



Sports Sense

Help your child avoid common athletic risks and injuries by taking a few basic precautions — and **tuning out the pressures.**

By Keith Ferrell

Playing sports is a big part of growing up and going to school for many children. But the pursuit of victory in any activity carries with it risks and responsibilities.

Managing the risks to a child's health and safety is a duty shared by coaches, parents, and the student-athletes themselves. That's why it's important that everyone is clear on what those risks and responsibilities are. The issue extends to school-sponsored sports and athletics, and to recreational activities.

Parents should be aware of the training and competitive practices in each area, notes Joel Brenner, M.D., FAAP, lead author of the new AAP clinical report, "Overuse Injuries, Overtraining, and Burnout in Child and Adolescent Athletes." "But non-school recreational sports tend to have fewer guidelines and rules," he says. "Often there are no athletic trainers involved, so parents need to be especially proactive in making sure proper practices are followed."

Along with the obvious concerns over sports-related injuries, there are three general risks that parents of young athletes should be aware of: overuse injuries, overtraining, and burnout.

Overuse Injuries

Overuse is by far the most common type of sports injury, accounting for as many as half of the total in the United States. An overuse injury is damage to bones, muscles, or tendons that results from the body being worked too hard. This type of injury causes stress to these tissues that takes time to heal.

But too often competitive pressures, practice and game schedules, and a sense of duty to the team compel many young athletes to ignore or deny symptoms of overuse injuries. Failing to allow these to heal only adds further stress to the painful areas, risking long-term damage.

Also, the “no pain, no gain” and “play through the pain” approach to ignoring the aches and pains of sports can discourage the healing process. A young person’s body is still growing. Bones simply cannot tolerate the high levels of stress common to competitive sports if healing isn’t allowed to happen. In more severe cases, continuing to exercise the overuse-injured area can have serious long-term health effects.

Parents should be alert to these common symptoms of overuse injury:

- Pain in the muscle, tendon, or bone after practice or a game
- Pain while playing or during practice (even if the child remains able to play)
- Pain during play that affects the child’s ability to perform
- Constant or chronic pain, even when not playing

- Be mindful of the weather during summer and winter training seasons. Insist that your child make changes to the schedule if the weather is extreme.
- Encourage your child to vary training exercises from day to day, if possible. For example, she could alternate formal track-and-field training with swimming.

Burnout

Enthusiasm is just as vital as physical skills in keeping children healthy during athletic seasons. Yet the very things that make sports participation so rewarding can also become overwhelming. When that happens, your child can lose interest in the sport that once gave so much pleasure. This is called burnout.

“Families need to be open in their communications about athletics,” Brenner says. “Parents should understand what the child’s goals are — and make sure the activity is driven by the child’s, not the parents’ goals.”

On a day-to-day level, burnout can produce moodiness, a loss of interest that spreads to other activities, such as academics, and a drop in performance in the sport. But there are physical

consequences to burnout as well. These can include:

- Constant or chronic muscle and joint pain
- Fatigue
- Increased resting heart rate

Keeping It All in Focus

The rewards — and lessons — of sports participation are a vital part of growing up for many students. The National Sporting Goods Association reports that every year, more than 45 million children and adolescents take to the fields, tracks, pools, and gym floors.

Many kids dream of athletic glory beyond their present level. But it’s crucial that they understand that less than 1 percent of student athletes reach the professional leagues. Taking on more than the body can handle can put a premature end to the fun of sports. ●



Overtraining

The drive to succeed — along with the sheer joy many youngsters feel as a result of developing their sports talents — can lead to long hours of practice. That can reach the point of overtraining, and, eventually, overuse injuries.

The best way for parents to address this problem before it occurs is to stay on top of their child’s training schedule. Pay attention to the amount of time, energy, and interest the child applies to training for his or her sport.

Some good rules of thumb for keeping training in line include:

- Limit your child to a single sport or team activity per season, and the training schedule to no more than five days per week.