



**AUSTRALIAN
ATHLETICS**

THE FIT MODEL

Overview of Stages of Development



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The following descriptions have been developed to ensure a clear understanding of the objectives and focus of the guiding principles for each stage of a young athlete's development. The athlete development pathway (FIT Model) aligns with evidenced-based programs and models used in other nations (UK and Northern Ireland, Canada, North America, New Zealand) with a similar sporting structure and culture to Australian athletics. In addition, the FIT Model reflects Sport Australia's Physical Literacy Framework and specifically, its approach to holistic development across the four domains of physical literacy (physical, psychological, social and cognitive) as the core driver of lifelong participation in sport and physical activity. The Overview of Stages of Development should be read in conjunction with the Training and Competition Guidelines for Children and Adolescents.

The FIT Model is made up of the following stages of development:

FUNDAMENTALS 1

Approximately 3 - 7 years

The focus of Fundamentals 1 is on introducing, learning and developing key fundamental movement skills (balance, agility, locomotion and hand-eye coordination) which provide the foundation for more complex skills in athletics as well as in play and other sporting and recreational activities. The emphasis is on fun and play with group activities providing opportunities for social interaction, inclusiveness and demonstrating cooperative behaviour (e.g. sharing, patience). At the younger ages there should be minimal focus on formal athletics training and competition, however "team event" contests may be introduced towards the end of this stage.

FUNDAMENTALS 2

Approximately 8 - 10 years

Entry into this stage is from approximately 7 - 8 years of age. Fundamental movement skills (FMS) are further developed and refined through the introduction of specific athletics skills and activities (running, jumping, and throwing), delivered in athletic event group areas (e.g. understanding the need to pace in longer events or coordinating a movement sequence for a throw/jump). More structured training and technical



development may be introduced towards the end of this stage when children become more responsive to constructive and positive feedback. However, children should be encouraged to participate in a range of other sports (team/individual) which helps foster both competence and confidence through exposure to other coaches, peers and sporting experiences, thus enhancing all round athleticism and holistic development.

This is also a good stage to incorporate social opportunities and begin developing some healthy attitudes and practices in relation to daily physical activity. At this stage children enjoy working in pairs, small groups and teams and begin to understand simple rules, sporting safety and etiquette (e.g. fair play and respect for other athletes, coaches, and officials). Therefore, fun, variety and the opportunity to learn, balanced with occasional but age and developmentally appropriate competition opportunities, are important factors at this stage of development. More formal and regular competition can be introduced at this stage, but competitions should be modified, low key, and seasonal (e.g. 4 - 10 weeks duration), with an emphasis on “team event” contests rather than individual achievement.

INTRODUCTION TO TRAINING

Approximately 10 - 12 years

During this stage, the focus of the young athlete’s training or practice activities can move towards some specific athletics training. Children at this age are better able to use equipment/implements safely, work in a team or training squad, and work without direct supervision (e.g. carry out warm up and cool down).

As this is a rapid period for skill acquisition, it is important for children to build up an armoury of skills and fundamental movement patterns for athletics training in the future. Therefore, it is important that they continue to participate in multiple sports with no real focus or preference for athletics over other sports and recreational activities. This is also important for further developing and encouraging daily habits supporting a healthy active lifestyle.

At this stage children are better able to focus on a task and understand individual strengths and competencies (e.g. having more natural speed than endurance), thus are more ready to be exposed to the challenges and excitement of competition. Positive competition experiences (achieving personal bests, improving skills, developing simple competition strategies and tactics) can enhance perceived competence and motivate young people to continue in athletics, as well as physical activity more generally. In addition, competition can provide opportunities to develop resilience in the face of defeat



or disappointment and further develop a sense of fair play in competitive environments. Again however, competition should not be a major focus or outcome, but an opportunity for children to improve fitness and skills in a fun team environment while enhancing and appreciating their understanding of the purpose and value of competition.

TRAINING I (GENERAL)

Approximately 13 - 15 years

This is a period of rapid growth and change (physical, mental and social) associated with puberty. Research across multiple sports (including athletics) indicates that young athletes are at an increased risk of bone related injury during this period. Therefore, during this phase, young adolescents require careful and professional supervision, and monitoring, to ensure their safe and ongoing development.

Athletics may now become the main sporting focus for some athletes during this stage. However, due to varying rates of development, predicting a young athlete's best event when fully matured is difficult, therefore training should focus on event groups rather than a specific event. Again, strongly supported by research, it is important to continue involvement in other sports to promote all round physical and technical development, as well as the opportunity to mix socially with a range of coaches and sporting peers. As many athletes in this stage of development are involved in multiple sports, there is a risk of overtraining due to multiple training loads, which can lead to overuse injuries and potential burn out/drop out from sport. Communication between athletes, parents and coaches regarding all sports and training loads is the key to a balanced and appropriate workload.

Athletes at this stage become more self-motivated towards training and improvement and are beginning to develop the ability to self-regulate. They begin to understand the links between training methods and performance as well as the positive contribution of good nutrition, sleep, and recovery to overall health and sporting performance. Social aspects of training become very important with peer and coach influence often becoming more important than parents. Therefore, this is an important stage for fostering positive relationships with team/squad mates, other competitors, coaches and officials to help encourage and motivate young athletes to continue success and enjoyment in the sport.

Athletes at this stage are usually better able to cope with the demands of competition. For example, staying focused, learning from mistakes, dealing with setbacks, and reflecting on performances and identifying how to make improvements. However, training and ongoing development should still be the main focus, keeping athletics competitions



seasonal (with an 8 - 10 week break from competition) and balanced with other sporting competitions and activities.

TRAINING II (SPECIFIC)

Approximately 16 - 19 years

During this stage, many young athletes decide athletics is their chosen sport and main focus, however, this is usually a gradual process throughout this stage. There are many conflicting interests during late adolescents (study, friends, socialising, needing or wanting to work, or being talented in other sports), making it more difficult to balance the increased demands of training and competition required to improve. To ensure athletes have the best chance of balancing the other important aspects of their lives and continuing in the sport, they need emotional and financial support (e.g. from family), and a positive training environment that includes quality coaching and friendship/mentoring from their training peers.

Towards the end of this stage, most athletes will begin to focus on their main event(s), drawing on the strong foundation (conditioning and technical skill/expertise) developed through multi-sports and multi athletics event group approach in the previous developmental stages. Training becomes more structured (specific training blocks, peaking, tapering and recovery), with competition becoming a main focus and outcome of training. There are now more major competitions (State, National and International level) for athletes to work towards, and for some, this is associated with more pressure, performance anxiety and the increased risk of injury associated with higher training and competition loads. To help athletes deal with these extra pressures they need a supportive network to enhance the development of emotional resilience, and their knowledge and application of self-regulation strategies (e.g. mental relaxation skills). Taking more responsibility for their own development by ensuring they have a support team which understands and promotes the need and importance of performance management skills (nutrition, mental skills, recovery), is crucial to the long term development of athletes during this phase.

It is also important to understand that some athletes are ready to fully commit (physically and mentally) to an athletics career at age 16 years, while others may not be ready until 18 - 19 years of age. For longevity in athletics (or other sports/physical activity) parents, coaches and other key influencers should support and encourage athletes in this more difficult transition phase to develop and/or commit on their own terms and at their own pace.