

CONTACT SPORTS – GIRLS AND CONTACT SPORTS

On August 30, 2002, Taylor Davison, a 10 year old girl and the only girl on her football team, left practice complaining of a headache and collapsed as she walked off the field with her coach. Three days later she died. It was reported that she had taken a hard hit during a full-contact practice on August 27, sat out three plays with a headache, returned to the field and not complained of head pain until her collapse three days later.

Taylor's death has caused some people to question whether tackle football is appropriate for children and whether girls should participate with and against boys in sports such as football or in contact sports at all.

POSITION STATEMENT

1. What happened to Taylor Davison was a tragedy and an accident that had nothing to do with gender. Any child who has a head injury, regardless of gender, age or sport, must be completely healthy before he or she returns to sport.
2. Reports remain unclear whether her injury was or should have been recognized. If it was recognized, she should have been sent to and treated by a doctor and received doctor's clearance before return to competition. This procedure should be used for all head injuries, whether they occur to boys or girls.
3. Allowing children to participate in contact football is an individual decision for parents. No scientific data exists that indicates that children at this age should not play contact sports. In general, if teams and leagues organize teams according to size, risks in contact sports have nothing to do with gender and more to do with coaching and the child's skills and experience in that sport.

4. There is no particular age that is appropriate for contact sports. Parents should consider variables such as the size of the athletes, the sport they are playing, the physical condition of the athlete and the quality of coaching and skill instruction. These factors should all be considered in deciding whether it is appropriate for a child, male or female, to play full contact sports.
5. Until the onset of puberty, girls grow faster and have more coordination than boys. Pre-puberty, girls and boys do not differ significantly in physiologic parameters such as height, weight, fat-free mass, girth, bone width, and skinfold thickness . Growth rates vary so much within and between the sexes that children prior to puberty should be matched by height, weight and skill when participating in contact sports. No generalizations should be made about the average height or weight or comparisons between boys and girls.
6. Once boys reach puberty, in general, it is unfair for boys to compete against girls on equal terms. Due to the male hormone androgen, boys develop more muscle mass per unit volume of body mass than do girls. Thus, even if you have a boy and girl of the same height and weight, the boy will have more fat free mass (a greater percentage of his body will be muscle) than the girl. Thus, he will be stronger, able to run faster, throw farther, etc. This is why after the age of 11 or 12, boys and girls compete (and should compete) on separate same-sex teams.
7. Girls who desire to compete on boys' teams should be permitted to do so if they have the size, strength and skill to match up to the boys they are playing with and against and can therefore to do so safely. Physiological differences within the sexes are greater than the differences between the sexes. Thus, especially in sport leagues below the professional sports level, there will be some individual girls who are able to compete with and against boys, despite the physiological advantages of most boys. Especially in cases where the opportunity to compete on girls' teams is not present, girls with comparable size, strength and skill as the boys they play with and against should be allowed the opportunity to play. In 2001, 1,655 girls played football, 3,023 girls wrestled and 1,610 girls played baseball on boys' high school teams in the United States.
8. Prior to puberty, there are no gender-based physiological reasons to separate males and females in sports competition. However, sex separate programs may be appropriate because of non-gender differences in skill or experience. In many cases, girls have not had the same experience or skill instruction of similarly aged boys. Prior to puberty, boys and girls can and should compete with and against each other. However, competition should be created between teams that are similarly skilled and experienced.

9. Post-puberty, there is no reason for girls not to participate in contact sports with and against other girls. There are now professional full contact football leagues for women such as the National Women's Football League (NWFL) and the International Women's Football League (IWFL). The NWFL just began a full contact football program for high school girls.