

IS FOOTBALL SAFE FOR KIDS?

by Kent Hannon: Sports Illustrated for Kids

With proper coaching and equipment, the risk is minimal.

Ray McEwen is one of the men in charge of Sanford Stadium, where the University of Georgia Bulldogs play football. Over the years, he has seen college players dish out many head-jarring tackles, the kind that sports shows love to include in their highlight films. But the collision that scared McEwen the most was one that involved his son Brent.

At the time, McEwen was the coach of an age-group football team. Brent, then 10, played linebacker. "One day in practice, a ball carrier shot through the line and Brent collided with him, helmet to helmet," McEwen says. "Both kids went down and didn't move. I remember someone saying, 'Those kids are really hurt.'"

Though Brent's helmet slit in half, neither he nor the ball carrier was injured. Brent, who went on to play football through college, never suffered a serious injury. In fact, he sustained his worst football injury one day after practice. Brent and some friends were playing catch with a Nerf football when Brent tripped over his own helmet, fell, and broke his arm.

Three Safety Factors

Three factors helped prevent Brent from being seriously hurt when he collided with the other player. Those three factors explain why age-group football -- when taught and managed correctly -- is actually less dangerous, statistically speaking, than soccer.

1. Proper equipment minimizes the danger of serious injuries. "Brent was wearing a water-and-air-bladder helmet that was certified for college use," McEwen says. "He did split the helmet, but the helmet took most of the blow for him."
2. Proper technique helps kids avoid getting hurt. "Brent was taught that he should never use his helmet to make a tackle," says McEwen. "You lead with your shoulder. Even though this ball carrier surprised him, Brent was turning his head away at the time of the collision. That probably saved those boys from a concussion -- or worse."

3. FORCE = mass x acceleration, and kids don't generate much force. "Neither kid weighed one hundred pounds," says McEwen. "And they couldn't run very fast. So it wasn't like Lawrence Taylor crashing into Emmitt Smith."

Surprisingly Few Injuries

Experts believe that as many as one million kids play age-group football in the United States. (There is no national body that oversees age-group football.) Some 170,000 kids play Pop Warner, which is similar in organization to Little League baseball. Pop Warner, which is for kids ages 7 to 16, has very strict safety rules against which all youth football programs should be measured.

"Safety is always a concern in our program," says Ralph Dumican, who is in his eleventh year of coaching Pop Warner teams in North Attleboro, Mass. "Our coaches attend several clinics each year, and they're well versed in coaching, conditioning, and safety. Frankly, many more of our kids get hurt riding bikes, climbing trees, or in-line skating than they do playing football."

Pop Warner has never had a player fatality in its 67-year history. And studies show that most youth football programs are relatively safe. In a recent study, the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission examined athletic injuries on a sport-by-sport basis. It found that organized football 5-to-15 year-olds had 12 % fewer injuries per capita than organized soccer for the same age group. Football also had 50% fewer injuries than bike riding and 74% fewer than skateboarding.

Good Equipment Is the Key

"Kids do get hurt paying football," says McEwen. "But if you put a kid in the right equipment, teach him proper techniques, and play him against kids who are the same age and weight, it's a pretty safe sport."

Fortunately, football equipment for kids has never been better. The same companies who manufacture equipment for the colleges and pro teams make equipment for kids. Beyond the standard helmet, pads (shoulder, knee, thigh, hips, tailbone), and rubber cleats, Pop Warner requires that players wear vests to protect their ribs and long Lycra girdles over all the padding to keep the pads from slipping.

"We use helmets that carry the NOCSAE (National Operating Committee for Standards for Athletic Equipment) seal of approval," says Dumican. "We

send the helmets out each year to be reconditioned, pressure tested, sanitized, and re-certified."

"In the end, what coaches have to remember about age-group football," says McEwen, is that it's all about providing recreation for kids in a safe environment. The score doesn't matter."