating all players through the goalie position, rather than selecting full-time goalies.

Half-ice hockey helps young goalies by providing:

- *More shots and save opportunities*
- *Faster decision-making reps*
- *Increased skating and movement*
- *Better net awareness*
- *Chances to compete and battle more often*
- *Higher mental engagement*

This approach **builds athleticism, confidence and physical literacy in goaltenders**, while allowing kids to explore all positions before specializing.



Practicing the Right Way

Player development happens every day at practice—not just on game day. Hockey Canada emphasizes practice environments that maximize learning, repetition and engagement through small-area games and station-based training.

This approach supports development at young ages by providing:

- *More meaningful repetitions in every practice*
- *Consistent opportunities to apply skills in realistic situations*
- *Higher activity levels with less standing and waiting*
- *More chances to make decisions and solve problems*
- *Better use of practice time to develop fundamentals*
- *Stronger habits through repetition and feedback*
- *A learning-focused environment rather than a results-focused one*

By designing practices that utilize stations and smaller spaces that are **active, game-like and skill-centered**, coaches and volunteers help ensure players are developing the right habits, building confidence, and getting the most value from every minute on the ice.



It's Where the Game is Played

Based on recent statistics, approximately **82% of the game is played in either the offensive or defensive zone**; therefore, it is most beneficial for players to train more in these areas.

Typically, all 10 players will be “blue line in” when the puck is in one end zone or the other, which supports cross- and half-ice hockey game play and small-area skills offensively and defensively during practice time.



Aligning with Long-Term Player Development

Hockey Canada's Long-Term Player Development (LTPD) framework emphasizes that **athletes develop best when training environments match their age, stage of development and physical capabilities**. Cross-ice hockey, half-ice hockey and small-area games are designed to support this stage-appropriate approach.

This model supports LTPD principles by providing:

- *Scaled playing surfaces that align with players' size, strength and skating ability*
- *When possible, use of appropriately sized nets that promote proper shooting technique and realistic scoring habits*
- *High levels of puck engagement that support skill acquisition and physical literacy*
- *Game speeds that allow athletes to read the play and develop hockey sense*
- *Opportunities to build fundamental movement skills and sport-specific techniques*
- *Safer, controlled environments that reduce risk while maintaining competition*
- *A progressive pathway that prepares players for full-ice hockey at later stages*



By scaling the game to the athlete—not forcing young players to adapt to adult-sized environments—associations support the LTPD focus on strong foundations, transferable skills and long-term success.

This approach is consistent with best practices across sport. Many major organizations have adopted developmentally appropriate formats, including:

- *Soccer using smaller nets and small-sided games to increase touches and decision-making*
- *Basketball adjusting court sizes and hoop heights to match age groups*
- *Baseball implementing shorter base paths and modified field dimensions*
- *Tennis using progressive ball and court sizes to support skill development*



These models reinforce the LTPD principle that early development should prioritize learning, confidence, and skill mastery before emphasizing competition and results.

International Best Practice

Many of the world's top hockey nations competing against Canada continue to use reduced playing surfaces and small-area games **during and well beyond the early stages of development.**

Their programs focus on building technically strong, adaptable and confident players before emphasizing structured systems play and full-ice tactics.

International best practice highlights a common philosophy: **build strong foundations first, develop skills under pressure and progress to full-ice systems as athletes mature.**



Why Not Full-Ice at U9?

Full-ice hockey at this age often:

- *Limits puck touches for many players*
- *Rewards straight-line speed of bigger, faster players vs. quickness and agility of all players*
- *Results in long stretches where players don't engage with the play*
- *Overly spreads out players, which leads to watching the puck carrier more often vs. supporting the puck carrier*
- *Creates overemphasis on systems and team tactics*
- *Means less ice time and/or higher costs*



Small-ice hockey and small-area games are not just for beginners—they are also critical tools for developing high-performing players.

At young ages, even the most skilled players benefit from training environments that emphasize puck involvement, decision-making and skill repetition over early specialization or full-ice systems play. At U9, half-ice hockey prioritizes overall **skill development first**, setting players up for success when full-ice play is fully introduced at U11.

Key Talking Points for Volunteers

When speaking with parents or coaches, you can confidently say:

- *“Half-ice hockey gives kids more chances to touch the puck and learn.”*
- *“It builds skills, confidence and hockey sense faster than full-ice play.”*
- *“This approach helps every child stay engaged, not just the strongest players.”*
- *“It’s based on long-term development, not short-term wins.”*
- *“Most of the game, even at the professional levels, happens in tight spaces. The goal is as many kids as possible, at as high a level as possible for as long as possible.”*
- *“It’s still real hockey: passing, shooting, defending, scoring and teamwork all happen—just with more involvement for every player.”*
- *“Advanced players benefit because they get more chances to make plays, solve problems and develop hockey sense.”*
- *“Small-ice hockey and small-area games build the skills players need later—quick decisions, puck protection, passing in traffic and playing under pressure.”*
- *“This approach develops better overall athletes, not just early goal scorers.”*
- *“It creates a level playing field where every child gets meaningful reps, not just the biggest or fastest players.”*
- *“It’s about building strong foundations now, so players are more successful when they move to full-ice hockey.”*
- *“This model is used by Hockey Canada and top hockey countries around the world because it produces better long-term results.”*
- *“It focuses on learning and development first, which leads to better performance later.”*

How This Connects to Hockey Canada's Values

This approach reflects Hockey Canada's commitment to:

- *Fun – More action, more joy*
- *Inclusion – Every player is involved*
- *Integrity – Decisions based on research and best practice*
- *Excellence – Building strong fundamentals first*
- *Ambition – Developing better players for the future*
- *Fair Play – Equal opportunity to learn and grow*



The Bottom Line

Small-ice hockey and small-area games are not about changing the game.

They are about **teaching it better.**

By focusing on development, engagement and fun at young ages, we create stronger players, better teammates and a healthier hockey community for the future.

