



YOUTH SPORTS

The Ins and Outs of Injury Prevention

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The Centers for Disease and Prevention (CDC) reports that more than 7,100 children ages 19 and under were treated in hospital emergency departments for sports and recreation-related injuries each day in 2009. That translates to 2.6 million children per year.

Participation in sports and recreation plays a vital role in the development of youths. Potential for injury, minor or catastrophic, is ever present. Steps must be taken by players, parents, coaches, administration and league officials to identify and mitigate risks that can lead to injury.

Many leagues throughout the country rely heavily on volunteers. Parents often step into roles as league ad-

ministrators and coaches as a way to give back to a sport and/or their community, but volunteers don't always receive the proper training required to maximize safety. No amount of training can eliminate the bumps and bruises from competitive sports, but there are specific steps that can and should be taken to prevent catastrophic injuries.

Factors contributing to catastrophic injuries generally fall into three categories: Equipment Use & Maintenance, Site & Facility Safety, and Coaching & Supervision. As a parent, it is crucially important to confirm that youth leagues follow best practices to ensure the safety of children.



EQUIPMENT USE & MAINTENANCE

When was the last time the child's helmet was reconditioned? Was the child properly fitted in the helmet and other protective equipment? Parents are often led to believe that the coach and league have provided "safe" equipment to their son or daughter. Without a proper fit, the risk of injury increases dramatically.

There is an expectation that administration will inspect and repair all safety equipment before it's issued at the beginning of the sports season. Administrators are also responsible for ensuring that athletes are issued equipment that is clean and fits appropriately. Coaches have a responsibility to regularly inspect the condition of equipment, provide their athletes with training on how to safely and appropriately use the equipment, and address any concerns raised by the athletes and their families.



SITE & FACILITY SAFETY

A well-maintained facility contributes to children's safety. Tree roots, sprinkler heads, and rocks can become tripping hazards and poorly maintained onsite equipment can be a cause of unnecessary injury. Leagues and coaches must actively identify potential hazards and take steps to eliminate the hazards and/or select locations and activities designed to minimize the risk of injury.

The National Alliance for Youth Sports states that coaches and league administrators have the responsibility to inspect and ensure proper maintenance of facilities. Implementation of this guideline includes a responsibility to develop and follow procedures for inspecting playing facilities for hazards before every youth sports activity and instituting procedures for continual inspections of all playing equipment. Facilities and fields must not be assumed to be in optimal working condition.



COACHING & SUPERVISION

To be a youth sports coach requires knowledge and ability beyond the subject sport. To help ensure that children are able to learn, grow, and compete in a safe environment, coaching certification programs cover various topics such as sports safety, equipment and facility use, injury prevention, and emergency preparedness.

A coach for youth sports must have the skills and abilities required to supervise participants, organize practice sessions and competitions in a safe manner, identify and address site/facility hazards, troubleshoot equipment issues, and ensure that children have a safe ride home at the end of practice.

Background and reference checks are a vital first step in keeping kids safe. Due diligence by the league or governing body can minimize the concern of having to protect children from their coaches. After qualified and responsible adults have been identified as coaches, the league or governing body should provide training specific to the safety factors of their given sport. Topics addressed must include: teaching skill progression, matching players according to size and ability, teaching techniques designed to minimize the injury from falling and/or collisions, providing for acclimation, hydration and rest/recovery for participants.

Sports can be the best or worst thing to happen to a child. Ask the hard questions to league officials and coaches to ensure safety is a priority. ■