

STAGE 1 DISCOVER, LEARN & PLAY

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ABOUT THIS STAGE

Chronological Age: 0-12

Target Audience: Youth

This youth rower is one just beginning to experience sports, rowing, and waterways. Discovery of key concepts and motor skills of physical movement is critical at this stage. Many skills are transferable and athletes should play multiple sports in order to develop as many as possible in a variety of different contexts. This early stage requires coaching that will allow fun and enjoyment through discovery and exploration of sports, rowing, and waterways.

Stage 1 does not necessarily include Olympic-style rowing for the main reason that access to age-appropriate rowing equipment for children is still fairly uncommon. Children should not row boats designed for teenagers and adults. Stage 1 can focus entirely on developing fundamental movement skills and getting kids excited about sports by creating fun and memorable experiences. If youths develop a love of the outdoors, a love of water, the ability to swim, basic motor skills, and an introduction to paddle sports with age-appropriate equipment, then that is a great start for rowing as a teenager.

Youths under age 12 may begin a form of Olympic-style rowing if appropriately sized equipment is available and age-appropriate coaching can be provided. Several manufacturers make boats and oars specifically for this age group. Check with your local boat reps for available youth rowing options. Effective, safe training programs for young athletes must take into account the individual factors of each child, including chronological age, developmental age, and general athletic experience. The type, duration, intensity, and frequency of training sessions will vary considerably depending on these factors, covered in more detail below.

ATHLETE

LEARN BASIC RULES AND SPORT TECHNIQUES

Young athletes without access to age-appropriate equipment can learn basic rules and techniques of waterway safety and boat movement via other paddle sports. Youths who learn right-of-way rules, basic directional navigation, and fundamental skills of paddling in rowboats, kayaks, canoes, SUPs, etc., can build on this knowledge and these skills later in their development as rowers specifically.

Young athletes with access to age-appropriate rowing equipment and coaching can learn waterway safety, rules of navigation, and begin rowing skill development. The rowing movement is complex and children in particular may benefit from a reduced range-of-

motion learning environment. Stern holds, where a coach stands in the water or leans off the dock to hold the stern and provide stability and instruction for a small boat rower, are very helpful for initial practice.

In general, avoid constraining the young rower's movements with too much technical instruction, such as implementing a segmented stroke style. Instead, allow an athlete time to develop their skills, with a few simple cues in a setting where they can explore and discover the rowing movement at their own pace.

PLAY MULTIPLE SPORTS TO ACCELERATE MOTOR SKILL DEVELOPMENT

Experiencing many sports will allow young people to find the activity that lights a passion within them for future success. Even if this activity is ultimately rowing, experiencing other sports contributes to better short-term motor learning and better long-term athletic development and success. The rowing movement is complex at a motor coordination and attentional level, and young children who learn to move their body through space, anticipate movements, and improve eye-hand coordination are likely to make better rowers in later stages of training.

EMPHASIZE SKILL DEVELOPMENT, SPORT EDUCATION AND AGE-APPROPRIATE PLAY

Young athletes participating in sports other than rowing should engage in skill development, sport education, and age-appropriate play specific to those non-rowing contexts. For the young athlete, the general path of learning one sport is much the same as learning any other sport at an engagement and motor learning level. The general athletic abilities they develop will transfer to rowing in Stage 2 or Stage 3 later on.

Young athletes participating in rowing should focus on these three areas above any others.

Skill Development: Skill development for the Stage 1 rower hinges on feel and comfort in the water and maneuvering the boat. Technical skill development should be fun and focused on body movement rather than power outputs, boat speed, or training time. Stage 1 rowers may row continuously for up to 15 minutes at a time. Longer intervals are likely to result in lost attention and are not as productive for skill development as breaking practice up for engagement and variety. Alternate some short intervals of continuous rowing with deliberate play activities from below.

Sport Education: A large part of getting involved with rowing is becoming acquainted with the rowing equipment. Young athletes should learn use and function of the sliding seat, foot stretchers, rigger, oarlocks, etc. at a practical level. Show young athletes how to carry shells and oars, and learn how to launch, take out, and later clean the boat.

These athletes should help each other when carrying the boats. When explaining movements and tasks, the necessary technical terms and commands should be used from the beginning. The instructor must continue to see that oars and sculls are positioned correctly and the foot stretchers placed in the right position. These younger athletes should be introduced to the special features of the area, including weather patterns and water traffic rules. Equally as important, both athletes and coaches should be well aware of the skills necessary to get back into the boat should flips happen.

Age-Appropriate Play: In addition to rowing, it is helpful to offer other opportunities for games and athletic activities on land. Ball games like soccer, basketball, volleyball, kickball are possible almost everywhere. In bad weather or in the cold season, an indoor gym is useful for games or children's gymnastics, aerobics, or early strength training. In the interest of a comprehensive training of athletic motor skills and play, games should take the place of erging. Games that incorporate all types of fitness and skills can be utilized to enhance fun, competitive activities. Any combination of running, throwing, swimming, kicking, and jumping can be combined with skills such as balance, mobility, flexibility, etc. to produce challenging and fun interactions that develop athleticism.

EMPHASIZE PRACTICE OVER COMPETITION, IF COMPETING, NOT BEYOND LOCAL OR REGIONAL LEVELS

Stage 1 rowers should enjoy paddling, rowing, and other on-water activities at an age-appropriate level, not specializing in competition. Youths who do compete in paddle sports or other sports should do so at the local or regional levels. Travel competitions beyond the regional level requires too much time away from playing, too much psychosocial pressure on competition, and too much cost to time and finances compared to other activities. Parents or coaches of young rowers who are interested in rowing as a competitive pursuit should consider attending a local regatta as spectators. The key of Stage 1 is building athleticism and enthusiasm for future rowing.

ENCOURAGE DELIBERATE PLAY

The main goal of introducing rowing to children is to make the sport attractive to the widest possible range of children as a positive emotional experience. The training should enable children to approach rowing playfully as a sport, as an experience and, most importantly, to find pleasure in an athletic activity. The below deliberate play activities can be included in the standard Stage 1 rowing practice, alongside short intervals (up to 15 minutes) of continuous rowing. "Let's row [to a specific destination/landmark] and then play a game" is a great way to run a Stage 1 practice.

Examples for games:

King/Queen of Turns: Who can do the fastest three 360-degree turns? Can you spin in both directions (clockwise/counter-clockwise)?

- Powerman/woman: Who needs the least number of strokes over a fixed distance?
- Powerslider: Who is the first to reach a fixed goal rowing backwards?
- Master of balance: Who has the best balance? Who can stand up in the children's skiff without holding on to the sculls?
- Boat-ball: A large floating ball is played towards a goal with bow, stern, or oars.
- Rower handball/basketball: The children try to score goals or baskets by throwing the ball.
- Relays: Depending on age, skill, and local situation, the distance in a relay should be between 200 and 500 meters.
- Hungry Hippos: Scatter floating balls (tennis ball or larger) in a calm, protected area of water and race to collect as many balls as you can.

Below is a helpful chart demonstrating the continuum of free play to deliberate practice. [Source: Joy of the People]

	Free Play	Deliberate Play	Structured Practice	Deliberate Practice
Goal	Fun	Fun	Improve Performance	Improve Performance
Perspective	Process (means)	Process Experimentation	Outcome (ends)	Outcome (ends)
Monitored	Not Monitored	Loosely Monitored	Monitored	Carefully Monitored
Correction	No Correction	No focus on immediate correction	Focus on correction, often by discovery	Focus on immediate correction
Gratification	Immediate	Immediate	Immediate & Delayed	Delayed
Sources of Enjoyment	Intrinsic	Predominately Intrinsic	intrinsic & Extrinsic	Extrinsic

DISCOVER

HAVE FUN

The main goal of Stage 1 is building an enthusiastic foundation for future success, in rowing, in other sports, and for lifelong physical fitness. Coaches of young children can introduce role models and stories of athletes or teams who exemplify positive athletic principles. Avoid using athletic activities or workouts as a punishment, as this teaches children that physical activity is a negative thing. Educate on the benefits of being physically active, particularly the immediate intrinsic benefits. Focus on how sport and exercise makes you feel positive and inherent things, and minimize discussion of extrinsic benefits. Children's bodies grow in different rates and ways, and children should not be introduced to "weight management" or other externally driven potential rewards of physical activity.

Very young children (approximately age 4-8) should be entirely focused on recreational enjoyment of waterways, swimming, paddle sports, and other physical activities. The goal as a coach or instructor is to introduce the child to the basic movements of sport in a fun way that builds an interest later in life.

Older children (approximately age 9-12) may begin to compete via engaging and fun practice activities on their local waterway. USRowing does not offer U12 competitive rowing events. Coaches or parents of interested young rowers could attend a local regatta to experience the competitive environment as spectators, without personally competing.

Examples of fun, semi-competitive, in-practice events include:

- ["Skiff Parkour"](#)
- [Standing up](#)
- [Rigger dips](#)
- [Standing rigger dips](#)
- [Blade swap](#)
- [Standing rowing](#)
- [Standing blade removal](#)

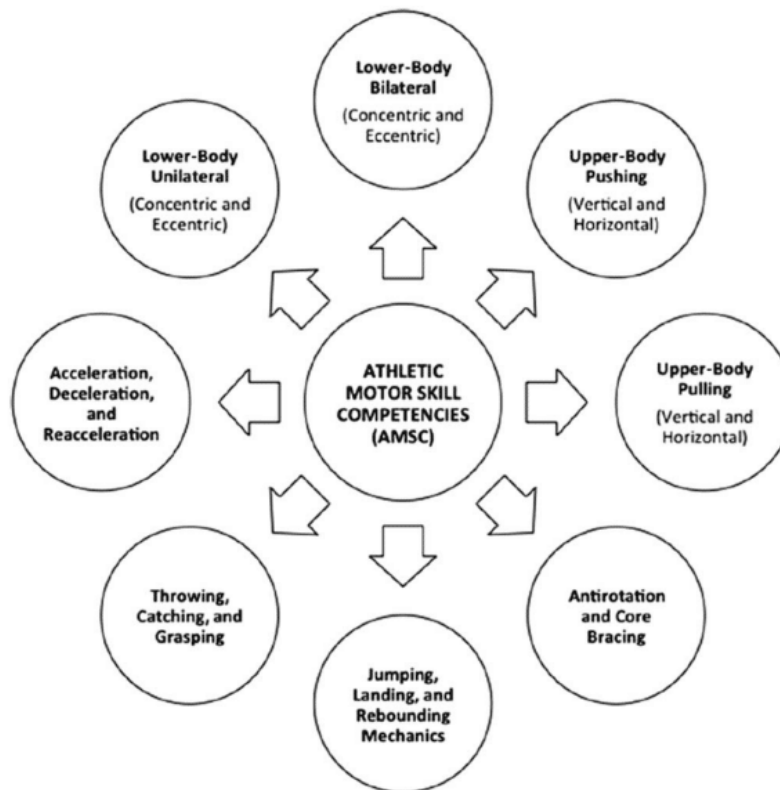
SAMPLE MULTIPLE SPORTS THROUGH UNSTRUCTURED PLAY

Provide exposure to rowing as a part of a broader athletic or outdoors camp experience. For example, many summer camps offer paddle sports and even rowboats or sculling with age-appropriate equipment.

DEVELOP MOTOR SKILLS THAT TRANSFER FROM SPORT TO SPORT

Youth sports training should focus on development of major athletic motor skill competencies (AMSC): (1) lower body unilateral, (2) lower body bilateral, (3) upper body pushing, (4) upper body pulling, (5) anti-rotation and core bracing, (6) jumping, landing, and rebound mechanics, (7) throwing, catching, and grasping, (8) acceleration, deceleration, and reacceleration. See the strength training section below for more information on land-based AMSC development.

[Image source from Radnor et al. (2020)]



SOCIALIZE WITH OTHERS

Provide team building activities that develop social skills and emotional intelligence. Allow a reasonable amount of talking or chatter while rowing or doing other physical activities as a means of social development.

UTILIZE FREE OR SPONTANEOUS PLAY FOR DISCOVERY OF THE SPORT AND SPORT SKILLS

Allow non-traditional activities within rowing context, such as padding with hands, playing catch in the boat, and more. See above sections for more example activities.

LEARN

CORE FUNDAMENTAL MOVEMENTS

Children in Stage 1 are learning fundamental athletic skills and physical movements, not necessarily specific technical skills of rowing. Physical activities on land are an opportunity for general physical skill development through unloaded or lightly loaded strength training movements such as those from the squat, hinge, push, and pull categories, as well as dynamic movements in the frontal, sagittal, and rotational planes. Coaches of Stage 1 rowers should consider this time physical education, not specific training for strength, hypertrophy, or endurance. Create engaging ways for young athletes to develop basic athletic coordination and lay a foundation for future training. See below for more information and resources for strength training with youth rowers.

HOW TO USE SIZE AND AGE-APPROPRIATE EQUIPMENT AND PLAYING SURFACES

Coaches should make sure that the safety and well-being of the athlete is always thought of long before training or competition. Ensuring that the equipment and setting is safe will allow the athletes the chance to thrive. Coaches can safeguard the athletes in a variety of ways including:

- Choose appropriate weather and water conditions in which to practice
- Age/size-appropriate equipment that the athletes can handle
- Size-appropriate handles on oars and proper rig for length/load. For example, Croker currently makes a small pink handle with a 31mm diameter for rowers with small hands. [Here is one example of a coach's rigging chart](#) for Swift Racing's Cadet boat class designed for young rowers [attribution unknown, provided by Chris Chase]
- Choose activities within the capabilities of the athletes involved
- Create an atmosphere and team culture that is appropriate to the age group

RULES OF THE SPORT

Children in Stage 1 who do participate in rowing can learn basic rowing vocabulary, such as parts of the boat, oar, and ergometer, sweeping versus sculling and the different boat types, basic parts of the stroke (catch, drive, release, recovery), and rules of local waterway, navigation, and boathouse procedures.

PLAY

PHYSICAL EDUCATION CLASS

Encourage children to participate in their school physical education class. Erg Ed™ is a program developed by USRowing and the George Pocock Rowing Foundation in Seattle, WA, to expand classroom-based indoor rowing education in middle schools and high schools across the country. [Information on Erg Ed™ here.](#)

OPEN GYM

Coaches can use the “open gym” model with children to encourage self-directed physical activity. Coaches should be qualified to instruct and supervise any physical activities available in the open gym environment. For example, in a commercial gym setting, the space must be constructed and coach-to-athlete ratios achieved so that the coach(es) can supervise all athletes at all times.

FREE/SPONTANEOUS PLAY

Even when rowing coaches are able to coach Stage 1 children with age-appropriate rowing equipment, free or spontaneous play with non-rowing sports can still be fun for athletes and potentially productive for athlete development. They can also provide high-energy environments that are helpful in keeping younger athletes engaged and entertained when coupled with slower-paced foundational learning experiences such as an introductory session with an erg/boat or learning to care for equipment. For example, games like Ultimate Frisbee and soccer require little equipment and provide opportunities for children to develop different athletic skills, engage with each other socially in different ways, and have fun through physical activity. Coaches should still supervise these activities to ensure that play is fair and safe. Coaches should not instruct, referee, etc. unless necessary, to maintain the free and spontaneous elements of play.

BASIC ORGANIZED PLAY

Coaches of Stage 1 rowers may use non-traditional methods of “play” when rowing and erging. See above sections for numerous examples of play in rowing practice.

EVERYONE HAS AN EQUAL CHANCE TO PLAY IN COMPETITION

Coaches of Stage 1 rowers should not cut children from teams, restrict participation opportunities, create competitive lineups of set boats, use erg tests as performance metrics, or rank athletes by performance. All Stage 1 rowers should have equal chances to participate and compete.

STRENGTH TRAINING

Children in Stage 1 can learn strength training for fun, enjoyment of physical activity, basic movement coordination, and an introduction to athletic movements. We can use an age-appropriate “open gym” environment for physical activity, basically a playground where children can learn to jump, run, change direction, and move their body through play. We can also use more a more structured gym environment for short, low intensity sessions designed to introduce basic movements in enjoyable ways.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

PDF: USRowing “Guide to Middle School Rowing” (2020)

There is overlap in age between Stage 1 and Stage 2. Many of the concepts from Stage 1 apply to early Stage 2 as well. The USRowing “Guide to Middle School Rowing” addresses key concepts in detail and outlines many activities and practical suggestions for coaches of young rowers.

See webinar below from the 2022 “Chasing Excellence” rowing conference: Coach Manny Valentin breaks down middle school recruitment, program management tips, and how to make rowing a positive and fun athletic experience for youth and recreational rowers.

Website: “How to Coach Kids”

This website outlines key resources and suggestions for general athlete development in the youth audience. This organization is co-created by the USOC and Nike, with support from the Aspen Institute “Project Play.”

Website: “Changing the Game Project”

This is a resource for parents and coaches of young athletes.

Webinar: The Coach’s Role in Creating Healthy Parent Involvement

This is a webinar from USRowing’s 2021 Convention, presented by Dr. Travis Dorsch of the Department of Human Development and Family Studies at Utah State University. Viewers will learn how to utilizing the “Quality Parenting Framework” to facilitate appropriate parent involvement.

THE NEXT STAGE

Stage 1 athletes may move to Stage 2 after age 10.

Stage 2 exists for the 10-12-year old rower who intends to be a competitive rower in Stage 3, as well as for the 10-18-year old rower who chooses to row for physical recreation and personal fitness.

**If you have additional questions please
contact Chris.Chase@usrowing.org**