



FOOTBALL DEVELOPMENT MODEL

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OVERVIEW GUIDE





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> **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

USA Football offers a multitude of additional resources for you and your coaches as you explore how to bring the Football Development Model to your community.

Resources include information on safety and medical research, in-depth guides for athlete development and tips for communicating with parents and coaches.

New resources for your league are developed throughout the year and are available at usafootball.com/fdm and after you enroll with USA Football. Supplemental coach resources will become available when they purchase or complete their certification.

WELCOME

Playing youth football should be one of the best experiences of a young person's life. It begins with a fun, positive environment where players can develop athleticism, learn skills, make friends, grow self-esteem, nurture confidence and experience success.

WHAT IS THE FOOTBALL DEVELOPMENT MODEL (FDM)?

Based on principles of long-term athlete development, the Football Development Model is a way of teaching the sport that meets athletes where they are and helps them grow physically and mentally, both as an athlete and as a person.

To best lead their players, coaches must effectively teach the sport in an informed, developmental and progressive way. By following the Football Development Model, coaches learn to instill solid fundamentals and develop better athletes while leagues provide multiple entry points and game options for kids to play.

HOW DOES IT WORK?

The Football Development Model provides a series of stages and progressions for parents, coaches and league organizers to help players develop appropriately both as people and as athletes through the fun and fitness of football.

These stages and progressions focus on skill development, training, education and more.

This creates a framework that is USA Football's game plan for how America's favorite sport is presented, practiced and coached. The stages of this framework lay out the technical and tactical skills players should learn, as well as the thinking, feeling and behaving abilities that they acquire through their development.

WHY USE PROGRESSIONS AND STAGES?

The Football Development Model (FDM) follows a progression of building appropriate skills suitable to each child's developmental stage and readiness.

Think of progressions like students being taught addition and subtraction before moving to multiplication and division. Through the Football Development Model, coaches are applying that same learning pathway to teach football skills.

The Football Development Model's stages are like grade levels in school. After mastering those basic math skills and moving up grades, some students go on to pre-algebra while others advance to algebra 1. This concept works similarly for stages. Leagues that offer various game types give players different options to participate and stay in the game.

From a player's perspective, imagine a first grader's chair and cubby. They're significantly smaller than a high school freshman's desk and locker. Right size and right time fit just as well in athletics as they do in a classroom. This approach develops better athletes and inspires them to participate in sport throughout their lives, whether as players or moving into roles such as coaches, league officials or game officials.

➤ USING THIS GUIDE

This guide provides an overview of player development with specific recommendations sorted by developmental stage to help you apply the Football Development Model to your league and reimagine the game of football. As you go through this overview, imagine the football experience through the eyes of a first-time player, or the kid who loves watching NFL games with mom and dad. This can help your league meet athletes where they are so they can have a great experience and develop physically and mentally, both on and off the football field.

THE DEVELOPMENT MODEL FRAMEWORK

Long-term athlete development models, like the Football Development Model (FDM), are intended to meet young athletes where they are and help them advance one step at a time.

Sport national governing bodies, from archery to wrestling, are leveraging development models to create appropriate training environments to make better people and better athletes.

Each sport follows the U.S Olympic & Paralympic Committee's American Development Model, which focuses on universal principles of

Program Development, Character Development and creating a Healthy Athlete. These cornerstones ensure that a player grows both on and off the playing field.

Those cornerstones also stand on foundational core areas - Technical, Tactical, Physical and Mental – in line with the game of football. These areas help define consistent training principles to develop better football players, overall athletes and most importantly the whole person.

SOME OF THE NATIONAL GOVERNING BODIES FOLLOWING THE AMERICAN DEVELOPMENT MODEL:



CORNERSTONES

HEALTHY ATHLETE

Competing and winning can be rewarding, but health and wellness should be the goal of sporting activity. Leagues can create that environment by providing education and emphasizing good choices athletes can make to build strength, mature appropriately, eat well and properly recover.

CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

Sports don't teach life lessons. People do. Football is a vehicle for instilling key values through coaches and other adults who actively promote them within their practice plans and display them within their actions.

PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT

Players and coaches learn to operate within their specific team, organization or community. Coaches and parents should treat every athlete as if he or she is their own, and players need to learn the values of teamwork by working with their teammates.

CORE AREAS

▶ TECHNICAL

The core skills of football are built upon the most basic fundamentals and are carried through an athlete's entire career.

▶ TACTICAL

Through strategy and recognition, athletes put their individual skills to use within a team concept.

▶ PHYSICAL

Fundamental physical movements help athletes improve as their bodies grow and mature, serving them for life.

▶ COGNITIVE/SOCIAL/EMOTIONAL

Athletes understand the world around them and their roles within it in stages; this is true in football as well.

DEVELOPING THE WHOLE PERSON

The game is about more than learning physical skills and football movements. From character development to social skills to cognitive development, USA Football is partnering with experts from some of the biggest playmakers in these arenas to develop resources to develop the whole athlete.

The Football Development Model (FDM) helps athletes of all ages enjoy fun, fitness and competition through developmentally appropriate physical, mental and social activities. We aren't just developing better players, but better athletes and most importantly, better people.



PILLARS: DEFINITIONS AND IMPLEMENTATION IDEAS

The following six pillars set the foundation of the model and work toward creating better people, better athletes and a better way forward.



WHOLE PERSON AND MULTI-SPORT DEVELOPMENT

It's not enough to make football players better at football. We will build on the life-long values and lessons of the sport and go beyond teaching football skills, also focusing on the thinking, feeling and behaving abilities of a person.

IMPLEMENTATION IDEAS:

- Be intentional about character development and incorporate life lessons and service projects into practice and team-building activities
- Provide coaches with training to understand the cognitive and social needs of the players they coach
- Address mental health issues and concerns that your players, parents and coaches may be experiencing
- Encourage athletes to make healthy choices about nutrition, sleep and the use of supplements
- Inspire athletes to try multiple sports, whether structured, intramurals or neighborhood pickup games
- Provide parents with multi-sport resources versus specialization information



PHYSICAL LITERACY AND SKILL DEVELOPMENT

The basics are the basics for a reason. We encourage teaching fundamental movements and techniques as a foundation at each stage, with complex skills added later. This will help players develop at their own pace and build advanced skills effectively.

IMPLEMENTATION IDEAS:

- Incorporate general movements, exercises and drills into practice plans to develop all-around athleticism
- Think skills before scheme, limiting formations and trickery at the youngest levels, instead focusing on building a solid base of fundamentals
- Encourage coaches to track how each player is progressing through different stages of development using the Player Progression Guide
- Offer the USA Football First Down Program for the young children in your community to help them learn movement skills that will transfer to the football field
- Use preseason evaluations so coaches can better understand a child's physical aptitude
- Be purposeful with dynamic warmups and include games-based activities



COACH EDUCATION AND TRAINING

Coach resources and training materials are designed to illustrate how to teach players the skills they need to find success. USA Football's new and enhanced certification helps coaches fulfill their responsibilities as mentors by helping to train athletes on every skill they'll use, both on and off the field.

IMPLEMENTATION IDEAS:

- Require USA Football's certification for every coach who steps on a practice or game field
- Encourage coaches to go beyond basic certification and expand their knowledge through supplemental education
- Hold preseason coaching clinics for veteran and new coaches where leaders structure appropriate drills, skills and activities
- Encourage joint practices so coaches can see what their colleagues are doing and incorporate new ideas into their practice plans
- Award your most creative coaches and share winning strategies with all coaches
- Identify top coaches and encourage them to continue coaching even after their children age-out of playing



MULTIPLE PATHWAYS AND ENTRY POINTS

There are multiple pathways, game types and ages a child may be introduced to football, and the model will meet players where they are most comfortable. Throughout their career, players may remain in Non-Contact game types until adulthood while others transition to Limited Contact or Contact

IMPLEMENTATION IDEAS:

- Offer multiple game types and divisions within the sport, like Non-Contact and Limited Contact games, and inform your community about the benefits of each
- Open opportunities for girls and boys who want to continue playing Non-Contact football as they get older
- Be honest with parents if an athlete would be better served with another year of Non-Contact football or Limited Contact before moving to full field Contact football
- Consider offering Non-Contact football league to welcome parents – or future parents – into your organization



FUN AND FULFILLING

Football should be enjoyed and learned as a game before it's a sport – it should be fun. We start with skills that result in personal success to create fun foundational experiences early in a player's career. The love for the game continues as the competition level rises.

IMPLEMENTATION IDEAS:

- Create a positive environment that engages players and accepts failure as part of the learning process
- Small-group, station-based drills and activities – no lines, no lectures, lots of repetitions
- Establish best practices for coaching methods and player-centered practice sessions
- Provide variety in the way practices are structured so players don't fall into routines
- Encourage coaches to use USA Football resources to keep practice fun and engaging
- Make playing multiple positions a requirement, especially at the younger levels



PARTICIPATION AND RETENTION

Playing and learning football in a developmentally appropriate way builds confidence and enthusiasm. By blending education, science, research and training, we create a better football experience, encouraging athletes to stay in the game longer.

IMPLEMENTATION IDEAS:

- Track player retention vs. new sign-ups, not just cumulative participation numbers
- Look at transition points, such as when particular game types are no longer offered, to investigate their impact on registration numbers
- Track retention numbers on a team-by-team basis to find opportunities to improve
- Identify coaches whose players consistently do not sign up the following year and address issues or causality
- Survey parents whose children did not return to football and find out why
- Survey returning parents to discover what their children enjoy about the sport and find ways to incorporate that feedback into your league operations



FOOTBALL DEVELOPMENT MODEL

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FOOTBALL FOR ALL™

GAME TYPES FOR EVERY ATHLETE

From flag to traditional tackle, USA Football has outlined the progression of game types to provide leagues and players the entry points and options to share and play the game.

HOW GAME TYPES IMPACT YOUR LEAGUE

PROVIDING MULTIPLE ENTRY POINTS

Keeping football fun and dynamic continues to capture the imaginations of young athletes. When you implement the Football Development Model in your organization, you're offering more ways to play and more reasons for athletes to stay in the game.

GIVING PARENTS OPTIONS

Parents are making the decisions for their young athletes, including if and when they play football. Offering multiple game types gives parents more options to consider and gives their athletes the confidence and skills to play the sport.

REDUCING CONTACT

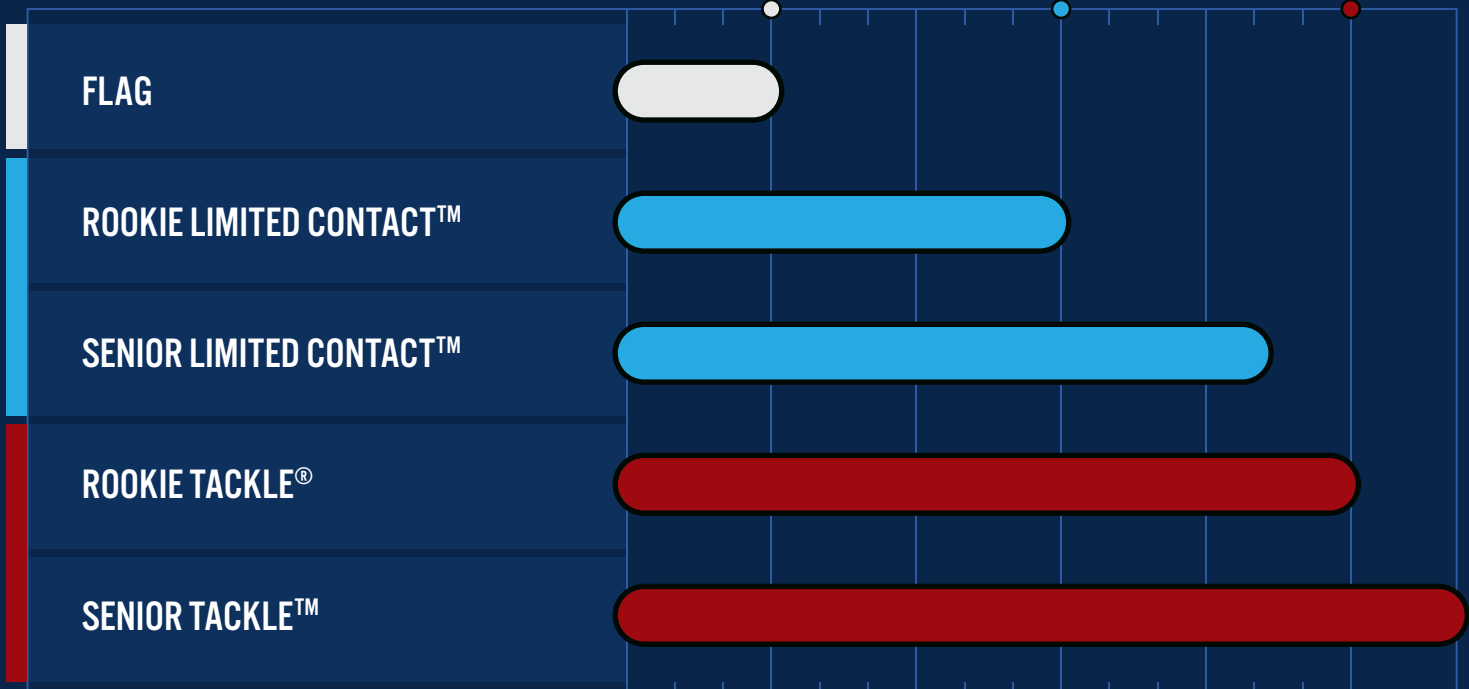
These game types, in addition to the skill and age progressions, create multiple entry points for athletes and help make the game safer by reducing contact and standardizing game aspects, including field size and the number of players.

AMOUNT OF CONTACT ▶

Non-Contact

Limited Contact

Contact



FOOTBALL FOR ALL™



FLAG

In flag football, both non-contact and prep for contact skills are learned to help players develop as they progress through the sport. These skills help some players transfer to tackle football, while others remain in flag and deepen their abilities within a non-contact football journey.



ROOKIE LIMITED CONTACT™

A bridge game to full contact using a smaller field, fewer players and specific rule modifications. Wearing traditional equipment, plus flags or a TackleBar™ harness, athletes learn how to block, track and engage an opponent with proper form and technique, all while staying on their feet. (An advanced version can be played on a larger field with two-directional play.)



SENIOR LIMITED CONTACT™

A bridge game played on a full-sized field, with rule modifications and game dynamics that mirror the look and feel of the traditional contact game. Wearing helmets and pads, plus flags or a TackleBar™ harness, athletes learn proper form and technique for both blocking and tackling without having to take the ball carrier to the ground.



ROOKIE TACKLE®

A modified version of the traditional full-contact tackle game, Rookie Tackle® is played on a smaller field with fewer players. With specific rule modifications and mandatory position sampling, it allows the contact game to be introduced in a fun and developmentally appropriate way.



SENIOR TACKLE™

A traditional tackle football game played on a full-sized field where athletes learn in-depth techniques and schemes. The goal of this game type is to introduce players to more advanced fundamentals from what they learned in Rookie Tackle®. The game becomes a bit more competitive with new elements and rules for experienced players.

STAGE SUMMARIES

Helping each athlete grow one step at a time is a key aspect of the Football Development Model (FDM). The following Football Development Model stages are based on the U.S. Olympic & Paralympic Committee's American Development Model standards. This resource covers four stages of the model with their associated age ranges. Additionally, each stage was developed by medical, physiological and football experts and stakeholders through the Football Development Model Council.

You can learn more about the stages or who serves on the council at usafootball.com/fdm.

5+ PLAY AND DEVELOP

Young athletes need the opportunity to develop basic movement skills such as running, jumping, kicking, throwing and catching in a fun setting built around informal play, exploration and positive reinforcement. No scores. No competition. Focus on activity and exposure. USA Football's First Down Program are a great way to introduce the game.

8+ DEVELOP AND ACHIEVE

Athletes begin to learn their movement ABCs – agility, balance, coordination and speed – while being introduced to the sport's fundamentals through fun practices and games. Skill building, participation and confidence are more important than a final score.

10+ ACHIEVE AND ADVANCE

Athletes begin to understand sport-specific skills and learn to compete against others in a fun, challenging environment. Players at this stage can work within a team concept and learn from their mistakes.

12+ ADVANCE AND COMPETE

Technical skill development and the dawning of tactical awareness mark athletes at this stage. Players test themselves with more complex strategies and movements within competitive games. With pre-adolescence also comes the development of strength and speed more than in previous stages.

MEASURING SUCCESS

How do you evaluate the Football Development Model's (FDM) success in your league? The long-term benefits of skill development through this football journey will take years to understand, but there are some questions that you can ask to measure the model's effects now:

Are your players having a more positive experience?	Are players coming back each season?
Do your coaches feel more prepared and self-confident?	Do you see coaches taking a more holistic approach to player development? Are they growing the athlete and the individual?
Has there been more focus on skill development and physical literacy in your programs?	Do you feel instruction from coach to player has improved? Are your coaches teaching the game more effectively?
Are players learning and understanding the game better?	Has the experience for parents/guardians improved as a result of your efforts to implement the Football Development Model?
What tools does your league have in place to evaluate success?	

DEVELOPING COACHES

The men and women who serve as coaches are the ones who bring the Football Development Model (FDM) to players. They are the touchpoints for change. That’s why we need to equip them with the knowledge, confidence and ability to properly install the model at the ground level.

Every league that adopts the Football Development Model should meet with every coach on every team’s staff before preseason practices and discuss expectations. For in-depth details, USA Football also created many resources that outlines goals for each stage, offering a skills checklist and appropriate progressions and drills to reinforce learning.



COMMUNICATING WITH YOUR COMMUNITY

Every youth football organization and school district should invite parents to a preseason meeting where they can learn about the Football Development Model (FDM), see what their athletes will learn and ask questions. When you enroll with USA Football, you will gain access to resources to help communicate with your community, such as a sample meeting agenda and Parents Guide.

As your league implements the Football Development Model, you'll get questions about the model. Here are quick talking points to help explain the model to parents, coaches and community stakeholders:

“ The Football Development Model starts by instilling the fundamentals that are building blocks for all athletes and continues to teach age-appropriate skills as kids advance through the sport. ”

“ The Football Development Model is USA Football's new initiative designed to make the game safer by reducing contact and teaching in a way that meets an athlete where they are in their development. ”

“ The Football Development Model provides more opportunities to play the game and allows parents and athletes to choose the type of football they want to play. ”

Overall, remember that the Football Development Model is built on scientifically based guidelines that help us teach the sport at every stage of a young person's development.

➤ **REMINDER:** Tell parents they can learn more about the Football Development Model at usafootball.com/fdm

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS (FAQs)

Q Who is USA Football?

A USA Football is the national governing body of the sport. Through partnerships at all levels of the game – from the NFL on down to the NCAA, high school and youth football – the organization works with leaders in medicine, child advocacy and athletics to support positive football experiences for all amateur players.

As a member of the U.S. Olympic & Paralympic Committee, USA Football designs and delivers premier educational, developmental and competitive programs to advance, unify and grow the sport.

Q What does the Football Development Model (FDM) offer that we don't already teach?

A Leagues and school districts will need to answer this question on their own as many parts of the Football Development Model will look familiar to parents, players and coaches nationwide. The six pillars of the Football Development Model are considered best practices by the U.S. Olympic & Paralympic Committee and long-term athlete development experts. These pillars are goals that football stakeholders have strived toward for decades. The Football Development Model lays them out in manageable, concrete form.

The first step for league representatives adopting Football Development Model is to use this overview to perform a self-evaluation. What are you already doing? What are you doing well? What are you not doing well? What are you not doing at all? Once you answer those questions, enroll with USA Football to access resources to work toward implementing the model.

Q Why encourage multi-sport participation and drive kids to play other sports?

A In study after study, findings have shown that playing multiple sports increases an individual's overall physical ability, lessens overuse injuries and reduces the chance for burnout.

Playing multiple sports also allows athletes to test their skill sets in different settings and achieve a higher level of performance.

The number one goal of youth football should not be to win games and collect trophies. It should be developing skills and all-around athleticism that young people can take with them the rest of their lives. Do that, and the wins will follow.

Q Will this progressive approach develop better players?

A Absolutely.

Athletes learn through progressive stages. The Football Development Model (FDM) takes the secure approach by focusing on the athlete's developmental stage – but without question, they are playing football at every stage.

Through Non-Contact game types, like flag football, players learn foundational football skills such as snapping the ball, running routes, throwing, catching and tracking the hip. The end result is a flag pull instead of a tackle, but the mechanics are much the same.

In limited contact game options, players are able to learn proper form and technique while staying on their feet. Players wear helmets and shoulder pads with the addition of flags or TackleBar™ harnesses. Games are played on smaller fields, which leads to more cutbacks and opportunities to make plays. Other rule modifications simplify the game so there are more snaps and increased repetitions.

As players progress through their football journeys, they can come to contact game types. There are many ways to play Contact football, from small-sided games like Rookie Tackle®, to more traditional forms like Senior Tackle™, with 11 players on each side. Rule modifications continue to put the focus on learning as they prepare to make the transition to the high school game.

Q Why is it necessary to address “whole-person” development?

A There's an old adage that says football teaches life lessons. What we realize is that for those lessons to connect with players, coaches and parents, they must be intentional in teaching those attributes.

By elevating social, emotional and mental lessons alongside teaching physical skills, adults put these life lessons top of mind and build them into their practice plans.

A whole-person approach means coaching each child in a way that makes sense for their thinking, feeling and behaving abilities and physical development. Participation in sports and interactions with others at an early age has a long-lasting impact upon personal development. It is up to those of us teaching the game and managing the child's touchpoints to shape the experience.

By emphasizing fun and fulfillment, players benefit from the lifelong lessons the sport teaches while remaining engaged and active.

Q Why should my league implement the Football Development Model (FDM)?

A The Football Development Model reimagines how football is coached, played and experienced. It prioritizes creating a love for the game through multiple pathways and progressive skill instruction, making it accessible and exciting for all.

Utilizing an appropriate balance of fundamental skill development with tactical scheme instruction will make the game more fun and engaging, which helps bring new athletes and keep players coming back. In addition, it allows you to introduce the sport in a way that makes sense for where each athlete is developmentally.

Q Is there any proof that this model works?

A In other sports, yes. USA Hockey adopted its Development Model in 2009 by focusing on skill development. In the years since, youth hockey participation has grown 13 percent, and participation for 8-and-under players is up 33 percent. Retention rates also increased at every age level.



During this time, USA Hockey teams have experienced unprecedented success at the IIHF World Junior Championships, winning four consecutive medals from 2016-19. And no country has won more championships at the World Junior A Challenge than the United States during that span.

Q Will the Football Development Model (FDM) make the game safer?

A The Football Development Model is designed to guide athletes through their football pathways, teaching them the foundational athletic, cognitive and sport-specific skills that they need to be successful along the way.

By introducing the game through in a progressive manner, it allows each player to build the fundamental foundation they need in the best learning environment while also lessening the chance for injury.

Offering multiple game types also helps make the game safer by reducing contact, while allowing athletes to build their confidence and giving parents options to consider.

Q What can parents do at home to help?

A Participation in sports and interacting with others in a team environment make an impact upon physical, mental and emotional development.

This extends beyond the game and practice field. When athletes talk at home about their experiences, it is important for them to feel encouraged and receive positive lessons like they do from coaches. This builds confidence and a positive attitude for the next time they practice or compete.

Free play is also something that parents can encourage. Playing unorganized games without rules or boundaries helps players learn leadership, problem solving and general movement skills in a way that an organized coach-led team may not allow. Encourage them to play with friends out of the house or at a playground.

Q Where can I get more information?

A USA Football has more information and free resources available at usafootball.com/fdm. Leagues can access additional resources when they enroll with USA Football throughout the year.



THANK YOU ESPN

USA Football sincerely appreciates
ESPN for its support of the
Football Development Model