



# **SMALL-SIDED GAMES STRATEGY 2013 / 2014**

## **The IFA is launching Small-Sided Games as the model for football development for all primary school aged children in Northern Ireland. From 2014 all football played by children will adopt the SSG ethos and format.**

The Irish Football Association (IFA) is the body responsible for association football in Northern Ireland. The IFA Grassroots Football Strategy defines its mission as “to further enhance the opportunities for all young people to play association football with opportunities to progress to levels appropriate to their ability and choice”. The strategy seeks to address key areas such as:

- children have increasing time pressure and wider choice in leisure options
- low levels of physical literacy and football skills in young people
- improving coaching
- tackling abusive behaviour by players, coaches, parents and spectators
- developing a focus on player development rather than team results

The IFA Grassroots Small-Sided Games (SSG) Programme is aimed at all children aged between 6 and 12 and provides a safe, pressure-free learning environment focused on player development. In 2012 there were 15 SSG centres, with 586 teams and 5,772 children, an increase of 90% in three years. Teams play against each other in fixtures that are streamed to try to ensure that teams play against teams of similar ability. Results are not recorded and there are no league tables. Coaches are encouraged to focus on player development.

The value of the Small-Sided Games Programme provides youngsters with an opportunity to showcase their newly acquired skill and creativity. The aim is to provide training and game environments that promote the continued improvement of ball skills, an increased game awareness, and an appreciation for taking calculated risks in attack through small-sided games

The small-sided game model is an effective method for developing ball skills and game awareness because it increases opportunities for players to have contact with the ball and to both attack and defend without the tactical regimentation that can occur in 11 v 11 football.

Competition is a central element in a player’s development. However, a competitive environment should not be a result-oriented environment.

A competitive environment at this level should encourage decisions from player and coach alike that focus on performance rather than the outcome (favouring balls skills and inventiveness)



The SSG Programme is designed to fit within the IFA Player Pathway, based around the first two phases: to learn fundamental movement skills and learning to train.

Until now, there has been no overarching policy in relation to children’s involvement in football. Children have access to organised football through clubs, schools and the IFA Grassroots Programme, providing a mix of SSG and 11-a-side formats, where there are competitive leagues using full size pitches and equipment. There are currently over 300 teams in under 12 age groups playing 11 a-side football in organised leagues.

The IFA now endorses SSG as the only model for primary school age children’s participation in football.

Small-sided games are recognised as the most appropriate way of teaching skills and developing young players across Europe, often up to age 14.

All research into how young people learn about sport, confirms that the development of the child, and the good of the game, are served best by the use of modified games and a sensible approach to competition. Appropriate sizes of goalposts, ball, and playing field, allied to simplified rules and tactics, allow for improved development within the game. The ethos of the SSG Programme is one which promotes fun and learning and measures success in terms of enjoyment and skills development.

**The IFA SSG format is summarised in the table below:**

Age	Format (max)	Max Pitch Size metres	Goal size metres (ft)	Duration	Size of Ball
U7 2006	5 v 5	35 x 25	3.65 x 1.83 (12 x 6)	36 mins	3
U8 2005	5 v 5	35 x 25	3.65 x 1.83 (12 x 6)	36 mins	3
U9 2004	7 v 7	55 x 35	3.65 x 1.83 (12 x 6)	45 mins	4
U10 2003	7 v 7	55 x 35	3.65 x 1.83 (12 x 6)	45 mins	4
U11 2002	9 v 9	65 x 45	4.87 x 2.13 (16 x 7)	50 mins	4

There have been a number of studies in recent years comparing SSG and 11 a-side football, particularly for young players. Some of the key findings include:

- Players are more involved therefore increasing fitness levels
- Players had more contact with the ball leading to increased opportunities to score, make decisions, and develop skills
- The children also reported a greater level of enjoyment and had higher levels of perceived competence (self-esteem)



Some of the criticisms of the current 11-a-side model for children include that it gives an advantage to larger children, encouraging a more physical approach, and the results based format means that coaches and parents focus on winning trophies.

Other sports also use a child centred version of the game to introduce it to children, for example rugby uses mini-rugby and the GAA uses Go Games.

Sport Matters: The Strategy for Sport and Physical Recreation 2009-2019 articulates the vision of “a culture of lifelong enjoyment and success in sport”.

It outlines Government commitment to sport and physical recreation and notes that improving the quality, quantity and access to places for sport is key to increased participation in sport and physical recreation and improved sporting performances. This Strategy seeks to:

- increase the number of children and adults experiencing, enjoying and participating in high quality sporting opportunities;
- ensure that every person in Northern Ireland has access to a range of new, improved and shared world-class and locally available sports facilities.

The IFA Grassroots Team organised a series of consultation events throughout Northern Ireland in 2012. Over 250 people attended the events. These consultations discussed the reasons for and impact of proposed changes to youth football and how best to implement changes for the benefit of football generally.

Some of the key issues arising from the consultation were:

- There was very strong support for proposals to replace 11 a-side football with SSG for children of primary school age (and possibly up to age 13/14).
- The many volunteers who administer, organise, coach and supervise youth football need to be recognised and harnessed within new structures.
- There needs to be a partnership approach involving the IFA, leagues, clubs, schools, and councils, to make sure that the proper infrastructure is in place.
- There needs to be funding available to deliver changes, particularly for facilities.
- To increase the number of pitches available for SSG, there will need to be a combination of more 3G/4G pitches being made available, dedicated SSG facilities and multi-marking of existing grass pitches.
- New smaller goals suitable for SSG will need to be purchased
- More qualified coaches will be needed as there will be more teams
- There needs to be a change of culture in coaching
- There was support for no leagues for primary school age children, however, most supported a limited form of competition or competitive element within the model.



### **Small-Sided Games: Timetable for Implementation**

The IFA Grassroots Team has widespread support to move to a small-sided games model for all football for primary school age children. It is therefore proposed that by the start of the 2014/15 season all clubs, schools and leagues must move to a small-sided games format for all football for primary school aged children. From the 2014/15 season there should not be published match results or league tables.

The IFA intends to develop a cohesive regional structure for SSG that provides a framework for leagues and clubs to organise matches and stream talented players so that players can find a level at which they are comfortable and can develop. A regional framework already exists through existing leagues and the intention is that teams which are currently aligned with a league will continue to do so. The aim is that all leagues will move to a SSG format within 2 years where the league organises matches for its member clubs. IFA SSG Development Centres will continue as now.

A key issue is the availability of facilities for training and matches. SSG requires pitches and goals that are suitable for 5 a-side, 7 a-side and 9 a-side football. This strategy needs to be developed and delivered in partnership with Government, local Councils, clubs, leagues and communities. It is important that clubs and leagues work with the Councils in good time to ensure that arrangements can be made to provide multi marked grass or 3G pitches suitable for SSG, particularly for 9 a-side football.

The IFA and DCAL are working to ensure that funding is in place for goals suitable for SSG. The IFA will write to all Councils to make them aware of the requirements of SSG and the plan to move to SSG by the 2014/15 season.

SSG is all about player development and making sure that children have the best possible development opportunities at a young age. SSG is aligned with the player pathway and provides the best foundation for young players learning the game. All training and matches should be focused on player development and on assisting players to improve their physical and technical ability and their understanding of the game.

Coaches are central to SSG with a change in focus from team results to individual and team development. As there will be more teams and more players at under 11 level, there will be a need for more coaches. The IFA will consider introducing a SSG coaching award focused on coaching at SSG level only. Coaching qualifications will be changed to reflect this and to introduce age appropriate coaching and coaching qualifications. Coaches should be encouraged to specialise in coaching at SSG level only.

Primary schools will be required to adopt the SSG model and to implement this as the only football played in or between schools. The NI Schools FA and the Education & Library Boards are fully behind this. Schools may, if they wish, adopt a 7 a-side model for all football up to and including under 11s. Clubs are also encouraged to work with local schools to share coaching resources and facilities.

The expansion of small sided games represents a major change in the way that children experience football and a significant opportunity to raise standards within the local game. Our aim is that more children will play and enjoy football and that in the longer term it will benefit football at all levels and encourage children and adults to participate in sport and adopt healthier lifestyles.

*The McDonald's Small Sided Games Programme launched in 2010 to help children aged 6 - 12 enjoy the game in a safe and pressure-free learning environment, helping young footballers shine. McDonald's is delighted to support the programme as part of our aim to create a better grassroots football experience for players of all ages and abilities.*

**Tom Barnsley, Sports Sponsorship Manager, McDonald's UK**



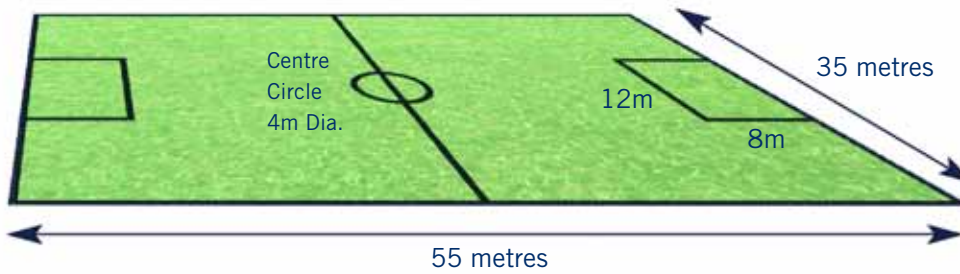
For more information on McDonald's football programme, including opportunities for local clubs to secure funding for development projects, once-in-a-lifetime opportunities like your child's chance to walk out onto the pitch as a Player Escort, or useful information on coaching or running a club, visit McDonald's KickStart - [www.mcdonalds.co.uk/kickstart](http://www.mcdonalds.co.uk/kickstart)

# MAXIMUM PLAYING AREA MEASUREMENTS

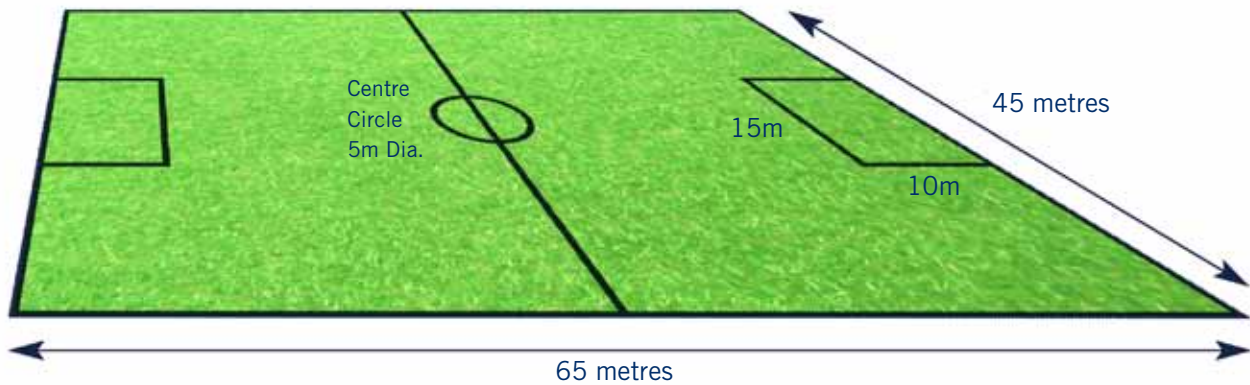
Under 7  
Under 8



Under 9  
Under 10



Under 11  
Under 12



Ian Stewart  
McDonalds Small-Sided Games  
Development Centres Co-ordinator  
Irish Football Association, Unit B, Adelaide Business Centre  
4 Apollo Road, BELFAST BT12 6HP

Telephone: 028 90 684710  
E-mail: [istewart@irishfa.com](mailto:istewart@irishfa.com)

