

# SHOULD KIDS PLAY (AMERICAN) FOOTBALL?

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*In recent years, Pop Warner, the world's largest youth football organization, has seen its numbers decline. This decline is due to concerns about new research establishing a link between football and chronic traumatic encephalopathy, a debilitating neurodegenerative disease. Hundreds of thousands of parents are now struggling with a difficult ethical issue: should kids play football? Since parents have an obligation to help children develop the capacities required for autonomous choice, the risks posed by football establish a strong presumption against allowing kids to play the game. I consider whether this presumption can be defeated by the arguments for allowing kids to play dangerous sports offered by John Russell in his papers 'The Value of Dangerous Sport' and 'Children and Dangerous Sport and Recreation'. While Russell does not argue that kids should be permitted to play football, and agrees that some sports may be too risky for children, he argues that kids should often be allowed to participate in extraordinarily risky sports. I contend that the reasons given in support of this position fail to defeat the presumption against allowing kids to play football. Thus, in the absence of further argument, or radical changes to the game, children should not play football.*

KEYWORDS: children; football; dangerous sport; chronic traumatic encephalopathy

## 1. Introduction

Football is America's most popular sport.<sup>1</sup> It is, for example, the most watched sport in the United States by a large margin (Thompson 2014). And, with over one million participants, more high school kids play football than any other sport (National Federation of State and High School Associations 2013–14 High School Athletics Participation Survey). In recent years, however, Pop Warner, the largest youth football organization in the world, has seen its numbers steadily decline (Fainaru and Fainaru-Wada 2013).<sup>2</sup> This decline is due

primarily to increasing concerns about head injuries in football. Hundreds of thousands of parents, myself included, are now struggling with a difficult ethical issue: should kids play football? This is the general question I wish to address in this essay. In what follows, although I focus on football, the discussion has obvious implications for other contact or collision sports, including hockey, boxing, and mixed martial arts.

There are compelling arguments on both sides of the debate over whether kids should play football. Football is an inherently dangerous sport. That is not news, of course. What is news, however, is that the concussive and subconcussive blows to the head football players routinely sustain are not the sort of transient and relatively benign injury they are commonly believed to be. A growing body of research suggests that repeated concussions and subconcussive impacts trigger a progressive degenerative brain disease, known as *chronic traumatic encephalopathy*, or CTE. Football now appears to be too dangerous a game for children to play. This position has widespread support among a large and diverse base of sport fans, commentators and athletes. For example, renowned sportscaster Bob Costas would not let his son play football (Mandell 2013). NBA superstar LeBron James won't let his sons play football (DeLessio 2014). And many present and future NFL hall of famers, including Troy Aikman, Terry Bradshaw, Drew Brees, Brett Favre, Adrien Peterson, and Kurt Warner have also stated that they would not let their sons play football (DeLessio 2014). Even President Barak Obama has weighed in on the matter, stating that if he had a son, he would not let him play football (DeLessio 2014).

The argument against allowing children to play football is countered, however, with a seemingly plausible argument for the opposing view. Empirical research indicates that permitting children to engage in dangerous or risky forms of play is essential to their optimal development (Brussoni et al. 2012). For example, dangerous sport and play helps children to learn important risk assessment and management skills. It also promotes the cultivation of virtues such as courage, perseverance, and resilience. Moreover, philosopher John Russell (2005, 2007) argues that participating in dangerous sport and recreation allows children to realize an important value he calls 'self-affirmation'.<sup>3</sup> So allowing children to play dangerous sports like football helps them to develop important skills and virtues, and to test their limits and thereby affirm who and what they are.

Those who argue against allowing children to play football would not of course deny that exposing children to risk ought to be tolerated to some degree, given its importance to the realization of developmental and other goods. So I take it that both sides of the debate would agree that we should allow children to take risks, within limits. The question is whether football falls within those limits. In other words, what is at issue is whether football

constitutes an appropriate or reasonable risk. By a 'reasonable risk', I mean a risk that is reasonable or justified, from a moral point of view, for a parent to allow her child to take. In what follows, then, I want to explore specifically the question whether it is reasonable for parents to allow their children to play football.

Toward this end, I begin by laying out the argument against allowing children to play football sketched above. This will involve consideration of the various harms associated with football, with a particular emphasis on recent research regarding the dangers of concussions and subconcussive blows. This argument establishes a strong presumption against allowing children to play football. I then consider whether there are any opposing arguments that defeat it. I focus in particular on the arguments considered or offered by John Russell (2005, 2007) in his papers, 'The Value of Dangerous Sport', and 'Children and Dangerous Sport and Recreation'. Russell claims that the conflict between the two general positions sketched above poses 'a genuine moral dilemma' (2007, 177, 185). He argues, however, that the conflict 'should frequently be resolved in favor of promoting self-affirmation', that is, in favor of allowing kids to participate in dangerous self-affirming activities (2007, 177). I contend that the reasons Russell provides for resolving the conflict in favor of promoting self-affirmation fail to show that children ought to be allowed to play football. To be clear, I do not deny that dangerous sports in general are self-affirming in the way Russell describes. Nor do I deny that, in some cases at least, the decision to allow children to participate in such activities is reasonable. What I deny is that the reasons provided suffice to show that the decision to allow one's child to play football, in particular, is reasonable. It is important to note that my conclusion is consistent with, and perhaps even implied by, Russell's all-things-considered position. For while he argues that children often should be allowed to engage in very dangerous sport and recreation, he acknowledges that some sports – full-contact hockey, for instance – may be unacceptably risky for children below a certain age. Since football involves potential harms at least as serious as those posed by hockey, Russell's overall position would seem to support my conclusion that children should not be permitted to play football.

## 2. The Argument Against Allowing Kids to Play Football

When you get into football, you think about hurting your knees, your back, even your neck. But your brain, man, no. We didn't think about that. I didn't sign up for that. (Leonard Marshall, former New York Giants defensive end)

Football is a dangerous sport. In fact, it is the most dangerous of all team sports. We all know that football puts one at risk of a number of different

injuries, commonly including cuts, bruises, broken bones, torn ligaments and, in very rare instances, death.<sup>4</sup> There are also familiar long-term problems associated with playing the sport. Former NFL players frequently suffer from depression compounded by excruciating pain due to degenerative arthritis in knees, hips, and backs. The individual stories of former professionals suffering from these issues, and others, are documented in a Sports Illustrated article descriptively titled: 'The Wrecking Yard As They Limp Into The Sunset, Retired NFL Players Struggle With the Game's Grim Legacy: A Lifetime of Disability and Pain' (Nack 2001; See also Schwenk et al. 2007). What has been much less recognized until recently, however, is just *how* dangerous football is.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that there are close to four million sport and recreation-related concussions every year (Cantu and Hyman 2012, 2). Athletes under twenty years of age sustain the majority of sport-related head injuries (Purcell and Carson 2008, 106). And football, of all sports, puts one at the greatest risk of concussion (Daniel et al. 2012), with up to twenty percent of high school football players sustaining a concussion each year (Guskiewicz et al. 2003).

Concussions have a number of familiar symptoms that present problems for children. These include headaches, dizziness, confusion, amnesia, and depression. In most cases, these symptoms are temporary and short-lived, resolving within one to two weeks. However, football players who sustain one concussion are four to six times more likely to suffer a second concussion than athletes with no prior concussion (Iverson et al. 2004). Studies show that young athletes who have sustained two or more concussions suffer from 'subtle yet significant prolonged neuropsychological effects' that impair social and intellectual development (Moser, Schatz, and Jordan 2005). Moreover, children who have suffered one concussion are at increased risk of *second impact syndrome*, or SIS. SIS 'causes severe and irreversible brain damage' and 'is fatal in up to half the individuals who suffer from it' (Moser 2012, 9). Those who do survive are usually seriously disabled (Cantu and Hyman 2012, 83). Fortunately, SIS is as rare as it is serious.<sup>5</sup>

More alarming is the emerging literature on subconcussive blows and brain trauma. One very recent study suggests that sustaining head impacts in football prior to age twelve may increase the risk of cognitive impairment later in life (Stamm et al. 2015). The greatest cause for concern, however, is the increasingly large number of studies suggesting that the hundreds and thousands of subconcussive hits football players experience in the ordinary course of play can trigger debilitating neurodegenerative disease (See, e.g. McKee et al. 2012; Kirk 2013). The link between repeated concussive and subconcussive blows and brain damage has been known since at least 1928, when doctor Harrison Martland observed symptoms of neurological disease in boxers. Dr Martland (1928) noted that the repeated blows to the head sustained by

boxers caused a condition that has come to be known as punch-drunk syndrome. In the early 2000s, researchers began to take note of former professional football players who were showing similar symptoms of brain damage. By 2005, neuropathologist Bennet Omalu discovered the first case of what he called *chronic traumatic encephalopathy*, or CTE, in a former professional football player. CTE is:

a progressive degenerative disease of the brain found in athletes (and others) with a history of repetitive brain trauma, including symptomatic concussions as well as asymptomatic subconcussive hits to the head. ... This trauma triggers progressive degeneration of the brain tissue. ... The brain degeneration is associated with memory loss, confusion, impaired judgment, impulse control problems, aggression, depression, and, eventually, progressive dementia. (Boston University CTE Center 2015b).

Since that first case, evidence of CTE has been confirmed in seventy-six of the seventy-nine former professional football players who have been examined after death (Breslow 2014).<sup>6</sup> The NFL now acknowledges that nearly thirty percent of players will suffer serious brain trauma during their careers (Belson 2014). Recent cases indicate, moreover, that CTE does not only affect older professional athletes. Autopsies performed on former college and high school football players have revealed early signs of CTE (Swartz 2010; Boston University CTE Center 2015a).

In light of these studies, various steps have been taken to try to make football safer. There are now strict 'return to play' protocols, at all levels of the sport, for athletes suspected of having suffered a concussion. Helmet-to-helmet hits have been banned. And limits have been placed on the number of full-contact practices teams are allowed. For example, Pop Warner has instituted rule changes to its youth football programs that limit contact to no more than one-third of practice time. Pop Warner has also recently partnered with the NFL to adopt USA Football's 'Heads Up Football' Program. This program claims to provide

a better, safer way to teach and play the game. It makes the game safer by teaching players to keep their heads up and out of the line of contact, training and certifying coaches on the fundamentals of safety, appointing Player Safety Coaches for every youth league to enforce safety protocols, ensuring proper equipment fitting, and teaching coaches, parents and players how to recognize and treat a concussion under protocols from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (Goodell and Butler 2013)

However, while these improvements may help to reduce the risk of concussion and SIS, there is no evidence to suggest that the steps taken will reduce the risk of developing neurodegenerative disease. A recent study of

high school football shows that players averaged 774 subconcussive impacts per season, with some players experiencing over 1000 (Broglia et al. 2013). Reducing contact to one practice (of 4) per week resulted in a less than eighteen percent decrease in impacts, with the typical player still experiencing well over 600 subconcussive blows to the head per season. Eliminating all contact in practices further reduced the number of impacts per season by thirty-nine percent. Still, players averaged over 450 subconcussive blows to the head per season. Similar studies of youth football show an average of 240 impacts per season for nine- to twelve-year-olds (Cobb et al. 2013), and 107 impacts per season for seven- to eight-year-olds (Daniel et al. 2012). Limiting contact to no more than one-third of weekly practice time for nine- to twelve-year-olds resulted in an average of thirty-seven to forty-six percent fewer impacts. It is important to note, however, that these players will still sustain an average of 130 to 151 subconcussive blows to the head per season. If CTE is triggered by an accumulation of subconcussive hits, as the evidence suggests, then there clearly remains much cause for concern. Further research is needed to show whether these reductions in head impacts will have any effect on reducing players' risk of developing neurodegenerative disease.<sup>7</sup>

Any plausible normative theory will recognize that parents have an obligation to promote their child's well-being. While the precise content of this obligation is perhaps not entirely clear and a matter of some debate, it is safe to say that it involves the obligation to help our children to develop the skills and capacities they will require as adults in order to make autonomous choices. It follows from this that parents have a *prima facie* obligation to prevent their children from engaging in activities that threaten the acquisition of these skills and capacities. In light of the evidence considered above, evidence which establishes a clear link between football and neurological disease, participation in football poses a serious risk of impairing or preventing altogether the development of the skills and capacities required for autonomous choice. More generally, since playing football may cause serious neurological damage, it clearly threatens to undermine children's long-term well-being. Hence, it follows that parents have a *prima facie* obligation to prohibit their children's participation in football; the decision to allow one's child to play football therefore appears to be unreasonable.

Pop Warner football currently allows children as young as five years old to begin playing (organized tackle) football. The argument just given implies that kids should not begin playing football until they are much older. How much older is not entirely clear. The current body of research does not establish any particular age at which it is safe to begin playing football. Experts agree that the developing brains of children and adolescents are significantly more vulnerable to trauma than adult brains. Dr Robert Cantu, of the Boston University CTE Center, therefore recommends that 'nobody under the age of

14 be involved in collision sports' (WCVB.com 2011). Neuropathologist Dr Bennet Omalu, who discovered the first case of CTE in a former professional football player, goes a few steps further: 'There is no reason, no medical justification, for any child younger than 18 to play football, period' (Walsh 2011). Nicholas Dixon's (2001) arguments against boxing could be deployed to support the view that no one – child or adult – should be permitted to play football, given the risks to one's autonomy (See, e.g. Sailors 2015). This latter position is perhaps too extreme, given our liberal presumption in favor of allowing competent adults to do more or less as they wish insofar as their actions are 'self-regarding'. There is broad agreement that the justification for paternalistic interferences to protect children from risky behavior decreases as their capacity to make informed decisions increases. It seems reasonable to hold, then, that youth should not be permitted to play football until they are competent to provide informed consent.

Laws governing adolescents and informed consent are varied and complex. In medical contexts, there is a general presumption that youth have the requisite decision-making capacities by age sixteen. It is also acknowledged, however, that some younger children may be sufficiently mature to provide informed consent.<sup>8</sup> Due to concerns about increased susceptibility to injury, USA Hockey and Hockey Canada have implemented bans on body checking for players below thirteen. At a minimum, Pop Warner should follow suit and ban full-contact football for similarly aged children. The harms associated with football seem sufficiently serious, however, to warrant the more conservative position that children below sixteen should not play tackle football. For that is the age at which we may safely presume that youth can fully appreciate the very serious risks involved and thus make an informed decision about whether to assume those risks.

### 3. Arguments For Allowing Kids to Play Football

The argument considered in the previous section establishes a strong presumption against allowing children to participate in football. Can this presumption be defeated? Are there reasons for allowing children to play football that offset the very serious risks associated with the sport? This section is directed at consideration of these questions.

Many empirical studies suggest that children have a natural inclination toward risky play. One such study notes, for example, that 'children are explorative and both seek and prefer risky play such as physical risk-taking activities and play where the ability to fight and physical strength is tested' (Sandseter 2009, 92). Of course, even if children naturally prefer risky forms of play, it does not follow that parents ought to allow their children to engage in risky or dangerous play. Natural behavior is not necessarily morally permissible behavior.

To defeat the presumption against letting our kids play football, what has to be shown is not merely that children are naturally disposed toward risky play, but that participation in football is valuable for one reason or another, and that this value is sufficient to offset the potential costs. In the discussion below, I draw on empirical research and philosophical argument to outline the various benefits that have been attributed to dangerous play and sport. There is little in the way of research on the specific benefits of football. But since football is a form of dangerous play or sport, it is reasonable to suppose that football provides many of the benefits of dangerous play and sport in general.

So, what are the goods that are realized through dangerous play and sport? To begin, dangerous sports are a kind of sport; hence, dangerous sports provide many of the obvious benefits associated with sports in general. One benefit of children's participation in sport, of course, is improved physical fitness in childhood. Studies have shown, moreover, that these fitness benefits for children can have 'carry over effects, such as better health status in adulthood' (Sandseter 2009, 94). Not surprisingly, participation in sport has also been demonstrated to promote the development of perceptual-motor skills in children (Brussoni et al. 2012, 3136).

It is also commonly thought that participation in sport helps to build moral character by providing opportunities for the development of virtues such as cooperation, respect, fairness, and sportspersonship.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, participation in sport provides obvious opportunities for achievement which, in addition to providing feelings of satisfaction, may be intrinsically valuable and at least partly constitutive of a flourishing life.

However, if there were nothing of value to dangerous sports beyond the value provided by non-dangerous sports, then of course there would be little in the way of justification for allowing children to play a dangerous sport like football. So let's now consider whether there are any distinctive goods that are realized through participation in dangerous sports.

### *3.1. The Common Sense Argument*

One distinctive good is that risky play and sport is something that children often find exciting. For many children, participating in dangerous sport and play is more fun and thrilling than safer forms of sport and play (Sandseter 2009). Of course, although this may be reason enough for many kids to want to engage in risky play, it is clearly not sufficient on its own to justify a parent's decision to allow her child to play dangerous sports.

Philosopher John Russell suggests that '[t]he most direct and compelling argument for including physical risk in a child's environment is that the world is physically dangerous and a child needs to learn to navigate those dangers



as quickly as possible' (2007, 178). The value of risky play to the development of skills required to navigate risk is borne out in numerous empirical studies (Sandseter 2009; Brussoni et al. 2012). Risky play and sport therefore appear to be effective ways of promoting the development of sound risk assessment and management skills that are of obvious benefit to children as they develop into autonomous adults.<sup>10</sup>

In addition to promoting the development of risk management skills, Russell notes that exposure to risk plays an important role in the development of various moral and nonmoral virtues. He suggests, for example, that 'developing capacities for assessing and making decisions about physical risk is fundamental to acquiring the virtue of physical courage or bravery' (2007, 179). And if we think of physical courage along Aristotelian lines, as involving the skill of determining what is too little or too much fear in a given situation, then, Russell contends, this 'will also contribute to the acquisition of a variety of other character virtues, such as moral courage or pride' (2007, 180). Skill at managing one's fear in the face of physical risk may also improve one's ability to manage fear in the face of nonphysical risk. Other virtues that can easily be seen to be promoted through confrontations with physical risk include perseverance, resilience, independence and self-sufficiency (2007, 180).

Following Russell's lead, let's call this the 'common sense view'. In short, this view 'asserts that the presence of some measure of physical risk is essential to the healthy development of a variety of important physical virtues and virtues related to exercising adult capacities for rational agency and choice' (2007, 177). The common sense view seems to provide us with the basis for an argument that might defeat the presumption against allowing children to play football. Call this the 'common sense argument': although football presents risk of serious injury, these risks are offset or overridden by the fact that participation in football helps to develop crucial skills children will need in order to flourish as autonomous adults.

Now, we might well wonder whether the various developmental goods noted by the common sense view are sufficiently weighty to justify a parent's decision to allow her child to play football. But we needn't concern ourselves with how these goods stack up against the harms posed by football. For as Russell (2007, 182–183) himself notes, the common sense view will not justify participation in very dangerous sports like football:

Participating in activities like American football, rugby, hockey, skateboarding, or gymnastics introduces levels of physical risk that are not required to achieve the goods the common sense view seeks. These are unnecessary and indeed reckless, risks from this perspective, because the degree of danger they present is not required for the development of the skills and virtues sought

by the common sense view. Thus, such dangers threaten needlessly to undermine the acquisition of those goods.

The sports mentioned in the quotation above pose what Russell calls 'extraordinary risks, dangers, or threats' (2007, 183). The extraordinary risks include death, paralysis, and serious head trauma. Russell's point is that participating in sports that pose such risks is not only unnecessary for the development of the goods sought by the common sense view; participating in these sports may threaten the very development of these goods, given the extraordinary risks involved. Repeated concussions and subconcussive hits, for instance, may clearly undermine a child's ability to make rational decisions, and thereby undermine the child's ability to effectively manage risk and to acquire such virtues as physical and moral courage, independence, and self-sufficiency. Given this, it seems we may safely conclude that the 'common sense argument' is not sufficient to defeat the presumption against the decision to allow one's child to play football.

### 3.2. *The Uncommon Sense Argument*

Russell proposes, however, another line of argument that might succeed where the previous argument failed. This argument is based on what he calls the 'uncommon sense view'. This view 'asserts that at a certain point in child development physical risks should be tolerated, and children's choices (and adults' choices on their behalf) to engage in them should frequently be respected, even if the risks of such activities are greater than necessary to promote the developmental goods sought by the common sense view - and thus represent unnecessary threats to the goods the common sense view aims at securing' (2007, 177). Russell contends that the decision to engage in activities that pose extraordinary risks ought frequently to be respected, because there is a distinctive kind of value associated with these activities - namely the value of *self-affirmation*: 'extreme sports like [football], boxing, aerial trapeze walking and mountain climbing have special value because they challenge us to push the boundaries of who we are by extending in certain ways the physical, emotional, and intellectual limits of our finite, embodied selves. Thus, in an important sense, we learn and affirm who and what we are when we confront and extend the limits of our being' (2007, 181).

Russell notes that '[t]he pursuit of self-affirmation is not about ensuring that individuals have basic skills and virtues necessary to pursue human flourishing, it is about achieving flourishing by pressing individual boundaries and thus defining new self-understandings and conceptions of the self' (2007, 182). So what, then, is self-affirmation? Russell (2005, 15) explains this concept as follows:

what I have described as self-affirmation obviously has a close connection to ideals of self-realization. There are of course many different accounts of self-realization, but a dominant theme sees self-realization as a perfectionist idea involving the realization of distinctive human capacities. The classic view has Aristotelian and Platonist origins ... There is no direct suggestion here that self-realization requires a testing and pressing of the very limits of the person. But ... an important type of self-realization requires confrontation with, and an attempt to surpass, the apparent limits of oneself. I have characterized this as a type of self-affirmation. In reaching and attempting to surpass our limits, we inevitably confront what we are. In doing so we affirm or declare to ourselves who we are and what we are striving to make of ourselves.

The 'uncommon sense view' provides us with the basis of a perhaps more persuasive argument against the presumption that parents should not allow their children to play football. Let's call this the 'uncommon sense argument': although football presents risk of serious injury, these risks are, or at least can be, offset or overridden by the fact that participation in football provides children with valuable opportunities for self-affirmation – opportunities to challenge their limitations and in the process discover who and what they are.

Russell contends that 'dangerous sport, in its best exemplars ... provides one avenue for such self-affirmation by challenging one's whole self at the limits of one's being' (2005, 15). While this certainly seems true, it does not seem to be the case that participation in football or the other kinds of sports that pose 'extraordinary risks' are the *only* avenue to self-affirmation. If there are safer sports that provide similarly good opportunities for self-affirmation, then it would seem that insofar as self-affirmation is the aim, the more reasonable choice is to affirm oneself through these safer sports.

Now, if self-affirmation is just a matter of pushing the physical and psychological boundaries of oneself, then there do in fact seem to be much safer ways of affirming oneself. Consider competitive running, for example.<sup>11</sup> It is certainly true that runners push their boundaries of physical and psychological endurance. Consider also sports like tennis and basketball. Participants in these sports also seem to push their physical and psychological limits in obvious ways. Indeed, it is not hard to think of many sports much safer than football that provide excellent opportunities for self-affirmation.

Russell would not take issue with my point in the previous paragraph: that there are many relatively safe (or safer) sports that provide opportunities for self-affirmation. Indeed, Russell (2007, 182) notes that

self-affirmation is not limited to dangerous sport ... It is a familiar feature of human striving and endeavor in essentially all aspects of human activity, in the arts and sciences in the broadest sense, and in sport and physical recreation as well.

But what Russell seems to be arguing for is a distinctive kind of self-affirmation that is available through participation in extremely risky sports, but not available through safer sports, such as competitive running, tennis, or basketball. He states, for example, that:

[d]angerous sport in its best exemplars, *particularly those in which substantial bodily danger is an immediate and ever-present risk*, represents an opportunity for confronting and pressing beyond certain apparent limits of personal, and indeed human, physical and psychological capacities in ways not afforded by other normally available human activity. (2005, 2. Italics are mine.)

Thus, while we can test and push our physical and psychological limits in familiar ways in a sport like competitive running, we are not, as Russell adds elsewhere (2005, 14), challenged ‘to preserve ourselves physically while devising and willing action to overcome dangerous obstacles that would not, or should not, be present in ordinary life’. Nor are we ‘confronting serious physical danger through our own choice and actions’. This seems true. If it is, then mountain biking, mountain climbing and perhaps even football might be good avenues for realizing the distinctive kind of self-affirmation Russell has in mind.

The question we are now faced with is whether whatever self-affirming value one can acquire not just through competitive running, for instance, but by exposing oneself to risk of very serious physical harm, is sufficient to justify exposure to that risk. That is, suppose I am right that competitive running, tennis, and basketball push our physical and psychological boundaries and are thus self-affirming in one sense, but perhaps not self-affirming in the way that football or mountain climbing are. Is the missing value important enough to justify the increased risk of very serious harm – risks that threaten the very acquisition of the developmental goods mentioned earlier and, I would add, may inhibit the ability of the child to engage in these safer self-affirming sports?

At first glance, it would seem not. For, as Russell acknowledges, ‘these risks must be examined against a long tradition of paternalism in dealing with incompetent persons, and children in particular, which holds that we are entitled to interfere with incompetent individuals for their own good, especially if their behavior poses an unnecessary danger to themselves’ (2007, 183). Russell suggests that this is a form of what’s commonly referred to as ‘weak or soft paternalism’. And ‘[a] principled application of weak paternalism’, he observes, ‘would prohibit children’s access to many dangerous sports until they were capable of making autonomous decisions to participate in these activities (i.e., until they were competent adult decision-makers)’ (2007, 183).

Note that the reasoning here is a close relative of the argument against allowing children to play football presented in Section 2. Russell (2007, 185) clearly recognizes the pull of this line of argument and therefore holds that dangerous self-affirming activities can pose the following moral dilemma:

On the one hand, ... we have special fiduciary obligations to do the most we can to raise children into autonomous, healthy, well-functioning adult members of society. On the other hand, it is reasonable to think that children's self-affirming behaviors will sometimes pose extraordinary risks to accomplishing these goals.

The correct resolution to this dilemma, Russell argues, is that we should often, if not always, respect the child's and parents' decisions to engage in extremely dangerous self-affirming sports. He provides two main reasons in support of this claim. The first is that the dangerous activity 'is something that he [one's child] believes is worth doing, is important to him, and he loves doing it' (2007, 186). The second and 'deeper' reason is that the opportunity to realize the distinctive value of physically self-affirming behavior is often available only or mainly in childhood (2007, 187).<sup>12</sup> I believe, however, that although the two reasons provided may be sufficient to justify a parent's decision to allow her child to play some dangerous sports, they are not sufficient to justify the decision to allow one's child to play football. Let me consider each of these reasons in turn.

Russell (2007, 186) argues that 'respect for a child's interest in self-affirming behavior plays a key independent, and often determining, role in the acceptance of some risky behavior'. How strong a reason this provides, however, clearly depends on the child's age. The younger the child is, the more unsettled and malleable his or her preferences and values are. So, we should not put too much weight on the fact that a seven-year-old, for instance, wants to play football. Things are different in the case of adolescents who want to play football. Since they are likely to have more settled and informed views of what they want and value, then more weight ought to be given to their preferences. But we must be careful here for the following reason.

There are familiar objections to desire-satisfaction theories of well-being that call for a cautious approach to how much weight we place on our children's preferences, and on people's preferences in general. One problem is that a person's desires may be based on false beliefs, or a failure to appreciate the truth. Suppose, for example, a child's desire to play football is based in part on the mistaken belief that football is a safe sport. Or perhaps he is aware of the risks, but at his young age, is unable to fully appreciate the possible long-term consequences of fulfilling his desire to play football. Then his desire to play football would merit little weight. Consider also desires based on immoral motivations or mistaken values. For example, suppose a boy desires to hurt people and therefore wants to play football because it provides him with opportunities to do this. Or suppose he wants to play football because he attaches excessive value to fame and fortune. In each of these cases, it seems clear that I ought not to put much weight on his desire to play football.

Finally, consider harmful desires. Suppose a child is filled with self-loathing and desires to play football because it will provide him with opportunities to hurt himself. Then, in this case as in the others, the child's desire to play football is deserving of little weight.

So while I believe Russell is correct that a child's belief that playing a dangerous sport is important or worthwhile might provide *some* reason for allowing him to play the sport, it is not necessarily a very good reason. We must ask *why* the child believes it is important or worthwhile. As noted above, children may value football for the wrong sorts of reasons and, hence, their desire to play the game will merit little consideration. However, if children value football for what we might call 'the right sorts of reasons' – e.g., it's a complex game of physical and psychological skill that promotes physical fitness and pushes one's boundaries – then their desire to play the game carries greater weight. But it remains far from clear that this desire constitutes a *determining* reason for letting them play football. A child may have good reasons for wanting to play football, but might still lack the capacity to fully appreciate the risks involved and thus make an informed decision.

Let's turn now to the second reason Russell cites in support of allowing children to participate in forms of sport and play that pose extraordinary risks. Russell (2007, 187) argues that

There is a deeper reason that weighs in favor of permitting children's participation in such dangerous activities ... It is suggested by Gareth Matthew's remarks that there are goods that can only, or perhaps only reasonably, be achieved in childhood. This is particularly true of participation in many sports and physical recreations. The fact of the matter, and it is a regrettable one, is that the goods of much physically self-affirming behavior are often only, or best, available to children. Given our biological make-up, there is limited opportunity to develop and acquire many athletic skills. That opportunity almost always begins before adolescence. Indeed, by the time adulthood is reached, the capacity to acquire and practice certain physical skills is often diminished or even eliminated altogether.

While Russell is correct that many dangerous sports provide time-limited opportunities for self-affirmation (skateboarding and freestyle skiing come to mind), it does not seem that football is one of those sports. It is true that most college and professional football players began playing the game in their youth, but this is certainly not necessary. Former Chief's Pro Bowl running back Christian Okoye, for example, excelled in track and field and did not play football until college. All-Pro tight end Jimmy Graham played four years of college basketball, and just one year of college football. Denver Broncos tight end Julius Thomas took a similar path to the NFL; he went to college on a basketball scholarship and did not play football until his fifth year of college. NFL

analyst Akbar Gbajabiamila (2013), a former professional football player who first played the game in his senior year in high school, discusses other cases in a recent article entitled, 'Ezekiel Ansah, Margus Hunt Show Youth Can Wait to Start Football'. Gbajabiamila notes that defensive ends Ansah, a 2013 first round pick by the Detroit Lions, and Hunt, a 2013 second round pick by the Cincinnati Bengals, did not start playing football until their college years. Ansah spent his youth playing soccer and basketball, while Hunt competed in track and field. These are just a few of the many examples that suggest that football skills can in fact be acquired well after adolescence. Provided that one has acquired athletic skills more generally – speed, strength, agility, for example – in one's youth, the skills required for success in football can be acquired rather late in life. Indeed, Gbajabiamila suggests that Hunt and Ansah 'just might help redefine the starting age for playing youth football'. He adds that '[w]hen scouts see such undeveloped talent [as that possessed by Ansah and Hunt], they trust that coaches can "train up" the athlete and turn him into an impact player. Ask any scout or coach and they'll say you can teach technique, but you can't teach athleticism. A player who gets a later start to the game lacks bad habits and has a beginner's mind, making him very coachable'. If this is true, participation in tackle football could be delayed until children are older and hence in a better position to give informed consent, without thereby depriving them of a time-limited opportunity for self-affirmation.<sup>13</sup>

It is important to add that even if prohibiting children from playing football did in fact deny them of one time-limited opportunity for self-affirmation, there are other dangerous sports, such as skateboarding and free-style skiing, that provide opportunities for self-affirmation that children may reasonably be permitted to play or pursue.<sup>14</sup> There are, moreover, opportunities for self-affirmation later in life through participation in dangerous sports like mountain climbing and mountain biking, for example. The opportunities for self-affirmation provided by these sports do not seem to be time-limited, for one can develop the skills required for competence and even excellence in mountain climbing and mountain biking well after adolescence. So, it seems we can safely conclude that the deeper reason for allowing children to participate in dangerous sports does not show that it is reasonable to allow children to play football.

#### 4. Conclusion

Parents have an obligation to promote their children's well-being. This includes the obligation to help children develop the skills and capacities they will require as adults in order to make autonomous choices. Since football continues to pose a serious threat to the acquisition of these skills and capacities,

despite efforts to make the sport safer, there is a strong presumption against allowing children to play football. The burden of proof therefore lies with those who would argue that it is reasonable to allow children to play football. The arguments considered in this article, I believe, are not strong enough to shoulder this burden. Perhaps they show that it is reasonable for children to participate in some dangerous sports. They fall short, however, of demonstrating that it is reasonable of parents to let their children play football for several reasons. Principal among these is that there are safer sports that provide excellent opportunities for children to realize the various goods afforded through participation in football. To be sure, there may be a distinctive kind of self-affirmation particular to participation in very dangerous sports and activities. However, as I have argued, preventing children from playing football would not prevent them from realizing this distinctive value through other dangerous sports or at a later point in life. And even if this were not the case, more argument is needed to show that this distinctive kind of self-affirmation is valuable enough to offset the risk of very serious harm to children who play football. Thus, in the absence of further argument, or more radical changes to the game, children should not play football.<sup>15</sup>

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### **Notes**

1. By football, I mean organized tackle football.
2. Between 2010 and 2012, participation dropped 9.5%, from 248,899 to 225,287 players.
3. Howe (2008) makes a similar point about the value of risky remote sports.
4. In 2013, eight high school football players died as a direct result of their participation in football (Kucera et al. 2014).
5. Seventeen deaths related to SIS were reported between 1992 and 1997 (Iverson et al. 2004).
6. Currently, CTE can only be diagnosed post-mortem. The rates of CTE among living past and present professional football players are unknown.



7. Broglio et al. (2013) raise the additional concern that limiting contact in practice may increase the likelihood of other injuries, due to 'decreased athletic skill set'.
8. See, e.g. *Gillick v West Norfolk and Wisbech Area Health Authority* and discussion of the 'mature minor doctrine' in Coleman and Rosoff (2013).
9. See, e.g. Simon (2003) for an excellent discussion of sport and moral education. Beller and Stoll (1995) challenge the claim that sport builds character.
10. It is worth noting that not all forms of risky sport seem equally good at promoting the development of risk management skills. Mountain climbing and mountain biking seem to be particularly good examples, whereas football may be a poor example. The mountain climber must assess risk and decide whether to put his hand here, or his foot there. The mountain biker must choose whether to roll over or around this rock or log. But football players cannot choose to avoid many of the most dangerous obstacles they face. An offensive lineman cannot run away from or around his defensive opponent. A receiver cannot miss the pass in order to avoid a brutally hard hit from the charging cornerback. The smaller safety cannot avoid the much larger full-back about to run through him. Indeed, as one anonymous referee put it, 'what it takes to be very good at football may be disregarding concerns for one's safety - which might make one worse at risk-assessment in general'.
11. I owe this example to my colleague, Doran Smolkin.
12. Russell is here providing general reasons or principles for allowing kids to participate in very dangerous sports. He does not claim, however, that the reasons provided justify participation in any and all dangerous sports. As noted earlier, he acknowledges that some sports may be unacceptably risky for children.
13. One may object that these examples are rare exceptions to the rule that success in football later in life generally requires that one begin playing the game early in life. This is an empirical claim, however, which is not obviously true. As noted, while most college and professional football players do in fact get an early start, this does not show that an early start is generally necessary. Indeed, the examples given provide good reason for being skeptical about the necessity of an early start to the game. As Gbajabiamila suggests, the cases of Ansah and Hunt lend support to the view that kids can wait to play (tackle) football.
14. The argument provided in Section 2 is directed against football, in particular. This argument raises obvious concerns about other dangerous sports in which repeated concussive or subconcussive blows are essential to, or a direct consequence of, participation in the sport (e.g., boxing, mixed martial arts). However, the argument leaves open the question whether children's participation in other dangerous sports is reasonable.

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