

Do Not Let Kids Play Tackle Football Until They Are 14, Aspen Suggests



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Kids will have plenty of opportunities to damage their brains as adults. So why should they start before age 14?

[A recently released report from the Aspen Institute's Sports and Society Program](#) recommends that flag rather than tackle become the standard way to play American football before kids reach high school. [Tom Farrey, Executive Director](#), and [Jon Solomon, Editorial Director](#) of the Aspen program co-authored the report entitled *What If Flag Becomes The Standard Way Of Playing Football Until High School?* Flag football can include all of the crucial elements of football, such as the strategy, the kicking, the passing, the running, and even the end zone celebrations, with one key difference. No hitting. No pummeling. No using your head as a battering ram. In flag football, if you want to stop someone who is carrying the ball, you instead grab a flag attached to his or her waist. Thus, you spare him or her and yourself a shake to the brain, unless of course the flag is inappropriately placed around his or her head.

Could flag football help reverse what seems to be flagging interest in tackle football at the youth and high school levels? The report cites several statistics suggesting such a decline. For one, high school football participation decreased for the fourth consecutive year to 1.07 million in 2017,

a 20,893 drop from the previous year. Also, over the past 5 years, tackle football participation among children ages 6 to 12 has fallen by 17.4% to just under one million.

What's contributing to these declines? Consider the following findings from a 2016 survey conducted by the [University of Massachusetts Lowell Center for Public Opinion Research](#). Over three-quarters (78%) of American adults "do not think it is appropriate for children to participate in tackle football before the age of 14, and that 63 percent believe it is either certainly or probably false that tackle is a safe activity for children before they reach high school," in the words of the Aspen Report.

Then there are current and former players like Brett Favre, for whom caution seemed like a four-letter word during his 20-year Hall of Fame NFL quarterbacking career. (Yes, "caution" actually has 7 letters, but that's not the point.) As you can see in his TODAY show interview, Favre now questions whether kids should be playing tackle football:

More and more stories and scientific studies have been showing the potential horrific effects of repeated blows to the head. The big concern is chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE), a disease in which toxic protein called tau accumulates in particular areas of the brain with accompanying progressive deterioration in brain function. CTE sufferers may lose the ability to think, conduct daily activities, and effectively control their emotions and behaviors.

Look at what happened to a number of former NFL players who were subsequently diagnosed with CTE after their deaths. San Diego Chargers great Junior Seau shot himself in the chest at age 43. Legendary Pittsburgh Steeler center Mike Webster suffered from depression and dementia before dying at age 50. According to his family, New York Giants star and longtime ABC

broadcaster Frank Gifford suffered CTE symptoms before passing away. New England Patriots tight end Aaron Hernandez went to jail after murder charges and hung himself.

A problem with CTE, among many other troubles, is that currently you can only really diagnose it after death by dissecting the brain. The Aspen report mentions [a study published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*](#) that found signs of CTE in the brains of 110 of 111 (99%) former NFL players, 7 of 8 (88%) former Canadian football players, 48 of 53 (91%) former college players, and three of 14 (21%) former high school players. Yes, this study had its limitations. It was a convenience sample, which doesn't mean that the study was easy to do or performed at a convenience store. Rather, a convenience sample results when researchers don't randomly select a sample from the population of interest and try to make the sample as representative of the population as they can. Instead, they just choose a sample that is easy to obtain. In this case, the researchers examined that were donated through a program, certainly not a random sample of former football players. To want to donate your brain for the study of CTE, you may already have concerns about CTE. Therefore, this study's results may not reflect the true prevalence of CTE among all former NFL players. Or all former college players. Or all former high school football players.

Nonetheless, these numbers are too high to ignore. The Aspen report also cites reports and studies suggesting that "the more blows taken over time, the higher the risk of developing the disease" and that "children may be particularly vulnerable to brain injury in collision sports like football." Indeed, kids in general have brains that are more immature and still rapidly developing, regardless of what you may say about the immaturity of many adult brains. They also have relatively larger heads and weaker neck and

shoulder muscles, which may result in more of a “bobblehead effect” on impact. Plastic "bobbleheads" may be oddly amusing. But real-life bobbleheading can shake and damage the brain even further. Medically, no one in their right minds would recommend that kids start banging their heads as early as possible.

The Aspen report lists other reasons why making flag rather than tackle football the standard among kids makes sense. **There's no indication that a switch to flag will decrease the "quality" of tackle football in high school, college, and the pros.** If you are worried that delaying tackle football may jeopardize your kid's chances of becoming a good tackle football player later on, the report offers a roster of players who did not play tackle football until high school. How about Tom Brady, Jerry Rice, Jim Brown, Walter Payton, Anthony Munoz, Warren Sapp, Mike Haynes, Michael Strahan, and Lawrence Taylor? That's no slouch of a lineup tackle football skill-wise. My guess is that Mr. Brady is not saying, "darn, I should have played tackle football earlier," while wearing his 5 Super Bowl rings. Moreover, if you are banking on your kid making the NFL, keep in mind that [only 6.9% of high school football players play college football](#) and [only 1.6% of NCAA players make it to a major professional football league](#).

Plus, flag football can be a lot less expensive to play than tackle football. You won't need a helmet or pads. Of course, no one is saying that you can't wear these things while playing flag football if you are so inclined. But removing such requirements may make the sport more accessible to those who can't afford or just don't want to pay for these items. Rather than hurt the tackle football industry, bolstering flag football could actually encourage a wider range of kids to participate in the sport. You may lose the kids who want to beat the bleep out of each other and the parents who want to see that. But

losing these folks may be more than offset by those who prefer playing a form of football that doesn't have as high an injury risk.

Additionally, flag football is something that you can play much further into adulthood than tackle football. Past a certain age, putting on a helmet and pads may not be practical or even cool anymore. Just look at Al Bundy on the television show *Married with Children* when he wears his old Polk High football uniform. Sexy is not the first word that comes to mind.

The report concludes with the following recommendations:

- USA Football, Pop Warner, and all other youth football organizations shift to a standard of flag football before age 14.
- Those same organizations begin to teach fundamental blocking, tackling, and hitting skills in practice at age 12 — the better to prepare interested athletes for high school football — and do so in a controlled, safe-as-possible manner that does not involve player-to-player and helmet-to-helmet hitting and contact, akin to what the Dartmouth football team does in its practices.
- High school and college football programs also minimize non-game tackling and player collisions by adopting Dartmouth-style instruction and practice standards.
- The football industry and other relevant stakeholders — including high schools and colleges — expand their flag football offerings so that individuals can continue to participate in the sport without having to transition to tackle.

All of this makes sense. Even though the NFL still makes gobs of money, its future is clouded with uncertainty. [As Jonathan Berr has written for *Forbes*](#), NFL television ratings have been dropping since at least 2015. You have to wonder how much injury concerns are contributing to this continuing drop. After all, knowing the harm that players are doing to each other may temper

your enthusiasm for the game. Fewer kids playing football may erode not only the pipeline of future players but also the fan base. If the NFL and tackle football industry want to tackle these problems then replacing tackles with flags among kids may be the answer.