

Is flag football a safer alternative to tackle?

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Reports of serious head and neck injuries to football players, especially young football players, have caused some parents to hesitate to let their children play tackle football. In some places, such as Bergen County, New Jersey, youth flag football leagues seem to be attracting more players, while tackle leagues are drawing fewer. In flag football, players

don't tackle each other, but snatch a piece of fabric – a "flag" – from an opponent's belt in lieu of tackling. Flag football is not a non-contact sport; players still block each other. But it's played without helmets and body armor and places an emphasis on speed and skill, rather than force.

Gregg Heinzmann, director of the Youth Sports Research Council at Rutgers University, has devoted much of his career to making youth sports safer. The council, part of the Department of Exercise Science and Sports Studies in the School of Arts and Sciences, Rutgers University-New Brunswick, sponsors the Sports Awareness for Educating Today's Youth, or S.A.F.E.T.Y, clinic for volunteer coaches. The clinic, which celebrates its 30th anniversary this year, has trained more than 300,000 volunteer coaches in New Jersey. Rutgers Today talked to Heinzmann about sports safety and the relative merits of flag football and tackle football for young people.

Let's start with the safety question. How safe – or how dangerous – is it for children to play tackle football?

In tackle football, or any other sport, safety is an attitude, not something you can really measure. We can take some measure of risk, but even there, the statistics are incomplete, because they're based on emergency-room visits. Parents often take their children to their own pediatricians or treat injuries at home if they don't have adequate medical insurance.

It's also difficult to measure the relative risk of participating in different sports because of methodological shortcomings in the current pediatric injury literature. Many parents rely upon anecdotal evidence or sensational news stories to make decisions about whether or not their child should participate in a given sport.

In my view, the benefits of participating in organized youth sports –

exercise, learning personal responsibility and making friends – outweigh the risks. A lifetime of video games is not the solution.

Have the youth tackle football leagues made the game "safer" in recent years?

In my opinion, yes. Their coaches are more knowledgeable and more aware of the patterns of injuries in young athletes. We've been training volunteer coaches at our S.A.F.E.T.Y. clinic in New Jersey since 1986. Many of the national governing bodies for organized youth sports have only recently mandated coaches' education, but the trend is growing.

I should add that kids suffer injuries differently from adults because of their smaller size and immaturity. They're more susceptible to heat illness than to the kinds of injuries that result when massive professionals collide at high-speeds. Certainly, youth [football players](#) collide, but, if they're taught proper tackling technique and properly conditioned for the demands of the activity, then the risk is minimized.

Finally, Pop Warner football has implemented rule changes that limit the amount of contact in practice and, most recently, eliminated kick-offs to reduce the likelihood of serious injuries.

How safe is flag football? After all, it's designed to reduce collisions.

Have you ever watched a game or practice? It's like tag on steroids. Although tackling has been eliminated, there are plenty of collisions – with other players, and the ground—that could produce [injury](#). So coaches need to teach kids how to fall properly and also instruct children to let the coaches know when they're not feeling well, or injured. Injuries often result when youngsters are tired and not able to perform

the skills correctly or when they're "playing through pain" – a lesson still taught by too many adults.

How can all youth sports be made safer?

There are several things: more knowledgeable coaches and parents, better equipment and fields, more research about the epidemiology of youth sports injuries – especially, how to prevent them – and, finally, a reappraisal of the nature and purpose of organized youth sports.

Reappraisal? Why?

The biggest trend in organized youth sports is the "professionalization" of a children's game, which contributes to overuse injuries in youngsters. It's being driven by parents with unrealistic hopes of a future athletic scholarship, or professional sports career for their youngster. Only about 3 percent of high school student-athletes ever compete at the Division 1 level and few get a "free ride."

In order for [youth sports](#) to achieve the intended purpose of developing competent, healthy, caring adults, the emphasis must return to fun – as kids define it, not adults. We've turned children's primary avocation into work, and the falling participation rates in traditional sports such as baseball and football in favor of "action sports", such as skateboarding and BMX biking, underscore kids' dissatisfaction with the status quo – we are not meeting their needs.

Provided by Rutgers University

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