



HOCKEY CALGARY

**EVERYONE'S
GAME**

U7 & U9

**PARENT
GUIDE & FAQ**

DECREASE THE SPACE, INCREASE THE PACE

UPDATED AUGUST 2026

A GUIDE FOR PARENTS

Why we play this way, what to expect this season, and how your player's pathway unfolds for 2026-27

KEY DATES – 2026-27 SEASON

- **Half-Ice season:** September 1 to December 26
- **Three-Quarter Cross-Ice:** December 26 to February 28
- **Eso Minor Hockey Week:** January (exact dates set by your Member Club)
- **Optional U11 transition skates:** February 1 to April 14
- **U7 Timbits Jamboree:** March
- **Registration deadlines and fees:** check with your Member Club registrar for exact dates

OUR PHILOSOPHY

Hockey Canada's Long-Term Player Development model is simple: kids should only play in situations that match their age and ability, not scaled-down versions of adult hockey. That's why U7 and U9 play on a smaller ice surface. It isn't a lesser version of the game, it's the right-sized version for the size of the player.

"We're not shrinking the game. We're growing the player."

In small-ice games, every player is closer to the puck, gets more touches, and makes more decisions per minute than they would on a full sheet. That's what builds real confidence, not the size of the rink.

- **Bigger battles, more touches:** smaller ice means more puck battles and more reps for every player, every game
- **Faster thinking:** less time and space sharpen decision-making speed and hockey sense
- **Real confidence:** age-appropriate competition builds contact confidence at a pace kids can handle
- **Fundamentals that last:** skating, puck control, passing, and shooting are reinforced every single shift

THE BENEFITS

Full-ice hockey has young players chasing the puck far more than they touch it. Half-ice hockey shrinks the space so every player gets more reps, more touches, and more fun while building the skills they'll need as they move up and continue to develop. It isn't just a philosophy, it's backed by data. Hockey Canada conducted a U9 study in 2024 comparing several stats from half ice to full ice, and the results below show why smaller ice adds up to a bigger head start for young players.



THE NUMBERS



3x

more puck touches, direction changes, pass attempts, and puck battles per player compared to full-ice



4x

more shots per player compared to full-ice



2x

more ice time during games thanks to the more inclusive playing format



2x

opportunities to be engaged in the play when the playing area is smaller



The half-ice surface delivers the same relative stride distance for a child as a full sheet of ice does for an adult as per a Hockey Alberta study.

Source: Hockey Canada Study, 2024

Compared to full-ice hockey, half-ice play gives every player 3 times more puck touches, direction changes, pass attempts, and puck battles, 4 times more shots, and 2 times more ice time and engagement in the play. Source: Hockey Canada Study, 2024.

Beyond the raw numbers, playing in a smaller space changes the game for a young player in ways that show up everywhere, not just on the scoresheet:

- **Skating skills:** extra emphasis on agility, balance, coordination, and quickness
- **Puck battles:** significantly more of them, building confidence in puck control and puck protection
- **Faster decisions:** less time and space means players read and react quicker, and more often
- **Ice awareness:** a more challenging environment sharpens hockey sense
- **Contact confidence:** more incidental contact teaches players to play with their head up and builds spatial awareness
- **More for everyone:** better ice utilization means more players are active every session, with more competition and more fun for every skill level

Hockey Canada's Long-Term Player Development model is built on a simple idea: kids should only be placed in competitive situations that match their skill level and abilities. Putting young players into a full-ice, adult-scaled environment too early works against that, the same way handing a child an adult-sized bike or basketball hoop would.

"Half-ice and cross-ice hockey is the equivalent of a smaller field or a lower net: an age-appropriate scale that lets kids build real skill, not just survive the game."

HOCKEY ALBERTA SKATING STUDY

Elite skating isn't about straight-line speed —
it's about how often you can change direction.



**CHANGE OF DIRECTION,
NOT JUST SPEED**

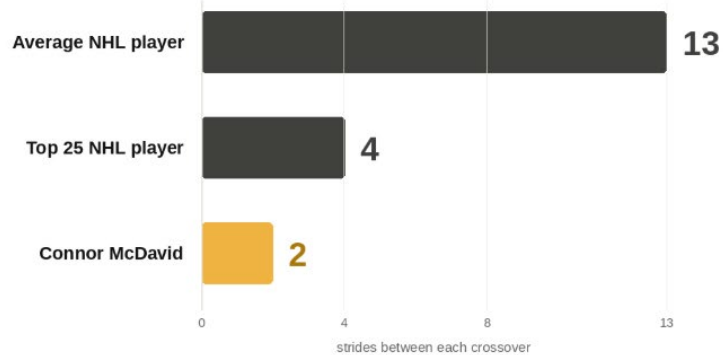
MCDAVID'S RATIO

1 : 2

a crossover every 2 strides

STRIDES PER CROSSOVER

Fewer strides between crossovers means more time spent actively changing direction — the skill that separates elite skaters from the rest.



WHY IT MATTERS

No.1 skill isn't top speed

The ability to change speeds and accelerate quickly separates elite players.

Cross ice / half ice training

Teaches players to skate the game, not just skate fast in straight lines.

Effective skating is layered

Turns, pivots, stops, starts, transitions, lateral movement, and change of direction.

HOCKEY CALGARY | Source: Hockey Alberta Skating Study

In Hockey Alberta's skating study, Connor McDavid changes direction once every 2 strides, compared to 4 strides for a top 25 NHL player and 13 strides for the average NHL player. Cross-ice and half-ice play builds that same change-of-direction skill from the start.

Skating itself changes too. Elite skating was never really about who can go fastest in a straight line, it's about who can change direction the most often. A smaller surface trains turns, pivots, stops, starts, transitions, and lateral movement, exactly what playing in a smaller space forces a young player to practice, shift after shift, without even thinking about it.

None of this happens in one practice or one game. It's the accumulation of touches, reps, and direction changes over an entire season that turns into real, visible confidence by the time your player is ready for the bigger ice surface. More touches, more shots, more decisions, more of the skating skills that matter, and more engagement for every kid on the ice regardless of ability, that's the bottom line, and it's the national standard for youth hockey in Canada, not just a Hockey Calgary preference.

THE PLAYER PATHWAY

One connected path from the first skate to full-ice hockey where each stage builds on the last.



The stages, in order:

- U7 Cross-Ice (ages 5 to 6)
- U9 Half-Ice (ages 7 to 8)
- U9 Three-Quarter Cross-Ice (ages 7 to 8)
- U9 Full-Ice, optional (ages 7 to 8)

WHAT U7 LOOKS LIKE

U7 is where most players get their first taste of organized hockey, so here's what a season actually looks like.

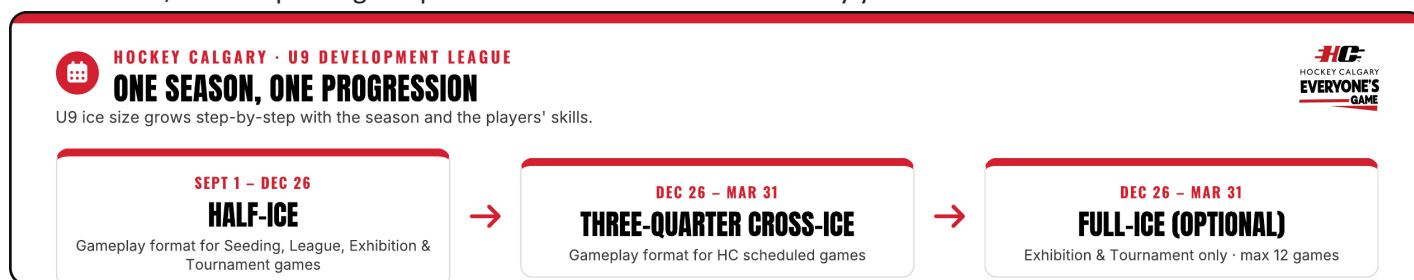
- **Format:** all Hockey Calgary Timbits games are played cross-ice. Teams may play half-ice at sanctioned events hosted by other associations, but full ice is never used at U7.
- **Groups:** players are split into Jr. Timbits (generally first year players) and Sr. Timbits (generally second year players) by birth year. Neither group is tiered. Each club instead balances skill levels evenly across all its teams.
- **Games:** no scores or standings are tracked or posted at U7, and officials aren't used in games. The focus stays on development and fun.
- **A typical practice:** a short warm up game, a longer block of individual skill stations covering skating, stickhandling, passing, and shooting, then a small cross-ice game to finish.
- **Season shape:** games start informally in the fall and shift to structured, formal modified games as the season goes on, with a set maximum number of games for each group so no team plays an uneven schedule.
- **Timbits Jamboree:** Hockey Calgary hosts a Jamboree every March, a family friendly celebration day that doesn't count toward any game limits.

WHAT U9 LOOKS LIKE

U9 builds on everything U7 started, with a bit more structure as players get ready for the bigger ice surface ahead.

- **Format:** the season starts on half ice (4 on 4, with a goaltender at each end), then shifts to Three-Quarter Cross-Ice after December 26. A limited number of full-ice exhibition and tournament games are also available later in the season, up to 12 total.
- **Groups:** U9 uses a 4 tier system. Every team is placed through an evaluation and a seeding grid that keeps tiers balanced across Hockey Calgary, and a reseeding process in late November can adjust placement based on how the season is going.
- **Games:** no official scores or standings are posted at U9. Shifts run on a buzzer every 90 seconds so every player gets equal ice time, and there's no offside or icing called until players move to full ice.
- **Goaltenders:** two goaltenders dress each game on a documented rotation that cycles through the whole roster before repeating, so every player who wants time in net gets a turn.
- **Officials:** U9 games are often worked by young officials still learning the game themselves, usually young teens. A little encouragement from the stands goes a long way toward keeping them in the game.

- **Season shape:** players can play up to 28 games by late February and up to 35 for the full season including tournaments, all on top of regular practices. Exact schedules are set by your Member Club.



U11 TRANSITION PLAN

Four ways we help your player transition smoothly from U9 to full-ice U11 hockey:

- **In-season transition:** the Three-Quarter Cross-Ice phase introduces full-ice concepts such as offside, icing, and changing on the fly before the season ends
- **End-of-season transition:** starting 2026-27, every member club runs optional, no-fee transition skates for graduating U9 players (Feb 1 – Apr 14)
- **Spring-season transition:** optional, additional-fee programming offered by some clubs. Contact your member club for information and registration. Your Member Club's registrar can also be found through the club directory at hockeycalgary.ca
- **Pre-season U11 pathway skates:** Minimum of 4 prep skates in the fall, before U11 evaluations begin

A FEW TERMS YOU'LL HEAR

Term	What it means
Half-ice / cross-ice	Games played on a smaller part of the rink so every player gets more touches and reps
Offside	A rule about staying onside of certain lines during play, introduced gradually as players move toward full ice
Icing	A rule about shooting the puck the length of the ice without it being touched, also introduced gradually
Changing on the fly	Swapping players in and out of play while the game keeps going, instead of only at stoppages
Tiering	Grouping teams or players by similar skill level so games stay competitive and fun for everyone
Contact confidence	Comfort with the incidental bumps and body contact that happen naturally during play, built gradually as players get older

PARENT FAQ

Q: Why doesn't U9 play full ice like when I was a kid?

Hockey Canada's national policy (LTPD) mandates half-ice/cross-ice play at U7 and U9 because it builds better foundational hockey skills including more puck touches, faster decision-making, stronger skating agility than full-ice play at this age. This isn't a Hockey Calgary preference; it's the national standard across hockey in Canada.

Q: Will my child fall behind players who play full ice elsewhere?

No research shows the opposite. NHL stars like Connor McDavid and Sidney Crosby rely on agility and direction changes, not straight-line speed which is exactly what half-ice hockey trains. The Three-Quarter Cross-Ice phase, Full-Ice phase, and U11 Transition Plan are designed to create an appropriate and stepwise transition into full-ice hockey.

Q: When does my child move to full ice?

U9 players progress in-season from Half-Ice (Sept–Dec 26) to Three-Quarter Cross-Ice, which introduces offside, icing, and changing on the fly. Starting 2026-27, clubs also run optional no-fee transition skates (Feb 1–Apr 14) before the move to full-ice U11.

Q: Why is there no full-ice option earlier in the season?

As per Hockey Canada regulations, full ice cannot begin prior to December 26 of the current season. A capped number of full-ice exhibition and tournament games (max 12) is permitted only after December 26, once players have had a full season of half-ice skill-building, so they're ready for the bigger surface, not overwhelmed by it. The number is meant to balance real exposure to the bigger ice surface with enough time still spent on half-ice fundamentals, so players get a taste of full-ice hockey without leaving the skill building that got them there behind too soon.

Q: Should players and/or teams be tiered?

Grouping players of similar ability helps set kids up for success and enjoyment. Hockey Calgary uses a 4-tier system at U9, so practices and games stay age and skill-appropriate for every player. Hockey Calgary does not tier players at U7. Players are split by birth years into Jr. and Sr. Timbits.

Q: What are the advantages of practicing in small areas and playing half-ice games?

Small spaces equate to more engagement in the play, and activity for young players. Through small area station-based practices and half ice games, players are closer to the play and have much more opportunity to be engaged in the game. Regardless of the skill level or the ability of each player, opportunities to be engaged in the play double when the playing area is smaller. The NHL Analytics research illustrated that all skill areas of the game increased substantially when players played in small spaces more suited to their age and skill level.

Q: What do parents need to do to get ready?

Along with registering your player, every U7 household needs one parent to complete Hockey Canada's Respect in Sport parent program, a short online course. Coaches complete their own certification too, including Respect in Sport for coaches and a Safety Program course, before they're allowed on the ice with your team.

Q: How is my child evaluated and placed on a team?

Each Member Club runs its own evaluation process, so the exact steps vary a little by association, but every evaluation happens on half ice and looks at both skills and game play. At U9, those evaluations place players into one of four tiers, using a seeding grid that keeps tiers balanced across Hockey Calgary. At U7, there's no tiering. Clubs instead balance skill levels evenly across every team within the Jr. and Sr. Timbits groups.

Q: What's the weekly time commitment?

Plan on roughly one practice and one game most weeks through the season. U9 players play up to 28 games by late February and up to 35 for the full season including tournaments, while U7 players play a set number of formal games capped by age group. Exact practice and game schedules come from your Member Club.

Q: What is Hockey Calgary doing to keep my child safe?

Every coach completes Hockey Canada's Respect in Sport certification and a Safety Program course before working with a team. If you ever have a concern about your child's experience, your Member Club's registrar or head coach is the best first call, and they can point you to the right next step.

GETTING YOUR PLAYER READY

New to hockey? Here's the gear your player will need before their first practice.

- Helmet with a full cage, CSA certified
- Mouthguard
- Shoulder pads
- Elbow pads
- Hockey gloves
- Hockey pants
- Shin guards
- Properly fitted skates (avoid buying a size up to grow into, it affects balance and skill development)
- Hockey socks
- Athletic supporter or jill, as appropriate
- A stick sized to your player's height
- A neck guard is a smart addition for younger players

Jerseys are provided through the program, most other gear is not.

REGISTRATION AND COSTS

Registration windows, fees, and payment plans are set by each Member Club, not by Hockey Calgary centrally, so they can look a little different from club to club. Contact your Member Club's registrar for exact costs and deadlines for the 2026-27 season.

QUESTIONS? WE'RE HERE TO HELP

Your Member Club is your best first stop, they know your team, your season, and your specific situation best. Reach out to your club registrar or head coach with day to day questions.

- Hockey Calgary staff contact [here](#)
- Member club contact [here](#)

For Hockey Canada's full Long-Term Player Development resources, visit [here](#)