

Parents and Coaches Taking Charge of the Youth Concussion Issue

Gerard A. Gioia, PhD
Director, Safe Concussion Outcome, Recovery & Education Program
Children's National Medical Center

As a society, we want our children to be active and stay healthy but with all the current media attention given to concussions, it is hard not to be worried about involvement in sports. While there is a risk in any sport, if coached and played with head safety in mind, the benefits will likely far outweigh the risk.

There are many things youth sports leagues, its coaches, and officials can do to maximize the benefits and minimize the risk. To safeguard children from concussion, parent and coach responsibilities include:

- Obtain education on concussion signs, symptoms, and risks.
- Develop skills to recognize signs and symptoms, and respond appropriately.
- Obtain appropriate post-injury medical evaluation and support symptom management at home and school.
- Understand the need for return to sport participation only with proper, written medical clearance.

In youth sports, trained medical professionals are typically not on the sidelines. Parents and coaches, therefore, have an important responsibility to recognize when a child may have sustained a concussion on the playing field, and respond appropriately. While the general public has become more aware of concussions over the past five years, many lack the basic information about what to do next when a concussion is suspected. It is important to feel confident in recognizing the signs and symptoms of concussion and to take the proper action steps to prevent further injury. We offer six action steps every parent and youth coach can take to address concussion.

Six Action Steps Every Parent and Coach Can Take

1. **Learn how to recognize a concussion.** To recognize a concussion, look for two things:
 - A blow to the head or to the body that moves the head violently
 - Any sign or symptom that indicates a change in the child's physical, cognitive, emotional function or behavior

For further information and education, we recommend parents view one of the online educational videos on concussion (e.g. CDC's Concussion Training www.cdc.gov/concussion, the Brain 101 concussion training program <http://brain101.orcasinc.com>, or one of the sport-specific videos (football, lacrosse, ice hockey) made by the National Academy of Neuropsychology and the National Athletic Trainer's Association www.nanonline.org).

2. **Use tools to guide your recognition and response.** The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) materials are excellent (www.cdc.gov/concussion) either in paper form or via the Concussion Recognition & Response (CRR) app to help guide your recognition of the signs and symptoms the SCORE Program has developed. (<http://www.childrensnational.org/score/smart-phone-apps.aspx>).

3. **Learn the 12 danger signs of brain injury.** There are 12 danger signs of a brain injury that require immediate emergency medical attention if they are observed or suspected. Call 911 immediately if any of these signs are present.

4. **Remove the child from play if you suspect a concussion, and obtain a medical evaluation.** When in doubt, sit them out. Any blow to the head, no matter how mild, can cause a concussion. Look for the associated signs and symptoms and treat all concussions as serious. If you suspect a concussion, call your child's pediatrician and ask if he or she would prefer to examine your child or if you should go to the emergency room. Do not try to judge the seriousness of the injury yourself. Second-impact syndrome, though rare, occurs when an individual sustains a second concussion before the first has properly healed, and can be severely disabling or even lead to death.

5. **Monitor and record the child's symptoms at home.** The home symptom monitoring feature of the CRR app can track symptom progress and provide this valuable information to your healthcare provider to assist post-injury treatment.

6. **Support proper treatment.** After a concussion, the individual's brain should not be over-stimulated or subjected to any further risk of re-injury. The less "work" the brain has to do, especially early in recovery, the more energy it can put toward healing. During recovery it is important to provide a careful balance between activity and rest. Managing the child's physical and cognitive (school) activity is very important throughout recovery.

Ten Questions to Ask Youth Sports Organizations About Head Safety

Parents must do their homework and ask questions about how head safety is handled. At a 2012 youth football Q&A event in Virginia, the commissioner of the NFL, Roger Goodell, was asked by a parent how to be assured of their child's head safety by the youth sports league. He responded with an excellent question, "How many of you would hire a babysitter without first checking them for safety and quality? You need to do the same with their sports activities." We encourage parents to ask the following 10 questions, and we encourage all youth sports organizations to properly prepare themselves for these questions.

- Does the league have a general policy in how they manage concussions?
- Does the league have access to healthcare professionals with knowledge and training in sport-related concussion?
- Are the coaches required to take a concussion education and training course?
- Who is responsible for the sideline concussion recognition and response to suspected concussions during practice and games?
- Do the coaches have readily available tools (concussion signs and symptoms cards, clipboards, fact sheets, smartphone apps, etc.) during practice and games to guide proper recognition and response of a suspected concussion?
- Does the league provide concussion education for the parents, and what is the policy for informing parents of suspected concussions?
- What is the policy regarding allowing a player to return to play? (Correct answer: When an appropriate medical professional provides written clearance that the athlete is fully recovered and ready to return.)
- Does the league teach/coach proper techniques (e.g., blocking and tackling in football, checking in hockey and lacrosse) in ways that are "head safe" by not putting the head in position to be struck? If the player does demonstrate unsafe technique during practice or a game, do the coaches re-instruct them with the proper technique/method? Is head and neck strengthening taught?
- If a contact sport, are there limitations to the amount of contact? How often (# days per week, # minutes per practice) do you practice with live contact? Is that any different than past years?
- How amenable is the league/team/coach to accepting feedback from parents about their child's safety as it relates to head safety?