

# Youth Sports Safety: The Rules of Play, Injury Risk and Respect

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**The goal of youth sports should be to have fun and to appropriately introduce sports skills, develop young players in an appropriate and healthy way and increase and maintain participation into the adult years. Players, parents, coaches and sport administrators must also recognize and support the importance of safety in youth sports. While all injury risk cannot be eliminated for participating youth athletes, the risk of injury can be minimized, especially for those preventable injuries related to overuse. The sport rules of play were developed for each sport to protect players from dangerous play and are periodically revised to improve safety and maintain the integrity of the game as each sport evolves. Respecting the rules and showing respect for other players are two of the best ways to reduce injury risk and keep kids in the game.**

## Rules of Play

The focus on youth sports safety is renewed every time a young athlete is hurt and taken out of the game, especially if the injury is serious and has life changing consequences. At all levels of sport, keeping kids safe during practice and game play starts with coaches who teach safe play and respect for the rules, use rule infractions as teaching moments for the players and enforce safe play and respect for the game and other kids. Coaches can improve game safety by promptly responding to players who break the rules, especially flagrant violations that have undue injury potential, with immediate instruction and benching of the offending players. The sport rules of play are designed and updated periodically to protect players and maintain the integrity of the game; and, much like traffic rule infractions, breaking the rules of play often results in accidents and injury. Just because an infraction is not called by an official during game play does not mean the rule was not broken. Players must learn the rules and play by the rules.

The next safety and integrity layer is defined and implemented by the game officials. These officials apply the rules to the game situation and make the rule calls consistently with an emphasis on player safety and health. Referees must call the infractions and set the safety standards during the contest. Youth sport officials train, study and test to advance through the ranks. Consequently, many youth sports officials are only an age group or two above a child's level of play, as there are not enough qualified adults to staff all the games in the youth sports community. This can lead to inconsistencies in how games are called and controlled.

Parents must also learn the rules of the game and understand the intent of the rules. The actions of parents and support of the game officials set the tone of every game. While every call by an official will not be correct, mistakes are generally distributed evenly across the game. Accordingly, intimidating behavior toward officials does little to improve the game or the outcome. However, demonstrated parent support of the officials' judgment calls goes a long way to keeping the game in perspective and youth athletes safe.

## Injury Risk

To minimize injury risk, effective youth sports coaches must be students and teachers of basic and advanced sport skills and have the knowledge and passion to enhance healthy athletic development and performance in all kids. Most youth sport injuries are minor and heal well. However, there are also life-changing injuries (e.g., ACL disruption or concussion) occurring frequently in the "main stream" youth sports such as ice hockey, football, gymnastics, soccer, baseball, volleyball and others. Occasionally there are catastrophic injuries like neck fractures and head injuries that are almost always related to serious rule infractions. These injuries are the reason that all the rules must be learned, followed and strictly enforced.

While the rules of the game address acute injury risk, it is the game and practice schedule that sets the stage for overuse injury. Overuse injury is a result of excessive stresses on the body tissues — as result of an athlete doing too much, too intensely and too often. Overuse injury rarely occurs in children in free play who naturally take breaks or call it a day when



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## Respect

Self-restraint and player respect go a long way toward making it a better experience for everyone on the ice, court or field and even for those watching and cheering. However, good coaches must also assist in developing good citizens of the game and community, by emphasizing and modeling good sportsmanship during every practice, game and all times in-between contests. This will greatly enhance every child's athletic experience and establish a stronger foundation for life.

In the end, it comes down to respect — respect for the game and each other as players and the honor of playing against other athletes for the right to be the best in a contest. Parents play a key role in teaching and promoting respect and proper behavior in their child athletes. These important lessons can make youth sports more enjoyable and set the stage for a lifetime of healthy and sustainable physical activity.

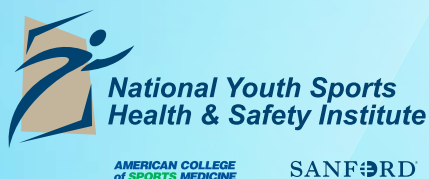
## The Message

While many sports bodies have safety programs that emphasize injury prevention and safe play, the teaching, enforcement, emphasis and support for the rules is largely dependent on the demonstrated commitment of parents to keep the game fun, safe and in perspective. Encouraging safe play, supporting the rules and weeding out unsafe practices and disrespectful players and “fans” will reduce injury risk and keep youth athletes in a more healthy and lasting pursuit of sport participation. Keeping it fun will keep kids “in the game” and hopefully develop lifelong exercise habits for our future adult population.

1. DiFiori JP, Benjamin HJ, Brenner J, Gregory A, Jayanthi N, Landry GL, Luke A. Overuse Injuries and Burnout in Youth Sports: A Position Statement from the American Medical Society for Sports Medicine. *Clin J Sport Med* 2014;24(1):3-20.

fatigued. In our world of adult-centered youth sports, with schedules for practice, league games and tournaments often assembled without regard to adequate rest and recovery for the athletes, overuse injuries are on the rise. The tendencies of many athletes to participate in several sports, often concurrently, with coaches who do not integrate other activities into the individual athlete's training schedule, have also driven up the incidence of overuse injury. A child athlete is best served by participating in one sport at a time, following a reasonable training schedule and having at least one day a week with no practice or games.

Child athletes should be performing well in the domains of life — physical, physiologic, psychological, cognitive/academic, social and spiritual to be considered “healthy”. Youth sports participation can either contribute to or detract from a child's well-being. Notably, “overuse injury” in youth sports may extend beyond musculoskeletal injury, affecting the other domains of life, and parents are in the best position to monitor their children's overall welfare.<sup>1</sup> Kids left to themselves to participate in free play and sports are generally free of acute and overuse injury. But, when adults step into the picture, the climate and “injury free” status seem to change.



The **National Youth Sports Health & Safety Institute** will be the recognized leader and advocate for advancing and disseminating the latest research and evidence-based education, recommendations and policy to enhance the experience, development, health and safety of our youth in sports.

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