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HEADLINE: Tough for kids to play like pros

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Revolution was easy for the NHL.

Easy, at least, compared to achieving similar philosophical change in the rest of the hockey world.

By now, those of you with children in competitive hockey have probably already attended a game in which the new rule standards called in the NHL last season were being applied to lower levels of hockey this season.

In many cases, it's been a distressing mess. Tons of penalties, all kinds of four-on-four and three-on-three play, disrupted forward lines and defensive pairings, all kinds of problems.

Well, everybody take a breath. It's going to take a while to make this work.

With Hockey Canada, USA Hockey and even the Western Hockey League, the last holdout in Canadian junior hockey, all deciding to adopt the NHL's new style of competition that was such a roaring success last year, there is really not a major boys or girls hockey organization out there in North America that isn't trying to emulate the new NHL when it comes to interference and using the stick to hook and obstruct rather than play the game.

But that doesn't mean they're all ready to do it.

Even Colin Campbell, the NHL vice-president and one of the league's key architects of last season's ambitious change, has heard about penalties and more penalties in minor hockey, and it's only September.

"This was my original concern when everybody said they were going to do what the NHL did," Campbell said yesterday. "When I heard that, it was almost like we should have said, 'Please folks, don't try this at home.'"

"People have to realize how much work went into the changes we made. We have the best referees in the world and we have two of 'em for every game and every single game we play is closely scrutinized and analyzed both by us and the teams and the media.

"This is still a really good thing for minor hockey. But my advice is to start with baby steps. We had to do it all at once, but that doesn't mean they do. Baby steps would mean starting with the basic idea that you don't put your stick on your opponent any more, that the stick is for passing and shooting. Then go from there."

It's no wonder, of course, that leagues at all levels want to move quickly on this. The changes to the NHL last season were such a blast of fresh air for the sport that every parent who has watched his or her son or daughter get pitchforked and restrained on a nightly basis suddenly realized there was a much better way to play this game.

It was extraordinary, really, how much the NHL accomplished in a season. For minor hockey, you have to believe it's going to be a longer process because of the differences in jurisdictions and quality of refereeing across the country.

That said, kids will mimic what they see on TV and, if the NHL is able to maintain the standards it set last year, it's reasonable to project that within five years all minor hockey in Canada and the United States will mirror the pros.

Will the NHL stick to its guns? Well, despite persistent criticism from some corners, particularly creaky old Hockey Night In Canada, it is extremely unlikely the league will loosen the enforcement patterns instituted last season and much likelier some grey areas will be made more clear.

No major rule changes are anticipated, although the board of governors could have ideas of its own when it meets Friday. Otherwise, all the rules will remain the same, including the controversial two-minute penalty for shooting the puck over the glass in the defensive zone, a lightning rod for criticism by old-world types last season.

There may be a few tweaks, such as increased stick curves, but in general the NHL has done the right thing by improving its product with intelligent, well-designed, proactive change and then sticking by those changes.

"We're not going backwards," Campbell vowed.

That can only help the kids' game.

After all, even the most dim-witted, unrealistic hockey parent can understand that if Johnny wants to make it to the big leagues, Johnny better start playing like a big-leaguer.

And keep his stick to himself.