

Expert calls for ban on school rugby

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Cape Town - A leading South African sports scientist has called for a ban on pre-primary and primary school rugby, arguing that early exposure to the sport can harm children emotionally.

Professor Cilas Wilders, a bio-kineticist at North West University, has been conducting observational research on children who play this form of rugby - also known as "bulletjie rugby" - for the past 18 years.

He said the sport not only exposed children to serious injuries as a result of underdeveloped motor skills, but the ignorance of coaches and parents on children's emotional development created a "breeding ground for emotional instability" for children into their adulthood.

A "distorted culture" where "winning and achievement" were emphasised over motor development and preparing children emotionally had resulted in incorrect skills being imparted to these children.

"In turn, this causes a child not to perform to his full potential," he said.

Over-exercising and injuries also exposed children to other developmental problems such as the restriction of growth plates in their bone structure.

Wilders said while some children displayed a lot of potential in sport from a young age, "those who develop only later often wear the sign of failure and inferiority around their necks".

While sport had a great value in children's lives and was meant to positively benefit their health and boost their confidence, this was unfortunately not the case as a result of the "distorted culture".

Some children were so disheartened by this "culture of winning" that they ended up giving up on sport altogether and resorted to being couch potatoes engaged in electronic games.

"There is no doubt that in this current form, bulletjie rugby is not working for our children. We need to go back to basics and look at the whole person when we train these children. The emotional being is as important as the physical being... the whole individual is integrated.

"If we fail to nurture children and prepare them emotionally, all our efforts to prepare them as future sportsmen will fail. Healthy competition is not supposed to emphasise the view that your opponent is the enemy... but rather serve as something to be challenged so you can develop to your full potential," he said.

His sentiments were shared by Cape Town's respected sports medicine expert, Professor Tim Noakes, who agreed that competition in any sport should only be "introduced much much later, probably at 15 to 16 years at the very earliest".

Noakes said this late start in competition was also supported by the country's sports federation, the South African Sports Confederation and Olympic Committee (Sascoc), which followed a Canadian programme that focused "on skills development before competition".

Wilders said another way of taking the pressure off children was for schools to have more than one team, as this would accommodate late developers who were often "left in the cold" by coaches who focused on top achievers.

There was also a need to scientifically test every child before participating in any form of sport to assess their motor and emotional development.

"I am of the opinion that children should play more and be forced less to participate in formal competitions," he said.