

IRISH FA BEST PRACTICE GUIDE

UNDER 18S IN ADULT FOOTBALL



THE WELFARE OF THE CHILD IS PARAMOUNT

All aspects of UK and Northern Ireland law agree that child welfare comes first in any decision making involving children and young people.

In establishing best practice in relation to young people under the age of 18 participating in adult football, the Irish Football Association acknowledges the following areas of guidance:

- **The Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995** - which defines a child as *'any person under the age of 18'* and stipulates that a child's welfare takes *'paramount consideration'*
- **Sport NI 'Code of Ethics and Good Practice for Children's Sport' (2000)** - which notes that *'adults interacting with children in sport are in a position of trust and influence'*
- **CPSU 'Club Framework for Safeguarding Standards in Sport'** - which emphasises that *'children and young people have a right to enjoy sport, free from all forms of abuse and exploitation'* and that *'sports clubs have a duty of care to children and young people who take part in their activity'*
- **CPSU 'Involving Young People in Mixed Age Sport or Activity' briefing paper (2022)** - which affirms that *'activity organisers have a responsibility to promote the safety and welfare of participants, and this extends to assessing the potential risks associated with mixed-age activities'*.

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IFA ELIGIBILITY RULES

- In the men's game, players must be 16 years of age on or before July 31st following the current playing season in order to be eligible to participate in adult football
- In the women's game, players must be 16 years of age on or before 31st December following the current playing season in order to be eligible to participate in adult football
- Best practice provisions set out within this guidance therefore relate to all players under the age of 18 and above the age of 15 as they fall under the legally accepted definition of a 'child'

POLICIES AND CODES OF CONDUCT

- The Irish FA Safeguarding Policy and Procedures (short version) should be personalised by clubs
- Coaches should sign a declaration to confirm they have read and understood the policy
- Consideration should be given to issuing a separate Code of Conduct for players under 18 years of age playing in adult teams
- The Code of Conduct should be signed by the player, their parents/carers and the club welfare officer

PARENTAL CONSENT

- Prior to selection, written consent should be sought from parents/carers in relation to participation in adult football
- Additional written consent in relation to photography/filming, social media and digital communication use is advised
- It is best practice to engage with parents and players in a face to face meeting to raise awareness of demands and expectations when playing adult football, so consent is fully informed

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PHYSICAL CAPACITY

- Younger players will likely be smaller in size, with lower muscle mass and developing frames
- Risks associated with differences in physical size and capacity should be assessed prior to selection
- Maturity and technical competence should be given due consideration alongside age and size

ONLINE COMMUNICATION

- Online communication should only take place in group forums
- One-to-one communication is discouraged
- Activity in group forums should be age-appropriate, or consideration given to separate groups for organisation and for social chat
- Group forums should be limited to those involved through club membership

SAFE CHANGING

- Clubs may wish to consider separate changing areas for adults and younger players
- Separate changing and showering times could be imposed if separate facilities are not available
- Younger players could be given the option to travel in their kit and shower at home if preferred

END OF SEASON AWARDS

- Consideration should be given to suitability of venues for awards evenings
- Awards and prizes should be age appropriate

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RAISING CONCERNS

- Players and parents/carers should be made aware of club reporting procedures, including identification of the following key staff:
 - Club Welfare Officer*
 - Club Secretary/Chairperson
- Any existing reporting procedures, including whistleblowing, must be made known to players and parents/carers prior to selection

*Adult clubs without a youth section should prioritise the appointment of a Club Welfare Officer prior to selecting players under the age of 18

SAFE TRAVEL

- Rooms should be allocated on a same-sex basis
- Consideration should be given to age appropriateness of room pairings
- Where possible, younger players should be roomed in groups of 3 or more

PEER PRESSURE AND BULLYING

- Coaching staff should be aware of signs of bullying, peer pressure and hazing behaviour
- Clubs should have clear processes for identifying and dealing with bullying
- Younger players should be informed of processes for reporting to the Club Welfare Officer prior to selection

ACCESS NI

- Coaches within adult teams are in a position of trust in respect to younger players transitioning from youth to adult football
- It is recommended that adult teams who have an associated youth academy act responsibly in organising for enhanced disclosure checks for coaching staff in adult teams through the IFA registered body process
- All adults involved in driving younger players must obtain an enhanced disclosure certificate