

Americans love football, but differ on whether kids should play

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Football may be America's most popular sport, but the nation is deeply divided about whether youth should play the tackle version of the game. In a new study, about 45% of Americans agreed that tackle football is

appropriate for kids, while 50% disagreed. The remainder didn't know.

The findings come as participation in youth tackle has declined with growing concern about the effects of concussions on young brains, said Mariah Warner, lead author of the study and a doctoral student in sociology at The Ohio State University.

"We found that tackle football for kids has become a contentious issue in the United States," Warner said. "Football may still be very popular overall, but many people don't think it is appropriate for kids, most likely because of safety issues."

But support for and opposition to kids playing tackle football isn't evenly divided among all segments of society, the study showed. Factors such as race and ethnicity, gender, belief in traditional values, [socioeconomic status](#), [family history](#) and the community people grow up in all were linked to how Americans viewed [youth football](#).

"A lot of social and [psychological factors](#) shape our perceptions of whether kids should be hitting and tackling each other on the football field," said study co-author Chris Knoester, professor of sociology at Ohio State. "But it seems that Americans are now more wary than supportive of youth tackle football."

The study was published recently in the journal *Social Currents*.

Survey data came from the National Sports and Society Survey (NSASS), sponsored by Ohio State's Sports and Society Initiative. The survey was completed by 3,993 adults who volunteered to participate through the American Population Panel, run by Ohio State's Center for Human Resource Research. Participants, who live in all 50 states, answered the survey online between the fall of 2018 and spring of 2019. Because NSASS participants are disproportionately female, white and

Midwestern, the researchers weighted the [survey results](#) to reflect the U.S. population more accurately.

Participants were asked to rate on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree) the statement "Tackle football is an appropriate sport for kids to play."

The issue divided Americans by race and class, results showed.

Black Americans and those with no more than a [high school education](#) were not as negative about tackle football for kids as were white people and the college educated. Higher-income adults were more likely to not support youth football.

"For less-advantaged people, football is seen as one of the only ways they can get ahead in society, which may explain why they support it for kids," Warner said. "It's a way to get to college and maybe even play as a professional. They want to give their children that opportunity."

Men and heterosexuals were more likely to think youth football was appropriate, as were people with more traditionalist values: those who identified as more conservative, who believed in [traditional gender roles](#), who especially perceived [female athletes](#) to be inferior to male athletes, who thought playing sports was part of being an American and those who said they were Christian all were more likely to support kids playing tackle football.

Beliefs about the value of sports participation played a role, results showed. Those who agreed that sports build character and that collision sports had health benefits were more supportive. Support for youth football is tied to people's formative experiences growing up, Knoester said, including whether participants themselves played and whether their parents or friends were fans.

Where people lived was also a key: People in rural areas were more supportive than those in the suburbs. And the odds of strongly endorsing kids playing tackle football were 27% to 39% higher for adults from the Midwest and South compared to those from adults living in the West.

"Being immersed in football cultures—whether it is your family, your friends, your community—played a major role in your beliefs about kids and football," Knoester said.

This study didn't specify the ages for youth football, but other evidence suggests Americans are much more concerned with kids under 13 playing football than those in high school, he said. The largest decrease in tackle football participation has been among children ages six to 12, who showed more than a 20% decline from 2008 to 2018, according to one study.

"We are learning more all the time about how the earlier in life that kids get head injuries, the more serious the health effects," Warner said.

"That may be one reason why so many Americans are wary about kids playing tackle football."

One result of Americans' changing attitudes could be that youth football may increasingly become a sport played mostly by people from lower-income families and racial and ethnic minorities, Knoester said.

Other changes may be ahead for youth football as people's views evolve, he said. "Football's popularity was created by people—that means we can change it," Knoester said. "We have seen the decline in sports like boxing when people's views change. That could happen with youth football."

More information: Mariah K. Warner et al, When Kids Hitting Each Other Is Okay: Examining U.S. Adult Support for Youth Tackle Football, *Social Currents* (2022). [DOI: 10.1177/23294965221074017](https://doi.org/10.1177/23294965221074017)

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