

Contact Football for Children

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Parents' main concern about contact football for children is the risk of injury. Intuitively, it would seem that young children, whose bodies are not fully developed and who are smaller, lighter, and weaker than older children, would be more vulnerable to injuries. To many parents' surprise, the opposite is actually the case. In almost all sports, including contact football, research has shown that injury rates are lowest for younger children and increase as children get older, particularly during adolescence. As children go from elementary school to middle school to high school, then college, injury rates and the severity of sports injuries steadily increase. From the standpoint of injury risk, the younger the child, the safer their participation in contact football is likely to be.

One reason that younger children are less prone to injury is that they lack the body size, strength, and speed to generate great enough forces to lead to significant injuries. In addition, young children's immature musculoskeletal system is generally more flexible and resilient than that of older children, so that serious injuries such as ligament tears, cartilage damage and broken bones less likely, and injuries are less severe when they do happen. The vast majority of children's sports injuries are considered mild, such as bruises and abrasions. Although these may look worrisome, they are actually superficial, temporary injuries that don't lead to permanent damage.

Pop Warner football, started in 1929, is the most widespread youth contact football program. This organization places great emphasis on safety. Children compete against children of similar age and size, under strictly enforced age and weight classifications, starting at age 5 and 35 pounds (Tiny-Mites division) up to age 16 and 175 pounds (Bantam division). A pre-participation physical exam and appropriate protective equipment are required. Academic excellence is also emphasized – participants are required to maintain a 2.0 GPA and a 70 percent school attendance record.

To put injury rates in youth football in perspective, one study showed that among 5 to 15-year-olds, injury rates in organized football were 12 percent lower than in organized soccer, 50 percent lower than during bicycle riding, and 74 percent lower than during skateboarding. Pop Warner football injury rates (ages 5 to 16) are less than one-third the high school football injury rate, one-fifth the college football rate, and one-ninth the professional football rate.

As far as sustaining injuries youth football is probably no riskier than many other sports and recreational activities that children participate in routinely. However, when evaluating any organized sports program for children, safety should be priority – in regards to appropriate setting, equipment, protective gear, program design and rules of play.

A more pertinent concern for youth football than safety is whether the program is structured in a developmentally appropriate way for the child's age. Most experts agree that organized sports for children should focus on participation, age appropriate skill development, having fun and positive coaching and role modeling, rather than on competition and winning. The best indicators of a good program are if children enjoy the program, have fun and are eager to participate.