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## HEALTH & SCIENCE

# Why Kids Under 14 Should Not Play Tackle Football

The more we learn about the dangers to children, the more it makes sense to wait

By Mark Hyman @sportsparents | Nov. 06, 2012 | 19 Comments

Tom Brady is the gifted quarterback of the New England Patriots, widely regarded (even by Jets' fans) as one of the best ever at his position. But when he was a kid in the late 1980s and early '90s, his father Tom Sr. and his mother Galynn did not allow him to play organized tackle football. For that, Tom had to wait until his freshman year at Junipero Serra High School in San Mateo, Calif. "The first time I ever saw Tommy seriously throw a football, he was 14 years of age," his dad told me.



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Tom Sr. believed that football was too dangerous. "As a parent, I didn't want my 7- or 8-year-old kid walking off the field with a broken arm or leg," the elder Brady said. (Concussions were just an afterthought at the time.)

Today's parents of peewee players would do well to embrace Tom Brady Sr.'s attitude. Last month, in one single [Pop Warner football game](#), five preadolescent players on a team from Tantasqua, Mass., suffered serious head injuries. The boys were all around the age of 10 and none were over the predetermined weight limit of 120 lb. In spite of the 52-point lead the opposing team had on Tantasqua, neither coach called for the contest to end. (Those coaches have since [been suspended](#).)

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This year, 3 million kids from the ages of 6 to 14 are playing organized youth tackle football, [according](#) to USA Football. Even some 5-year-olds are in helmets playing in the Tiny Mite division of Pop Warner (which insists that its gladiators weigh at least 35 lb.).

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In my new book, *Concussions and Our Kids*, which I co-authored with Dr. Robert Cantu, a clinical professor of neurosurgery at the Boston University School of Medicine, we make the case for delaying organized tackle football until kids are 14 years old. The better game for children is flag football — in which kids grab flags rather than each other to stop the ball carrier. Kids can develop tackle-football skills during these early years by practicing those skills on tackling dummies.

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Admittedly, the cutoff age of 14 is somewhat arbitrary. (That’s usually the case with any mandatory minimum or maximum, i.e. “10 items or less.”) However, there are important reasons to hold off until then, including:

- Kids are not miniature adults. By age 4, the heads of kids are 90% of adult size. However, their necks are much weaker than an adult’s neck. The combination creates a danger. When a child takes a hard blow from falling or being struck in the helmet, it is more difficult to keep the head steady. The result is greater force to the [brain](#) from being jerked inside the skull.
- Kids don’t understand the risks. This is as much an ethical as a medical consideration. A teenager entering high school can make a judgment about the ups and downs of playing tackle football. He has the ability to think through the consequences himself, not as an adult would but at least with an understanding of risk and reward. The same isn’t true of a 6-year-old.
- Much is not known about the long-term effects of repetitive head trauma, especially among young children. How will these kids be affected when they’re 70, or even 50?

At Emerson Hospital in Concord, Mass., Cantu treats hundreds of patients a year for concussion symptoms. Cantu is also co-director of the Center for the Study of Traumatic Encephalopathy at Boston University, which has examined the brains of many deceased professional football players who were found to have the degenerative disease as a result of years of accumulated head trauma. Chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE) has also been detected in the brains of a college football player and a high school football player. There aren’t any known cases in younger athletes (CTE can only be diagnosed after death), but it is scary to think that there may be eighth-graders out there who have the disease in such an early stage.

Sure football is an exciting game. But the more the medical community learns about the risks, the more Tom Brady Sr. seemed to have asked the right question: What’s the rush?

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Hyman the co-author of *Concussions and Our Kids: America's Leading Expert on How to Protect Young Athletes and Keep Sports Safe*. The views expressed are solely his own.



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and Our Kids**

AMERICA'S LEADING EXPERT ON  
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AND KEEP SPORTS SAFE

**ROBERT CANTU, M. D.**  
AND MARK HYMAN

Mark Hyman's third book is *Concussions and Our Kids: America's Leading Expert on How to Protect Young Athletes and Keep Sports Safe*, a collaboration with Dr. Robert Cantu