

Auskick or junior football?

One coach's perspective on the big decision ...

To start with, you should understand that there is no correct answer to this question – it is impossible to provide a “one-size fits all” answer as to whether your son or daughter should be playing competitive football games at a local junior football club or attending an Auskick centre. Maybe they should be doing both ...

That said, there are some easily articulated questions that can (and should) be considered by the parents of the child ... and the child themselves. Having worked through those questions, you might find, as my son and I did, that the answer is a definite “I’m not sure”!

Some of the most obvious decision criteria relate to age, size, skill level and the like. There are other criteria, though, that should be given equal, and in some instances, more weight in the decision process.

If you make the correct decision, you are likely to have a son or daughter who continues to enjoy their footy, developing their skills and having fun with their friends. Make the wrong decision and, sadly, you might watch them walk away from football forever.

The purpose of this document, then, is to chat through the issues as I see them from my perspective as a parent, an Auskick coach and, most recently, a junior football team coach. I have been through this process with my son and I am happy to say that we got the decision correct. Three years on and he is enjoying his football enormously.

And what was that decision? I’ll tell you at the end ... I don’t want you jumping to any conclusions just yet!

1. Is my child old enough to play for a football club?

I have written this document on the assumption that you are considering the future of a young footballer who is somewhere in middle to late primary school. If your child is younger than this, I can’t see any way that he or she is old enough to play for a club.

Some football clubs encourage kids to start playing in a team as early as seven or eight years of age, typically playing in a “tackers” or under-nine’s team. Based on this example, your child may be playing against children who are 25% older than they are ... a significant amount at that age.

The potential age difference introduces a range of issues, including:

- **Size of the child** – the extra physical development that can occur in a two year period is significant. Think how much your son or daughter has grown in the last two years. Consider their school photograph and see how much the physical sizes range within their grade. In the case of a seven year old playing in an under-nine’s team, there’s a two year range of sizes to consider.
- **Maturity of the child** – children who have insufficient levels of maturity will find it difficult to cope with the concepts of game strategies, rules, etc. I have worked with under 12’s and under 13’s who struggle with these concepts – how much more of a struggle is for a seven or eight year old, who’s still coming to grips with the basic skills of kicking, handball, etc. As well, he or she needs to understand the concept of team. An example of this is when watching games at Auskick, no-one wants to play in defence - everyone wants to kick goals.
- **Fitting in with other players** – often junior football clubs attract a number of children from the same grade levels at each of the local primary schools. If a child moves into junior football too early, it is likely to occur without many of his own grade level, making it difficult to “fit in”.
- **“Fear factor”** – if your child is worried about being hurt in a football match, they are less likely to go near the action, meaning that they will become, at best, an “active spectator”. There needs to be an acceptance and understanding that incidental injuries will occur in a club game. If the child is not ready to accept this, they are not ready to be part of a team
- **Team mates’ feelings** – so far, all of the criteria have related to how your son or daughter might feel. There is also the rest of the team to consider – are they going to want to accept a team mate who is small, immature and not prepared to be an active player? While we might think about this from an adult perspective, remember that the team mates are also small children and are likely to see the child as not being part of the team.

In an Auskick environment, the keys to success are based on safety, fun and equal participation. This often involves coaches and umpires becoming "creative" in their activities to ensure that everyone gets a kick and an opportunity to try things like going up in the ruck, kicking out after a behind, etc. This is not going to be easily achieved in a competitive club environment and therefore must be considered in the decision you make. As well, when a game needs to be won, the older and better skilled children will get the opportunity to play in the primary positions on the ground, leaving the younger, less skilled children to either sit on the bench throughout the game or to take up another low-key role in the game.

2. Is my child skilled enough to play football at a club?

This is a question that, even as a coach at both Auskick and club level, I find difficult to answer easily. To some extent it is a similar question to the old favourite – "How long is a piece of string?"

For starters, I have seen far too many mums and dads who possess a "skewed" opinion of their child's ability to play football.

I have seen parents who honestly believe that their children are significantly more skilled than they really are. These are the parents who spend a lot of time harassing the coach about why their son or daughter is not spending more time on the ground during the game. They are the ones who believe that their child should be rotating through two positions – "on the ball" and centre half forward.

At the other end of the spectrum are the parents who, no matter how well their child is trying and developing, are never satisfied with their son or daughter's rate of development. If the child is enjoying what they are doing, they will be trying their best to develop their skills just as fast their bodies will allow – taking into account their size, maturity, interest level, etc.

As well, there is the question as to how well a player should be able to play before they join a team. If **they** (not you!!) are truly happy playing a fringe role in the team, being a player who gets a run when the game allows, the skill level can afford to be a little lower than would otherwise be the case.

So much of this aspect depends on the club and on the coach themselves. If the club is determined to win games as their primary focus (sadly, there are too many clubs like this at junior level), the lesser skilled player will be assessed as a liability and will be treated accordingly. If the club and coach are strong believers in kids having a go and being rotated through different positions, equal time on the ground regardless of how their skill levels compare with other team members, once again, the child can afford to join such a club / team earlier than they might in a "win at all costs" kind of club.

As a broad and sweeping statement, if there is some doubt as to whether the child is skilled enough to join a competitive team, there's a fair argument that they should stick with Auskick. This will give them the opportunity to develop their skills in a non-competitive and player-focused environment .

To provide an idea of how far a player **can** go in Auskick without **having** to play for a team, it is worth considering the criteria for achieving the highest certification at Auskick – the Platinum footballer.

- Kick three goals out of five shots with the preferred foot from 25 metres and three goals out of five with the non-preferred foot from a distance of 20 metres.
- Deliver a "rocket" handpass over ten metres with alternate hands
- Spoil from behind an opponent who is attempting to take an overhead mark. The kick must have travelled at least ten metres.
- Perform a one-handed pick up of a stationary football and immediately handball to a team mate ten metres away.
- Correctly tackle a stationary player from behind and from side on.

This list is not presented as a minimum standard required to play club football – it simply serves to demonstrate how far a child can progress in Auskick.

That is not to say that they can't start playing junior football as well as staying at Auskick, but more about that later.

3. Should I encourage my child to stay on at Auskick rather than going to play club football?

Again, this is a difficult question for me to answer in relation to **your** child. It depends on whether your child feels happy participating in Auskick. Remember that the primary objective for playing junior sport of any kind is that the child will be safe and have fun. Nothing else really matters.

So if they are enjoying Auskick, why not stick with it?

Remember my earlier comment about doing both Auskick and playing junior football at a club. I know that people are busy and being involved in both is a commitment for the child (and the mums and dads) but it is certainly one option. In fact, a few clubs are gradually coming to realise that the Auskick program is unparalleled in its structure and quality of resources and they are replacing traditional "training sessions" with Auskick.

In this situation, we can have the ideal – on-going development of skills whilst playing competitive games on the weekends.

But let's consider the situation where the choice needs to be made – Auskick or club football.

The decision will depend on a number of factors, some of which have already been highlighted, others that include:

- What the player thinks they are up to
- What the parents think the player is up to
- What the player's friends are doing
- Does the scheduling of one activity suit the family better than the other

These are valid considerations but, in my experience, the decision to move on to playing with a team in preference to staying in Auskick will be made for the wrong reasons. Three common reasons are:

- **Keeping up with friends** – as already indicated, the primary reason for playing junior sport is to have fun, and that includes playing with your mates. What **is** wrong though is when the keeping up with friends is actually based on the parents' friendships with other players' parents. Don't force your child to play at a level that is higher than they want to just because your friends' children are playing at that level.
- **Mum and Dad wanting their children to develop quickly** – once again, don't get me wrong – I am all for parents encouraging their son or daughter to excel in any pursuit. Here, I am talking about parents who move from **genuine encouragement** to the continual pushing, almost harassment by some parents that often manifests itself in the "ugly parent" syndrome. These are parents who push their child in a most unrealistic and unfair manner, to achieve skills levels that are simply beyond their ability and / or interest levels. They are often the same group of parents as those mentioned earlier with a skewed view of their child's ability – they either continue to damage the child's self-esteem by never being satisfied with their child's development or they get angry with umpires, coaches and other people who don't share their over-inflated view of their son or daughter's ability.
- **Dad living his football dream through his son** – this is very closely linked to the previous point. This is seen when the child's father was never good enough, big enough, interested enough, motivated enough – whatever – to be as successful as they may have once dreamed of. No matter what else happens, they are going to drive their kids to make sure they make into the AFL, Australian cricket team or whatever other elite sport that Dad thinks they should make it in. On very rare occasions, this continued harassment of the child does appear to pay dividends when they make it to "the big time".

Far, far more common is the situation where the child learns to dislike the whole sporting experience and walks away. In extreme cases, the child thinks he's failed because "he didn't make it" and Dad thinks the child has failed, with the sad outcome of the fundamental father / son relationship being damaged.

Please don't think that I am over-dramatising this – it does happen and all because Dad (and in some instances, but less often, Mum) has taken the whole thing far too seriously.

And by the way, in the case where the kid does "make it" ... there's no proof of this ... but I reckon they might have made it anyway.

Therefore, in response to the original question – should I encourage my child to stay at Auskick instead of going onto the football – the correct answer is that you should do what you think is right **for the child and for the family**, taking into account all that has already been said.

My feeling is that if there's any doubt, stick with Auskick. This will give your child another twelve months of growth, maturity and skill development before they go off and play competitive football. As well, by leaving it another year it could be argued that they'll be more ready for the experience, will play a more active role in the team and, hopefully enjoy it even more than they would have had they joined the previous year.

So let's say you do choose club football instead Auskick ... what then?

This might sound obvious but the choice of club is crucial. There are too few clubs that support the model mentioned earlier where the cross over between Auskick and junior football is staged. One such club is Doncaster Heights Junior Football Club in Melbourne's eastern suburbs. They have developed a pathway program with Templestowe Park Auskick where children can continue to stay at Auskick whilst trying out "tackers" football. No "one-way" commitment exists, where the child makes the decision to play club football and leaves Auskick forever.

In the first instance, the child has the opportunity to play a few games with the Doncaster Heights tackers while primarily remaining an Auskicker. This means that, if the child enjoys the experience, they play more and more games, eventually becoming a "full-time" junior footballer for the Doncaster Heights club. If they don't, they can maintain their "guest" status for as long they like, meaning the "big decision" can happen over a three or four year period if they like.

As well, even after the decision has been made to move into junior football "full-time", the younger players (up to under 12) are encouraged to continue going to Auskick as an additional training session each week. As an incentive to do so, Doncaster Heights reimburses the cost of joining Auskick for any registered junior player at the club.

This type of program exists at a few other clubs, but sadly, not anywhere near enough clubs. Hopefully, there will come a day when this becomes the norm, either voluntarily or via mandate from the AFL.

Anyway, let suppose that no such club exists in your neighbourhood and you need to choose a club for your son or daughter to join. There are some issues that are obvious – location, game and training times, etc – must be compatible with other family activities that are going on. This consideration is not only important in ensuring that your child can be an active participant in the team, but also so that at least one of his or her parents can be an active participant, too.

It is a very sad thing to see a child being dropped off at junior sport at the start of the activity and having the parent come back to pick them up at the end. The excuses (and I use that word deliberately) are always one of two – "I don't have the time" or "I don't know anything about football / cricket / whatever sport". To be frank they are both absolute cop-outs.

If you don't have the time to spend a scheduled, predictable period of time with your kid once a week, then I think the priorities are wrong. Sure, there are will be occasional weeks where work or other commitments mean that you can't be involved **for that week**. Why not schedule that hour or two every week to spend with you kids ... it sure beats the gym, reading the paper, doing the shopping or whatever else you think is more important.

The other one – "I don't know about football (or whatever other sport)" – is probably because you've never taken the time to come along and watch your son or daughter playing. There are lots of ways to be involved – cutting up the oranges, doing the timekeeping, waving the goal umpire's flags, etc – and your child will be rapt to have you involved.

Some of the less obvious considerations about choosing a club include the following:

- What is the attitude of the club towards the children who play in their teams? Is everything focused on winning premierships? Is the coach fanatical about winning every game at the expense of giving everyone an equal go? Are the other parents berating their children if they make a mistake?

If the answer to any of these questions is "yes" and your son or daughter is in primary school, walk away and don't go back. At primary school age, as has been said on several occasions in this document, the focus must be on fun, being safe and learning and developing skills. Sure, the kids mightn't win every week but they'll enjoy developing even more important skills – team play, contributing to a team effort (even when that means calling out encouragement from the bench), reliance upon others, sportsmanship, respect for opponents and officials and the list goes on and on.

If they enjoy their footy, they'll continue to play into secondary school and hopefully into senior teams at whatever level they feel comfortable in. There's going to be plenty of time for them to understand competitive sport during those years.

- Is there a written and published policy that guarantees that, if your child comes along to training each week, they'll get an equal amount of game time as others, regardless of ability? A former AFL player and coach, when addressing a recent coaching forum told us that he has a policy that if you come to training each week, you are guaranteed at least three quarters of a game, no matter how skilled you are.

This philosophy is never going to work at an elite level where winning and excellence are the key aspiration of each participant. But in the primary school years, take the chance to find a team where your son or daughter can be **their** best, not necessarily **the** best. In a squad of 24 players, only one player can be **the** best. Every single player can, however, be **their** best.

If they are good enough, they'll come through the system with their skills well developed, unlikely to have been burnt out by the expectations of their club and ready to progress through to the elite level or close to it. And if they are not good enough to make it to the elite, it doesn't matter if they are having fun.

- Is there an opportunity for you, as a parent, to participate in the team's activities? Don't let your children get through to their senior school years and regret that you didn't take the chance to be involved in their sport when they were young. Far too often, I hear of people expressing this regret – "if I only had got involved"

Returning to an earlier theme, there are two groups of people who don't get involved in their kids sport.

The first are the lazy and selfish ones who see the sporting club as a cheap baby-sitting service. They take the opportunity to use someone else's parents to look after their child while they go off and buy themselves a coffee and a newspaper.

You might have detected by now that these people really, really annoy me. They just don't get it ... here's a first class opportunity to spend quality time with their son or daughter - and their friends - and instead they are off doing something else

As already said, there will be occasions where work or family commitments preclude your involvement every now and again – maybe for small business operators, this is even more of a regular thing.

But for those of you reading this document and thinking that being involved in your kid's sport each week would be an imposition on your spare time ... get real. Get out and enjoy the company of your kids and their friends and watch them play.

If you are part of that second group who has not been involved with a club before, here's the drill. Early in the season, when you are picking your child up from training, find out who the coach is, introduce yourself and say "Hi, I'm Sally's Dad. I've never been involved in football before but I'd like to help. What can I do this season?"

I'll bet you they give you a number of things you could help with, with or without any football experience. It might be walking around at training saying "Well done" or "Good effort". It might be helping to pick up the equipment at the end of the session. It might be bringing a bag of lollies to the game to help replace some of the energy.

You'll be amazed at how much your kid will love your involvement, no matter how small.

By the way, if the coach says that there's nothing you can help with, find another club.

- Do other children from your child's school play at the club? That is often a really good indicator as to whether the club is a good one to be involved in. It gives you the chance to ask other parents about the way the club works and gives you someone to stand with on match day. It also means that the kids can get to school on Monday and relive the game, minute by minute, kick by kick.
- Does your child want to go and play there? That is, do they **really** want to go and play there (see "**Dad living his football dream through his son**" earlier in this document).

And so, we are almost to the end of the document ... are you any closer to making the decision to what your son or daughter wants to do in regard to their footy? You may have picked up that, if anything, my leaning is towards another year at Auskick if there is any doubt. Auskick is safe, Auskick is predictable, Auskick is familiar and normally, Auskick is fun.

Typically, unless they are part of an Auskick centre where they can move across to football over a period of time, as discussed earlier, the decision to go to a football club is a one way street. It is most unusual for a child to leave Auskick, go to junior football, dislike it and return to Auskick. They'll generally go and find another sport.

Another year of Auskick will not take away the chance to move onto club football the following year and because of the way that age groups work in most leagues, they'll be playing with same bunch of kids the following season anyway. But moving too early can be a risk that could result in the child leaving football at a young age, never to return.

By the way, you might be wondering about what my son did.

When we first had the conversation about Auskick and junior football, he was going into grade four at age nine. He had the option of another year of Auskick or junior football at our local club.

He chose to go to junior football and three seasons later he loves his football more than ever and has 53 consecutive games under his belt with the same club. At the start of the third season, an opportunity arose for him to go back to Auskick, which he did – training during the week, Auskick on Saturday and club footy on Sunday. His skills went ahead in leaps and bounds, as did his enjoyment of the game.

During his 53 games he has played in every position on the ground for a club that he loves. It is a club that has produced three players with top ten Brownlow finishes, a number one draft pick and Rising Star nominee and another twenty or so who have played AFL football. But best of all, it's a club where a couple of thousand young people and most of their parents have had the chance to be involved and participate.

Would I have changed the outcome if I could ... absolutely not.

The most important thing for me is that he loves his footy and he is motivated to develop his skills. It's most unlikely that he'll be an elite footballer but I know that he'll play football for as long as he can, at whatever level he feels is appropriate. As a Dad, an Auskick coach and a junior coach ... I couldn't be happier.

As I said at the start of this document, it is impossible for me or any other coach to make the decision about Auskick and junior football for you, but I hope that this framework is of some assistance. The best measure of whether you make the right decision or not is whether you have chosen the option that will give your child the most fun and the best opportunity to participate.

Might your journey from Auskick to junior football be as enjoyable and successful as ours.

Good luck with your decision!

Neil Butler is an accredited Level 1 coach in AFL Auskick, Youth Football, Cricket and Hockey and has been involved in his local Auskick centre since 2000. He has been Head Coach at Templestowe Park Auskick and was named AFCA Regional Auskick Coach of the Year for Oakleigh Region in 2003. He has also coached junior football at Beverley Hills Junior Football Club for two years (under 10 and under 11), not winning many games but giving every kid an opportunity to have a go. Most recently, Neil has been involved in coach education for Football Victoria as both a presenter and course facilitator.

For further information about Templestowe Park Auskick, please visit their web site at www.tpauskick.info