# The ICFA Player Development Pathway

## Minis → Junior Academy → Academy → Academy Plus

At ICFA, our programme is designed around a **progressive player development pathway**. As children grow in age, confidence and ability, the balance of their training gradually changes with them.

This approach isn't new. We have always adapted our coaching as players develop. Our new class structure and names now make that pathway **clearer for parents to understand**, showing how the different classes connect, what children are working towards at each stage, and how players progress through the ICFA programme.

## The Development Principle

Our pathway follows a simple progression:

**Learn the skill → understand when to use it → successfully apply it in a game**

For our youngest players, the priority is **skills acquisition, ball mastery and confidence with the ball**.

As players progress, we gradually introduce more opportunities to apply those skills under the pressure and unpredictability of a real football match.

By Academy Plus, approximately **half of each 90-minute session is dedicated to coached match play**.

# Minis | 45 minutes

## Building the foundations

For our youngest and beginner players, the emphasis is almost entirely on **individual technical development**.

Children learn fundamental football movements and become comfortable controlling and manipulating the ball. Sessions are designed to develop coordination, confidence and a positive relationship with football.

At this stage there is **little to no formal match play**. We believe children benefit more from first developing the basic tools they will later need in a game.

# Junior Academy | 60 minutes

## Developing skills and introducing the game

Junior Academy builds on those technical foundations.

Skills acquisition remains the central focus, but **game-based activities and match play begin to form a greater part of training**.

Players start learning not only *how* to perform a skill, but when and why they might use it.

# Academy | 75 minutes

## Taking skills into the game

At Academy level, technical development continues, but **coached game time becomes increasingly important**.

Players are given more opportunities to apply their individual skills in realistic football situations and begin developing greater awareness of teammates, opponents, space and movement.

The longer session allows us to increase match play **without sacrificing the technical coaching that remains fundamental to our programme**.

# Academy Plus | 90 minutes

## Developing the complete player

Academy Plus combines continued technical development with a substantial coached match-play component.

Approximately **half of the session is dedicated to game play**.

This isn't simply a longer match. Coaches actively use the game as a teaching environment – directing play where appropriate, helping players recognise situations and encouraging them to make better decisions for themselves.

Players learn how individual technical ability connects with **positioning, movement, decision-making and tactical understanding**.

# Why Coached Match Play?

Being able to perform a football skill in isolation and being able to use that skill effectively during a match are two different things.

A game introduces pressure, opponents, teammates, limited space and decisions that have to be made in seconds.

Coached match play creates the bridge between **technical ability and actual football**.

Rather than simply telling children what to do, our coaches can help them recognise situations, experiment with solutions and understand the consequences of their decisions.

The objective is not simply to produce children who can perform football skills. It is to develop players who understand **how, when and why to use them**.

## Supporting Children's Physical Development

The longer sessions also allow ICFA to make a more meaningful contribution to children's overall weekly physical activity.

International guidance recognises the importance of substantial physical activity during childhood.

**UNESCO recommends at least 150 minutes of physical education per week for primary-school-aged children**, while the **World Health Organization recommends that children and adolescents aged 5–17 average at least 60 minutes of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity per day across the week**.

Organised football is only one part of a child's overall physical activity, alongside school PE, active play and other sports. However, as our players progress to longer **75- and 90-minute sessions**, their weekly ICFA training can make an increasingly significant contribution to an active lifestyle.

Importantly, the additional time isn't simply about exercising for longer. It allows us to increase meaningful game time while retaining the technical coaching that is central to the ICFA programme.

## Individual Development

Birth years provide a useful framework for organising classes, but **age alone does not determine a player's position within the pathway**.

We also consider ability, experience, confidence and individual development. This is why there is deliberate age overlap between some ICFA groups.

Placement is therefore **not a ranking of players**. It is about finding the training environment in which we believe each child can develop most effectively.

Players are continually observed by our coaches and can progress through the pathway when they are ready.

# Our Aim

From the inception of ICFA, our goal has been to encourage an **all-round enjoyment of sport from the very first time a child steps onto the field with us**.

For some children, ICFA is their first introduction to organised sport. We want that first experience to be positive, enjoyable and confidence-building – creating an enthusiasm for being active that extends beyond football itself.

As children progress, we want to build on that enthusiasm by giving them the technical foundation, confidence and understanding they need to become better footballers, while never losing sight of the reason most children start playing in the first place: **because they enjoy it**.

Ultimately, our aim isn't only to develop better football players. It is to help children develop **a lasting enjoyment of sport and physical activity** that we hope stays with them well beyond their time at ICFA.