

# Mini-rugby is having a field day

Much-loved family pastime teaches kids about healthy living, fair play and teamwork, writes *Luisa Tam*

To say mini-rugby is flourishing in Hong Kong would be a total understatement. Every Sunday morning, from September to April, more than 4,000 children – boys and girls under the age of 12 – turn up for training and tournaments involving 19 clubs from across the city.

Although mini-rugby began in the expatriate community in the 1980s, about half of the participants now are local Chinese, and more and more children are donning jerseys and taking to the playing field every year, observers say.

The Hong Kong East Rugby Football Club is one of the smaller teams with 40 to 50 children taking part in their three-hour weekly training sessions at Lei Yue Mun Park and Holiday Village. But it exemplifies why the sport has rapidly become so popular.

"Rugby is an excellent game for the family," says Alice Chung, the club's chairperson and founder. "Every Sunday, the whole family can participate."

Typically, you see mums basking in the sunshine with babies, toddlers running around the sidelines, and dads helping out with the training or shouting encouragement to their kids. Some parents go on to take the Level 1 coaching qualification from the International Rugby Board that is required to coach mini-rugby in Hong Kong; others become referees.

According to Chung, the family atmosphere and strong support set a good example for the children about the importance of developing a healthy lifestyle.

While rugby is widely regarded as a rough and intensely physical activity, the mini version of the game is quite the opposite. There's no tackling and little physical contact, providing kids with a gentle introduction to the sport that enables them to develop co-ordination, ball-handling skills and teamwork.

"This is important as there are many things they cannot learn from books or in the classroom. By playing, kids develop greater interest. Exercise is also good for the health, bone development and eye, hand and brain co-ordination," Chung explains.

It also fosters vital social skills at a young age, giving participants a chance to improve their overall development.

Chung says children learn how to become team players, how to share and let others have the chance to participate. "This is especially important nowadays,



At a regular weekend tournament, a Hong Kong East Rugby Football Club mini-player shows promise on and off the field. Photo: HKERFC

at a time when kids live in a high-technology world. They need more exposure to the outdoors and to get connected with other kids with verbal communication and interpersonal skills."

All of this helps to boost their confidence – an important factor, not only in sports, but also for academic

achievement. There can also be direct health benefits. "Some parents joined because their children were overweight or suffered from asthma, ailments that began to get better through sporting activity," she says.

She continues: "There are also kids who are uncommunicative at first but, after a while, they begin to become more talkative and mix with the team."

Apart from regular tournaments, where they get to pit their developing skills against children from other parts of the city, mini-rugby players also specifically feature in one of Hong Kong's premier sporting events.

At the Hong Kong Rugby Sevens tournament, usually held in March, they are given a chance to play at the Hong Kong Stadium in Causeway Bay as mini-rugby is now an established part of the annual event.

Apart from playing in front of a large crowd, they can also mix with established rugby stars from around the world by

joining the march-past around the stadium with the 24-competing teams.

"It's a great chance for them to feel and be part of the fantastic atmosphere," says Chung.

The popularity of mini-rugby in Hong Kong was illustrated in October last year, when 2,610 kids set a Guinness World Record by playing simultaneously. That was three times the number of youngsters who set the previous record.

Once they graduate from mini-rugby, further opportunities are available for children to pursue their interest in rugby with regular Under-14, Under-16 and Under-18 tournaments being held throughout the rugby season.

The rules are adjusted progressively to suit the abilities, stature and strength of the youngsters as they develop each year and become tomorrow's leaders, sports people and parents. Some of the former "minis" have even gone on to play in international competitions for the Hong Kong men's and women's rugby teams.



Alice Chung

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