Sports are a great way for kids to exercise, learn about teamwork and discipline—all while having fun. Research has shown that compared to their peers, kids who participate in sports attend school more often, are more community and civic minded, get in less trouble, and tend to be more successful in the workplace. To help kids enjoy the lifelong benefits of sports it’s extremely important for coaches to teach them safe ways to participate.

Why do injuries occur?

There are various reasons why an injury might occur, including improper training, improper technique, equipment failure, and/or anatomic or biomechanical issues of the athlete.

What is an overuse injury?

Kids sustain two types of injuries in playing sports: acute and overuse. Acute injuries usually result from a single, traumatic event such as fall or hit to the leg or arm. Some common examples of acute injuries are fractures, sprains and dislocations. Overuse injuries are more difficult to diagnose and treat because they are usually subtle and occur over time. When repetitive trauma affects the tendons, bones and joints, an overuse injury develops. Common examples include tennis elbow, swimmer’s shoulder, Achilles tendinitis and stress fractures.

How can I teach a child to play safe?

• **Encourage pre-participation physical exams every year.** Having an annual pre-participation physical exam allows for the screening, prevention, and treatment of any conditions.

• **Warm up properly before an activity.** Warming up before an activity involves gradually bringing an athlete’s heart rate up from the resting level by engaging in a low-impact activity such as jogging in place. Teach your athletes to stretch their muscles to release tension and help prevent injury. Stretching involves going just beyond the point of resistance and should not include bouncing. Hold the stretch for 10-12 seconds.

• **Cool-down properly after an activity.** Have your athletes cool down after an activity which allows their heart rate to gradually return to a resting level. Once again, stretching may be helpful to avoid injury.

• **Use proper training and technique.** Coaches and trainers are there to help teach proper technique and avoid injuries. It is very important to have your athletes listen to and adhere to your instructions. Establishing and adhering to rules and procedures can help prevent injury. Most overuse injuries occur because of improper training or technique. Before beginning any training program or activity, work with a physician and/or another coach to make sure the program won’t cause chronic or recurrent problems.

• **Increase training gradually.** When deciding when and how much to push your athletes to the next level, remember the 10 percent rule: do not increase training activity, weight, mileage or pace by more than 10 percent per week. This allows the body ample time to recover. Keep your expectations and your athlete’s expectations in check.

Coaches

How can I teach a child to play safe? (continued)

• **Wear proper fitting equipment.** Make sure equipment such as running shoes are in good condition and fit properly. Something as simple as weekly equipment checks may help minimize injury potential.

• **Drink enough water.** Athletes often forget to hydrate—an essential step for the body to run well. Hydration allows muscles to work properly and avoid cramps and spasms. Be sure that your athletes take water breaks every 30 minutes or more often based on the level of activity and temperature.

• **Rest and take a break.** Kids who play sports year-round are more likely than others to experience overuse injuries because they aren’t giving their bodies a chance to rest and recover. Encourage your athletes to take at least one season off a year. Have them mix it up and play different sports during the year so that the same muscle groups are not being used continuously, leading to overuse injuries.

How will I know if an athlete has an injury?

If an athlete experiences sharp, stabbing pain, you should stop the activity immediately. Playing through pain may make the injury worse and probably cut the athlete’s season short. If an athlete is bleeding, has swelling of the joints, can’t put weight on the affected limb, or feels dizzy or physically ill, seek medical attention immediately.

What should I do if an athlete has an injury?

If an athlete experiences pain or other symptoms that might indicate an injury, seek medical attention and tell the athlete’s parents or doctor immediately. The sooner an injury is diagnosed, the more effectively it can be treated and the sooner the athlete can return to playing.

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Every coach has run into situations where a parent wants his or her child to succeed in sports at all costs—whether it means playing hurt or just trying to win the game. Coaches need to treat each situation delicately and learn tips to prevent, diffuse and convert a potentially negative situation into a positive one.

**How can I prevent parents from overreacting or becoming difficult?**

From the first day of practice, it’s important to define and communicate shared goals, values, and procedures to parents and players. You set the tone for practices and play, and can instill a positive ethic that signals zero tolerance for difficult behavior. Your statements may include:

- **Our primary goal is to develop the technical and social skills of young athletes.**
- **Winning is great, but it’s not everything. Learning to be a good sport and working as a team is the most important.**
- **Having fun and getting physical exercise is key.**
- **Whether we lose or win, we do it as a team.**

During the first meeting, it’s also important to outline clear roles for yourself, other coaches, parents, and players. You should welcome the parents’ support and encouragement and call on the players to work hard and do their best. Open communication through emails, phone calls, and team and individual meetings should be welcome on all levels to reinforce roles and responsibilities.

**How should I deal with a difficult situation?**

Whenever possible, try to avoid situations where you sense the potential for trouble. In a heated situation during a game or practice, coaches and parents often move into an adrenaline zone that signals to the brain, “fight or flight.” This is not the best mental state for resolving an issue; interactions can become aggressive and parents may feel threatened.

Try to maintain a positive attitude and remember: you can only control your own reactions and actions. When you speak with the difficult parent, be sure to:

- **Listen**
- **Empathize**
- **Explain**

People are much more receptive to discussion and alternatives if they believe you understand the reasons behind their actions, whether it’s concern about a scholarship possibility, winning a game, avoiding injury, or wanting to be the best.

Sometimes the best solution may be to physically separate yourself from the situation for the rest of game or even for a few days. Don’t be afraid to take this step if it’s necessary.
How should I handle a tense parent meeting?

In meeting with difficult parents, begin by thanking them for meeting with you and ask them what they think about the issue in question or other related issues. Be sure to listen carefully; do not interrupt. When they finish, ask: “Is there anything else you would like to share?” Once they have finished, acknowledge what they have said and ask once again: “Is there anything further you want to tell me?” Listen again and do not interrupt.

Ensuring that parents have held nothing back at the outset of the meeting lays the groundwork for a constructive discussion. Next, understand the parent’s goals, values, and view of how things should go, and empathize. Consider the situation from the other point of view and let the parent know that you understand by repeating back what the parent said.

Finally, explain the problem and your proposed solution in terms that address the parent’s concerns. Set out your own goals, values, and view while considering ways to work out multiple options for a solution.

How can I establish what a positive outcome should be?

Parents are generally receptive to an approach that benefits their children in some form. You should make it clear that your role as a coach is to create a positive and safe experience for each child, and you want to work together with the parent to resolve the problem or issue.

Based on this common ground, you can define a positive resolution. In many cases a successful outcome is simply having the parent’s opinion heard and understood.

Whatever the other issues/pressures that created the difficult situation, it’s important to stress to the parent that you want to work together to create a solution, whether that is resting an athlete or taking a step back during a practice or game.
Sports are a great way for you to exercise and learn about teamwork and discipline—all while having fun! However, sports may also come with injuries, both the obvious, like broken bones, and the not so obvious, like tendinitis. These less apparent injuries are called overuse injuries, which often result from too much athletic play.

What is an overuse injury?

Injuries can be categorized into two groups: acute and overuse. Acute injuries are usually the result of a single, traumatic event such as a fall or hit to the leg or arm. Some common examples of acute injuries are wrist fractures, ankle sprains, and shoulder dislocations.

Overuse injuries are more difficult than acute injuries to diagnose and treat because they are subtle and usually occur over time. When repetitive traumas affect the tendons, bones, muscles, and joints, an overuse injury develops. Common examples include tennis elbow, swimmer’s shoulder, Achilles tendinitis, and shin splints.

Why do injuries occur?

There are various reasons why an injury might occur, including improper training, improper technique, equipment failure and/or anatomic or biomechanical issues of the athlete.

How can I tell if I’m playing too much?

Most of the time, you’ll know you are hurt because you have some pain. However, the list below includes other signs that you are playing too hard and should talk to a parent, athletic trainer, or doctor right away:

- Can’t put weight on a certain body part, such as the ankle or wrist
- Favor one side of the body over the other; begin limping
- Have pain when using a body part
- Can’t sleep
- Have shortness of breath/trouble breathing during activity
- Have headaches during or after activity
- Experience severe joint or muscle stiffness
- Feel dizzy or lightheaded
- Can’t sit and/or climb stairs
- Can’t feel fingers or toes
- Experience unusual weakness
- Have irritated skin and/or blisters
- If you begin to have pain associated with play tell your athletic trainer, parent or coach. You should not be told or encouraged to play through pain.

What should I do if I have an injury?

If you're in pain, STOP! If you are experiencing sharp, stabbing pain, you should stop the activity immediately. If you play through pain you risk making the injury worse and probably cutting your season short. If you are bleeding, your joints are swelling, or you can’t put weight on the affected limb, or if you feel dizzy or physically ill, seek medical attention immediately.

Don’t be afraid to say something. If you experience pain or other symptoms that might indicate an injury, you need to tell your coach, parent/caregiver or doctor immediately. The sooner an injury is diagnosed, the more effectively it can be treated, and the sooner you can return to playing.

How can overuse injuries be prevented?

• Get a pre-season health and wellness evaluation, which can identify possible health concerns that may lead to overuse injuries.

• Perform a proper warm-up and cool-down routine to prepare the body and help it recover from activity.

• Incorporate strength training and stretching into your training program.

• Hydrate adequately to maintain health and minimize cramps.

• Wear properly fitted protective equipment, including helmets, pads, shoes, and mouth guards.

• Wear sunscreen to protect the skin from repeated exposure to the sun during practice and games.

• Don’t play one sport year-round. Taking one season off each year helps muscles recover from use and prevent overuse injuries.

• Play different positions or sports throughout the year to minimize the risk of overuse injuries.

Playing while injured does no one any good—not your team and especially not you. Keep yourself in the game by resting and taking care of your injuries.
After a child suffers a sports injury, healthcare providers wear many hats—confidante, healer and, in many cases, mediator between a parent and athlete. Parents want their children to be healthy, happy and successful in everything, including athletics. Kids want to continue playing and not worry about the injury. Your job is to remind them that this is youth sports—it’s about the kids learning lifelong lessons about teamwork and good health.

Open communication throughout the treatment process is essential. As a healthcare provider, it’s important to stress that the lifelong risks of ignoring recommendations far outweigh the short-term benefits of winning a game. As healthcare providers know, overuse injuries, especially in younger athletes have long-term consequences that parents and athletes need to recognize. As a healthcare provider it is important to stress rest and recovery for future success both on and off the field.

What can I do as a healthcare provider to prevent parents from overreacting or becoming difficult following an injury?

• Listen and empathize with their concerns. Be sure you understand the source of their reactions.

• Explain your views and recommendations, specifically addressing their concerns.

• Define a detailed outline of options and recovery recommendations, and ask for their thoughts on the treatment plan.

• Stress that everyone involved wants the child to be healthy and hopefully return to playing.

• Highlight the risks involved with not following guidelines.

• Highlight the benefits of following guidelines, including a more rapid return to playing.

What can I do as a healthcare provider to keep injured athletes on the recovery path?

• Educate the athlete on the risks of not following the recovery recommendations especially as it relates to overuse and trauma, including cutting their playing season short and having health consequences in the future such as arthritis.

• Highlight that playing sports is not about just winning a game, but also being part of a team—and by following directions for recovery the athlete is helping their team.

• Emphasize that a full recovery improves the athlete’s chances of continuing to play sports into adulthood.

How can I establish what a positive outcome should be?

Parents are generally receptive to an approach that benefits their children in some form. You should make it clear that you want to work together with the parent and athlete to resolve the health issue. Based on this common ground, you can define a positive resolution. In many cases a successful outcome is simply having the parent’s opinion heard and understood.

Whatever the other issues/pressures, it’s important to stress to the parent that you want to work together to create a solution, whether that is resting an athlete or taking a step back during a practice or game.
Every parent of a young athlete hopes their child will enjoy playing and get not only the health benefits of sports, but also the sense of pride and accomplishment that comes with being part of a team. However, some kids push their body to the extreme and lose sight of what’s truly important --- their health! It’s important for us as parents to remember our job includes listening and discussing, in a safe and non-judgmental way, what our kids are going through. You can use open-ended questions to get your child to talk about what he or she is feeling.

The following are a few sample questions to ask your kids about their athletic activity and physical level of comfort.

• “How was practice today? What kind of drills did you do? How long did you throw the ball?”

• “What was the most enjoyable part of today’s practice/game?”

• “What did you learn today?”

• “That game was exciting. It looked like you started limping toward the end. What part of your foot is bothering you?” Be specific about what you saw.

Following up with gentle suggestions may help get more information from your child. For example, “It sounds like you really threw a lot of pitches at practice. Maybe we should just run around the yard, instead of throwing the ball to give your arm a rest.”

How do I know if my child has an overuse injury?

Be sure to listen for complaints of pain in an overused area, such as the shoulder or elbow. Your child may not notice the pain until using the affected area when resting or sometime after practice or a game. Also notice any changes in how much your child feels about a sport. “I don’t like pitching any more” may really mean, “My elbow hurts when I pitch.” Once you have determined that an area is causing pain, look for tenderness and/or swelling over the injured area. If your child cannot move a joint fully, it is important to seek medical care immediately.

Remember to keep the lines of communication open and don’t give up – a lesson every parent and child can hold on to!
Injuries from youth sports are almost impossible to avoid, but following the suggestions below can help prevent injuries and reduce the risk of long-term complications.

What types of injuries occur?

Kids sustain two types of injuries in playing sports: acute and overuse. Acute injuries usually result from a single, traumatic event and may include wrist fracture, ankle sprain, and shoulder dislocation. Overuse injuries are more difficult to diagnose and treat because they are usually subtle and occur over time. When repetitive trauma affects the tendons, bones, and joints, an overuse injury develops. Common examples include tennis elbow, swimmer’s shoulder, Achilles tendinitis, and stress fractures.

Why do injuries occur?

There are various reasons why an injury might occur, including improper training, improper technique, equipment failure, and/or anatomic or biomechanical issues of the athlete.

How can I tell if my child is injured?

Most children will let you know when they are hurt, but for those kids who try to tough it out, parents and caregivers should watch for signs of injury such as:

- Avoiding putting weight on a certain body part (e.g., ankle or wrist) or favoring one side of the body over the other (i.e., limping)
- Appearing to be in pain when using a particular body part
- Inability to sleep
- Shortness of breath/trouble breathing during activity
- Headaches during or after activity
- Appearing to experience stiffness in the joints or muscles
- Dizziness or lightheadedness
- Difficulty sitting and/or climbing stairs
- Inability to feel the fingers or toes
- Experiencing unusual weakness
- Irritated skin and/or blisters

If your child experiences sharp, stabbing pain, he/she should stop the activity immediately. Playing through pain may make the injury worse and probably cut your child’s season short. If you have any concerns that your child might be injured, speak with a physician or certified athletic trainer immediately. The sooner an injury is diagnosed, the more effectively it can be treated, and the sooner an athlete can return to playing.

What are some ways to prevent injuries?

- **Have your child receive a pre-participation physical.** Having an annual pre-participation physical exam allows for the screening, prevention, and treatment of any conditions.

- **Encourage your child to warm up properly before an activity.** Warming up before an activity involves gradually bringing the heart rate up from the resting level by engaging in low-impact exercise such as jogging in place. Athletes should also stretch their muscles to release tension and help prevent injury. Stretching involves going just beyond the point of resistance and should not include bouncing. Stretches should be held for 10-12 seconds.

- **Be sure your child cools down properly after an activity.** Cooling down after an activity allows an athlete's heart rate to gradually return to a resting level. Once again, stretching may be helpful to avoid injury.

- **Obtain instruction on proper training and technique.** Coaches and trainers are there to help teach proper technique and avoid injuries. It is very important for your child to listen to their instructions because most overuse injuries occur because of improper training or technique. Before beginning any training program or activity work, with a physician and/or coach to make sure the program won’t cause chronic or recurrent problems. They will take into consideration your child’s current fitness level and how the training program might complement or hurt it.

- **Increase training gradually.** When deciding when and how much to push your child to the next level, remember the 10 percent rule: do not increase training activity, weight, mileage, or pace by more than 10 percent per week. This allows the body ample time to recover.

- **Have your child wear proper fitting equipment.** Make sure your child’s equipment such as running shoes are in good condition and fit properly. Something as simple as weekly equipment checks may help minimize the potential for injury.

- **Be sure your child drinks enough water.** Athletes often forget to hydrate—an essential step for the body to run well. Hydration allows muscles to work properly and avoid cramps and spasms. See that your child takes water breaks every 30 minutes or more often based on the level of activity and temperature.

- **Encourage your child to rest and take a break.** Athletes who play sports year-round are more likely than others to experience overuse injuries because they aren’t giving their bodies a chance to rest and recover. Encourage your child to take at least one season off a year. Also, suggest ways for your child to mix it up—encourage your child to play different sports during the year to avoid using the same muscle groups continuously, which can also lead to overuse injuries.

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How to Encourage Success in a Young Athlete

Most parents who watch their kids in athletic events have seen an inappropriate action involving a coach, player or another parent. To some sports are all about winning, and the value of building teamwork and increasing physical fitness can be lost in the drive to come out on top. To overcome this pressure, it’s important for parents to work together with coaches, athletes and other parents to create a positive athletic environment. The following tips can help:

• Place your child in the best and safest environment—with proper training and equipment—for them to enjoy and succeed in athletics.

• From the first day of practice, work with the coaches and other parents to define and communicate clear goals, values and procedures for everyone involved.

• Understand that some coaches in youth sports are volunteers who are not professionally trained. A travel team and high school coaches are more likely to be professionally trained and certified.

• Temper expectations of what you want for your child with the goals of the team and coaches. Remember that other parents and kids have their own expectations—which have to be considered equally to yours.

• Set realistic goals for your child, the team and the coaches

• Emphasize improved performance is key, not just winning

• Resist the temptation to recreate or reinvent your own athletic past through your child. Stay focused on your child’s unique abilities, interests and goals.

• Remember to control your emotions at games and events. Maintain a positive attitude, and don’t yell at other players, coaches, or officials.

• Be a role model. Show respect and your child will follow your example.

• Communicate openly. If you disagree with a coach’s approach or the behavior of other parents, discuss it with them respectfully at an appropriate time and place.