

Should My Child Be 'Playing Up?'

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Backpacks are loaded and yellow buses are gassed up for another school year. But what if we decided it was best to send our 9- and 10-year-olds into fifth or sixth grade instead of third and fourth?

The idea comes littered with worry: Are they ready for that? How will it affect them? Is this the best option to help them grow? These are the same questions that parents of 10U players should deliberate when considering whether to push them up a level in hockey.

"There's always going to be a temptation for parents to have their child play up," said John Burke, head coach of the women's hockey team at Rensselaer Polytechnic to be any better or get any more out of playing with a 12U team right now. In fact, I think they lose a lot more and tend to have less fun doing so."

More Drawbacks than Benefits

While for some there is an allure to having children "play up," they should first consider the drawbacks.

- Children playing ahead of their age classification can experience diminished playing time – sometimes dramatically diminished – which means fewer puck touches and less fun – **two critical elements of 10U hockey.**
- Children playing ahead of their age classification endure physical and emotional pressure to interact (on and off the ice), perform and compete at a different level with older, more physically mature players. This can lead to physical and social situations that hurt younger players more than help them.
- Children playing ahead of their age classification often suffer a hindrance to their overall development.



"At that age, 10U players are all in the same boat," Burke said. "They are still in the beginning stages of learning the game. A player who shows promise and a high level of talent right now might not see that translate a year from now. Playing them with older kids isn't going to speed up their skill, no matter where their development is now."

Ages 9 and 10 provide the optimal time for players to start [developing their hockey](#)

[skills](#). It's a process that shouldn't be rushed. Players develop at their own pace and trying to accelerate that pace artificially can actually hurt their growth.

Buddy Builder

Kids at 10U aren't as concerned with being on the first, second or third line. What they most look forward to is time on the ice with their friends.

"From the hockey perspective, you want to see kids playing with kids their own age," said Burke. "But socially that's very important, too. Kids should be playing at this age, largely as an activity to do with their buddies."

Hockey creates lifelong friendships. This is made easier when players grow up together on the ice and in school. You can continue nurturing these lasting bonds by having your players stay within their age group.

Don't Compare

There's no doubt that parents want the best for their child. You might think they'll fall behind or they should be pushed harder, but remember, the focus should be on your child, not others.

"You have to treat each child as an individual," said Burke. "If you start treating them like this player or that player, they are going to end up feeling defeated more often."

You know your child best and children have a pretty good assessment of themselves, too. Decide together what level is going to help them develop and ask them where they want to play. Odds are they'll be best served by playing with their own age group.



From the desk of Idaho IceWorld Hockey Coordinator