



Youth Helmet Football Standard: Research and Development Update

NOCSAE Football Standard Helmet Overview

NOCSAE has one football helmet standard that applies to helmets of all sizes, worn by players of all sizes from youth to adult. NOCSAE standards use variable-mass biofidelic headforms to account for different sized players. Helmets that are small enough to be worn by youth players are required to be tested on a headform that replicates a 50th percentile 10-year-old male. As helmet sizes get larger, headforms with more mass are used in the testing protocol. The NOCSAE small headform was first developed in 1980 and has been part of the NOCSAE football helmet standard for over thirty years.

For more than 10 years, NOCSAE has been researching the science necessary to support a separate standard for helmets designed for youth. Today, NOCSAE continues to prioritize this issue and is the only standards organization actively pursuing a youth football helmet standard through research grants and contract funding. At present, there is insufficient data to suggest a specific performance criteria that would provide more injury protection, or would protect against injury risks not already addressed.

Scientific Advisory Committee

In June 2017, NOCSAE convened a Scientific Advisory Committee (SAC) to explore the latest scientific support for a youth football helmet standard. This is the third time NOCSAE has convened leading experts in science and medicine to explore this issue since 2011. The SAC includes scientists, physicians, experts in sports equipment testing organizations and other interested parties.

Frequently Asked Questions

Does NOCSAE use an adult football helmet standard for youth players?

No, this is a misperception and misrepresentation of the NOCSAE football helmet standard. NOCSAE does not have an adult or a youth football helmet standard. NOCSAE has one football helmet standard that applies to helmets of all sizes, worn by players of all sizes from youth to adult.

How does one standard apply to youth and adult players?

NOCSAE standards use variable-mass biofidelic headforms to account for different-sized players. Helmets that are small enough to be worn by youth players are required to be tested on a headform that replicates a 50th percentile 10-year-old male. As helmet sizes get larger, headforms with more mass are used in the testing protocol. NOCSAE was a pioneer in the use of variable mass headforms designed to represent different-sized players. The NOCSAE small headform was first developed in 1980. It was tested, evaluated and validated by independent labs and incorporated into NOCSAE standards by 1987.

Is NOCSAE developing a separate youth helmet standard?

For more than ten years, NOCSAE has been researching the potential benefits of creating a separate standard for helmets designed for youth. Today, NOCSAE continues to prioritize this issue and is the only standards organization actively pursuing a youth helmet standard through research grants and contract funding. Currently, there is no scientific data to justify a different level of protection for youth. NOCSAE will not develop a standard without solid science from which we can conclude that taking an action such as limiting helmet mass will not present an increased risk of injury or otherwise prohibit the helmet from effectively addressing rotational acceleration-induced injuries.

The objective of the SAC is to evaluate the latest scientific research relevant to youth helmets, identify areas where additional research is needed, and share professional insights on the potential criteria for youth helmet standard.

Coming out of the June 2017 meeting, NOCSAE authorized funding for two new research initiatives to explore potential criteria for a youth helmet football standard. Virginia Tech is leading one of the research programs to collect biomechanical and clinical data directly from youth football players using helmets instrumented with helmet-mounted accelerometers arrays (HITS) and video capture/analysis. The second research program is being conducted by the Neurotrauma Impact Science Laboratory at the University of Ottawa, Ontario, Canada to investigate potential test parameters for a youth football helmet standard based on observed youth football impact dynamics.

The research programs aim to do the following:

1 Research initiatives to inform the development of a youth football helmet standard.

Abstract: This research aims to inform the development of a youth football helmet standard by quantifying the biomechanics of concussion in youth football players, matching on-field impact velocities with resulting head accelerations, and relating on-field measures to the proposed pneumatic ram test method. Youth football teams are currently being studied at Virginia Tech and this research will develop data from those teams using in helmet accelerometers as well as video from multi-camera arrays to calculate and verify player and helmet impact velocities.

(1-SAC-2017)

2 Establish test parameters for youth American football helmets informed by injury surveillance.

Abstract: Develop data from biomechanical analysis of youth head impacts in American football to inform the development of a youth football helmet standard. Head impact events from sixty youth football games will be analyzed, documented and reconstructed using FEM for concussive and non-concussive impacts to establish youth specific risk curves for peak linear accelerations to develop an impact protocol specific to youth players age 14 and under. Video analysis will identify the most common injury mechanisms, levels of impact parameters (velocity, mass, location, compliance) relevant to causing injury, and quantify head dynamic and brain tissue response associated with injury.

(2-SAC-2017)

Next Steps

Interim findings from the two research projects described above were shared at the NOCSAE Winter Standards Meeting in January 2018. Both research programs are expected to conclude by June 2019. Once completed, the SAC will reconvene to evaluate the findings and determine whether any additional data is needed, and will make any additional recommendations to the Standards Committee.