

21 February 20

TO: ALL PROVINCIAL UNIONS
Via Email Communications

Dear CEOs,

AGE BANDS TO PLAY AGE GRADE RUGBY REVIEW

The purpose of this letter is to advise of the updated NZR policies on Age Bands to play Age Grade Rugby and Dispensations.

As I identified in my letter dated 20 December 2019, there was a need for NZR to provide greater clarity around age bands to play age grade rugby up to U19. This was to ensure that there were suitable safety measures in place, without unnecessarily and negatively impacting participation.

The attached policies provide that clarity in the form of:

- Expanded age bands for teenage males and female rugby players.
- An enhanced process for screening and assessing players who are playing under an Exceptional Circumstances Case.
- Consideration for dispensations of overage players, to have regard for those Exceptional Circumstances Case players within the same competition.

The Age Bands for Age Grade Rugby Policy has been amended to reflect the following points:

- The policy extends across all forms of contact rugby (Sevens, Tens, Fifteens).
- Players who are playing at the extreme range of the permissible age bands for their age group may do so subject to satisfying an Exceptional Circumstances Case screening and assessment.
- This screening and assessment includes consent from a legal guardian, provision of medical advice, a technical assessment of key rugby skills by an independent coach, and approval by School Principal or Club Chair for the player to be entered into the proposed competition.
- NZR will provide the screening and assessment protocols as part of the policy.

The respective age bands were also reviewed from a medical perspective. NZR's Medical Director supported the expansion of bands for teenagers subject to an independent medical review of this recommendation. This peer review has now been completed and supports expanding the age groups as follows:

Age Range	Previous Policy	New Policy
Males/Females: Up to 12 years of age as at 1 Jan	Age + 2 years above	Age + 2 years above. Players playing 2 years above required to be screened (eg 10 year old playing with 12 year olds)
Males: 13 to 18 years of age as at 1 Jan	Age + 2 years above	Age + 3 years above. Players playing 3 year above their age are required to be screened (eg In an U18 competition – a 14 year old may play subject to screening)
Females: 13 to 18 years of age as at 1 Jan	Age + 2 years above	Age + 4 years above. Players playing 4 year above their age required to be screened (eg In an U18 competition – a 13 year old can play subject to screening))

It is anticipated that the implementation of this policy will create some additional overhead in screening and assessing those players on the extremes – especially with our young female teenage players. However, we feel these steps are necessary in order to enable broader age bands whilst also ensuring that safety is paramount.

NZR's analysis suggest that there are a significant number of 13 year old females entering the game with little playing experience and have little option other than an U18 grade to play in. The revised policy will require that these players undergo screening and assessment as they will be at the extreme of their age bands and may need some additional support around meeting the technical competence and confidence in the specified rugby skills. PUs may therefore need to provide support to their Secondary School systems noting that these assessments need to be completed by an independent coach and will impact on team entries.

The Dispensations policy has also been revised to better connect it to the Age Bands for Age Grade Rugby policy. Previously, dispensation decisions were being taken with little regard for players in the competition that may be at the younger end of their age bands (Exceptional Circumstance Cases). The risk of dispensated players and Exceptional Circumstances Case players coming into contact is now greater with the expanded age bands, so the policy has been revised to mitigate this with a process that organising committees must follow.

The revised policies are attached for your implementation and are effective immediately. The policies are also available on our website <http://www.communityrugby.co.nz/running-rugby/national-rugby-policies>. They will be reviewed at the conclusion of the 2021 winter season.

For any questions relating to the revised policies, please contact Mike Hester on 0274672199 or at mike.hester@nzrugby.co.nz.

Yours Sincerely,



Steve Lancaster
Head of Participation and Development

Appendices:

1. NZR Participation Policy #9 Age Bands to play Age Grade Rugby (February 2020)
2. Age Bands to play Age Grade Rugby: Exceptional Circumstances Case Assessment Form
3. NZR Participation Policy #4 Dispensations (February 2020)
4. Dispensations Process Diagram

NATIONAL RUGBY POLICY

POLICY #09 AGE BANDS FOR AGE GRADE RUGBY

Updated 20 February 2020 and effective immediately.

RELATED NZR POLICY

This policy should be read and applied in conjunction with National Rugby Policy #04 DISPENSATIONS.

POLICY REVIEW

This policy will be reviewed at the conclusion of the 2021 winter season.

BACKGROUND

As with many sports, rugby involves an element of risk to the physical wellbeing of participants. New Zealand Rugby is committed to making the game as safe as we practically can for participants, ensuring they continue to enjoy playing rugby and have a lifelong love of the game. Players up to the age of 19 years old need to be supported with policies and processes to ensure their safety and the safety of their opponents without unnecessarily limiting their ability to play. In some provinces, particularly in small schools, small towns and rural areas with smaller populations, the depth of the player base may warrant players playing with older cohorts than their current age, where it is safe for them to do so.

This policy is developed with consideration of the New Zealand context, and takes account of World Rugby guidelines to ensure player safety is the primary focus when considering players being approved to play outside their normal playing cohort. The policy recognises the difference in physical, mental, and emotional maturation of players across age and stage.

POLICY

This policy applies to all players up to the age of 18 years old on the 1st of January of the year in question. This policy also applies to all contact forms of the game, including Sevens, Tens, and Fifteens.

The term 'age window' is defined as the year that caters for any particular playing cohort. This is typically defined by defining grades by age such as U11 years or U19 years. For the purposes of this policy, focus should remain on the age of the respective playing cohort rather than the grade description. To clarify, the absence of an age grade at a level within a competition structures does not mean that players can be automatically considered for the next available age grade.

Players may play within the following 'windows' by age and gender:

Males and Females Up to age 12 years old should play within the following age windows:

- Best Practice – Within same age window ie a 10 year old with other 10 year olds.
- Acceptable Practice – within one year age window ie a 10 year old with 11 year olds.
- Exceptional Circumstance Case – within two year age window ie a 10 year old with 12 year olds.

Males between 13 and 18 years of age should play within the following age windows:

- Best Practice – Within same age window ie a 13 year old with other 13 year olds.
- Acceptable Practice – up to a two year age window ie a 13 year old with 14 or 15 year olds.
- Exceptional Circumstance Case – within three year age window ie 13 year old with 16 year olds.

Females between 13 and 18 should play within the following windows:

- Best Practice – Within same age window ie a 13 year old with other 13 year olds.
- Acceptable Practice – up to a three year age window ie a 13 year old with 14, 15 or 16 year olds.
- Exceptional Circumstance Case – within four year age window ie a 13 year old with 17 year olds.

Players wishing to play in age windows that qualify as Exceptional Circumstance Case for their respective age and gender are required to undertake an Exceptional Circumstance Case assessment before being cleared to play in the desired grade or competition. This assessment will require:

- Parental consent,
- Provision of individualised medical advice to the player and legal guardians,
- a technical assessment by an independent and currently qualified Developing Rugby Coach Level 2, and

- Principal or Club Chair approval.

Assessments are to be completed in accordance with NZR Age Band Exceptional Case Assessment form ([link](#)).

RESPONSIBILITIES

New Zealand Rugby will provide:

- Exceptional Circumstances Case Assessment form, and
- Resources to support the assessment coach in undertaking the technical assessment.

Provincial Unions will:

- Provide support to Players, Clubs and Schools in administering the policy,
- Provide support for technical assessment for any player,
- Record and retain approved assessment forms for any player, and
- Administer and enforce the age grade policy properly and fairly within the Provincial Union, with the health and wellbeing of players as the most important consideration.

Coaches/Schools/Clubs will:

- Comply with the policy to identify players requiring assessment,
- Provide support to any player requiring assessment, and
- Comply with policy in selecting players that meet age windows for the grade/competition.

Principals/Club Chairs

- Review, assess, approve or decline Exceptional Circumstances Case Assessments in accordance with this policy and their duty of care to all players, and
- Submit approved Exceptional Circumstances Case Assessments to the organising PU for recording and recording.

SANCTIONS

Coaches, Managers, Administrators, Clubs and Schools knowingly playing or allowing players to play outside age band policies and procedures will face Provincial Union disciplinary sanctions. These are to be determined by the Provincial Union.

NZR AGE BAND EXCEPTIONAL CIRCUMSTANCES CASE ASSESSMENT FORM (February 2020)

APPROVED FORM IS TO BE SUBMITTED TO YOUR COMPETITION GOVERNING BODY'S PROVINCIAL UNION FOR RECORDING

Player Details (please print clearly)

Name:	National Rugby ID:
Club/School	Provincial Union:
Number of Years played:	Proposed playing position:
Weight:	Height:
Date of Birth:	Requested Competition:
Contact Phone No:	E-mail:

Parent/Legal Guardian (Consent required if player is less than 18 years old)

I confirm that:

- a) I am the player or a parent or legal guardian of the above-mentioned player;*
- b) I have been provided with a copy of the NZR Age Band for Age Grade Rugby Policy.*
- c) I consent to my contact details being provided to an Assessing Coach for the purpose of the player undergoing a technical assessment (including for arranging a suitable time and day to undertake the assessment);*
- d) It has been explained to me that the aim of Age Band for Age Grade Rugby Policy is to facilitate inclusion so long as it is safe and for rugby participants with comparable physical development in conjunction with ability and/or experience to play with and against each other;*
- e) I understand that rugby is a contact sport, and, like all contact sports, players are exposed to a risk of injury. In addition to understanding these risks, I also agree, to the extent permitted by law, to waive my right to bring any claim for liability against any participant (including players, coaches, volunteers and administrators) and release all participants from any liability that may be incurred in connection with the player's participation in the requested or recommended age grade.*

Name:**Signature:****Date:****Medical Specialist**

I confirm that:

- a) I have been provided with a copy of the NZR Age Bands for Age Grade Rugby Policy; and*
- b) The player is physically able to participate in a contact sport at the level proposed; and*
- c) I have provided relevant medical advice to the player and their legal guardian of any matter that they should consider in applying to play rugby outside their recommended age bands.*

Name:	Practicing Certificate:
Phone:	Email:
Signature:	Date:

TECHNICAL ASSESSMENT BY INDEPENDENT COACH (Minimum DRC 2 QUALIFIED)			
<i>The player's level of competence and confidence allows the player to compete safely with players in the proposed competition</i>			
Track to tackle	Yes	No	Notes:
Tackle technique	Yes	No	Notes:
Tackle contest	Yes	No	Notes:
Approved to play?	Yes	No - Requires Re-assessment (add comments as necessary)	
Name:		National Rugby ID:	
Phone:		Email:	
Signature:		Date:	
APPROVAL BY SCHOOL PRINCIPAL / CLUB CHAIR			
<i>Approval is granted to enter the player into the proposed School/Club team in accordance with NZR Age Bands for Age Grade Rugby Policy.</i>			
Name:	Signature:		Date
Position:			

NATIONAL RUGBY POLICY

POLICY #04 DISPENSATIONS

Updated 20 February 2020 and effective immediately.

POLICY REVIEW

This policy will be reviewed at the conclusion of the 2021 winter season.

BACKGROUND

Given a strong focus on ensuring rugby is available to as many players as possible, organising bodies have traditionally offered dispensations to players who may not meet grade criteria on either weight or age grounds. Failing to allow a dispensation may prevent those players from playing and could impact an organisation's ability to field a team in a competition, thereby potentially affecting the meaningfulness of that competition.

On the other hand, it could be suggested that allowing dispensation of players may pose a risk to safety and enjoyment of the grade eligible players. This risk is enhanced further if Exceptional Circumstance Case approvals have been granted for players within the grade in accordance with NZR Participation Policy #9 Age Bands to Play Age Grade Rugby, and accordingly, Player safety and minimising risk will always be the first consideration when deciding whether or not to allow a dispensation in Rugby.

Dispensations must not be allowed in any situation where there is reason to believe the request is motivated by a desire to have players play down in younger age grades in order to influence results.

POLICY

This policy applies to all players up to the age of 18 years old on the 1st of January of the year in question. This policy also applies to all contact forms of the game, including Sevens, Tens, and Fifteens.

The term 'age window' is defined as the year that caters for any particular playing cohort. This is typically by defining grades by age such as "U11" years or "U19" years. For the purposes of this policy, focus should remain on the age of the respective playing cohort rather than the grade description. To clarify, the absence of an age grade at a level within a competition structures does not mean that players can be automatically considered for the next available age grade.

Dispensations in rugby below U19 may be permissible, subject to the following principles and considerations:

- The safety of all grade eligible players is paramount and must be considered by the competition organisers and the Provincial Union.
- Provincial Unions and their respective organising committees must determine for any age grade competition, the need for an upper weight limit taking into account player safety and local demographics in their region.
- For any weight grade dispensation, an upper age must be nominated.
- Provincial Unions and their respective organising committees must determine the conditions under which dispensations are to be granted and set out the steps for risk mitigation to ensure the safety of the competition's participants.

- Dispensations are to be managed in accordance with the attached process diagram (Link) to ensure:
 - Consideration is given to the presence of any approved Exceptional Circumstances Case players in the competition.
 - An assessment of the potential safety risk to participants is undertaken for any player requesting dispensation.
 - A risk mitigation approach is established and communicated to maintain safety but provide maximum opportunity for inclusion of all players.
 - Legal Guardians of players / Schools / Clubs are aware of any dispensated players within the competition.

RESPONSIBILITIES

New Zealand Rugby will provide:

- NZR Dispensation Process (link); and
- Support and guidance to the Provincial Unions in making their decisions in NZR Dispensation Process.

Provincial Unions and their Organising Committees will:

- Provide support to players / clubs / schools requesting dispensation;
- Provide dispensation application form to players / clubs / schools requesting dispensation;
- Provide support in viewing players to support risk assessment;
- Review applications for dispensation;
- Advise affected players / clubs / schools of dispensation outcomes;
- Record and retain completed dispensation forms for any player; and
- Sanction all parties for knowingly breaching this policy.

Clubs / Schools will:

- Submit dispensation applications as required; and
- Comply with Provincial Union dispensation decisions

SANCTIONS

Coaches, Managers, Administrators, Clubs and Schools who knowingly play or allow players to play outside of the NZR Dispensation Process may also face Provincial Union disciplinary sanctions. These are to be determined by the Provincial Union.

NZR Dispensation Process

