

# Youth Football Challenges

by Tom Downs, Essex Chargers 7/8 Offensive Coach

Let's be honest with ourselves. Football is facing many challenges, especially at the youth football level.

The first major challenge is football competes with other sports, activities, and clubs. Football also competes with many negative distractions. Now that is nothing new, but kids today are exposed to so much more than kids from 20 years ago. There are a lot more choices coming at kids from many different directions. Choices range from picking a different sport to taking drugs or pursuing criminal activity. Again, this is nothing new, but it feels like the exposure kids are subjected to today is ramped up in comparison to earlier generations.

I have absolutely no data to support this, and I do not claim to be a sociologist. I am just a youth football coach, but after coaching 20 years at this level, I have seen how times have changed. However, I do not want to paint a completely negative picture to this enhanced exposure kids are receiving. There are some absolutely incredible advantages to what kids can experience today. The whole world is now at their fingertips. That is an amazing advantage over earlier generations, but it is not without its pitfalls.

The bottom line is youth football competes with distractions be it other organizations or socially created. You might say, "Well coach, other sports are dealing with the same distractions." And I would tell you that you are absolutely correct. I would also tell you "I don't care!" My job is to make football as fun as possible and bring in as many kids as possible. I am competing with all those other distractions, and I want youth football to win.

The second major challenge football is facing is concussions. Although every major

sport has its concussion issues, football receives the most attention, as it should mind you, because the kids' job is to consistently bring someone to the ground quite often in a violent manner. It is obvious that the chances of getting a concussion are increased if you choose to play a sport that requires a lot of contact. I do not see a way for me in good conscience to deny that simple fact or state it in a more obscure way to sugar coat that simple truth.

Now having said that, there are ways to greatly reduce the chances of a concussion while playing football. First, every coach receives training on how to identify concussion symptoms and receives training on how to deal with them. Second, it is a rule that a medical responder is required to attend every youth football game so kids can get immediate assistance for concussion like symptoms or any other type of injury. Third, if a kid shows the signs of concussion like symptoms, they do not return to play until after following concussion protocols, realizing those protocols could take days or weeks in extreme cases. Fourth, full contact is minimized during practice. We are creative with drills to teach football skills while also minimizing the chance for a head injury. Fifth, our league's referees are also trained in the subject of concussions and they consistently provide feedback to the kids during the game about safety issues, and penalize as necessary. Sixth, we teach good rugby tackling fundamentals. Yes, that is right, rugby tackling. You can find information on YouTube about this form of tackling and you can also find NFL teams teaching the technique.

Lastly, we educate the kids and parents about the six points listed in the paragraph above. It is imperative that they understand how important their kids' safety is to us as coaches. Parents and kids need to know that we are always looking out for their best interests, and that we are doing everything we can to minimize the kids' exposure to concussion.

We have had a good track record for minimizing concussions on our team. In fact, we average about one concussion a year due to football related activities. I believe this is a big reason that our football team has not seen decreased numbers in recent

years, because I think word gets around and the parents talk about it. We typically average 40-45 kids on our 7th-8th grade team. Aggravatingly enough, we average 3-4 concussions a year due to non-football related activities. One of those conversations usually goes like this.

*“Coach, look over there. It looks like Jimmy does not have his gear with him. I better go see what’s up.”*

*“Jimmy, how come you don’t have your pads with you?”*

*“Coach, the doctor says I have a concussion and need to go through the protocols before I can play again.”*

*“Did it happen last practice?”*

*“No coach, I was messing around insert silly nonsensical activity here and then I banged my head”*

*“You have to be kidding me. Coach, come over here, you are not going to believe this one.”*

I am certainly not trying to take concussions lightly, but damn I have seen and heard about some really stupid concussions. One of my son’s good friends even got one from a frisbee at ultimate frisbee practice. He was standing several yards away from the thrower and was talking to my son on the sideline. The frisbee hit him in the head and he could not play for two weeks.

Kids get concussions from bad luck (I put the frisbee concussion as bad luck), plain stupidity or knuckle headedness, and from playing many different sports. Kids are being kids. However, it cannot be understated how important it is for everyone to know how seriously we try to control the chance of a concussion while your kid is practicing or playing football.

