

Take Children Safely Out to the Ballgame

Resource Type: Articles

Topic: Youth Protection and Child Safety

Organized sports and recreation can improve physical fitness, coordination, self-discipline and teamwork, but these beneficial activities put participants at risk for injury unless precautions are in place. Half of organized sports-related injuries are preventable, reports the [National SAFEKIDS Campaign](#). It's a matter of protecting bodies while they are still growing and developing motor and cognitive skills.

Hospital emergency rooms treated an estimated 162,100 children just for baseball-related injuries, many of which were injuries to the head or face, according to the Consumer Product Safety Commission in 1998. Most soccer injuries, on the other hand, occur to the lower extremities: contusion, muscle strains and sprains of knees and ankles. Sports-related injuries occur more frequently in sports programs with higher levels of competition and then most often during practice rather than games.

The American Academy of Pediatrics says puberty is the dividing line between insubstantial and substantial injury. Young children don't generate enough force to cause a substantial number of injuries even in collision sports, such as football, while those of high school age and older do.

Nonprofit organizations that include sports and recreational activities in their programs need to take precautions to protect young athletes and the organization from harm. Whether your organization sponsors the activity or contracts with another organization, it's your responsibility to see that youth in your program are safe from foreseeable harm.

Sports Injury Prevention Tips

- **Dress participants in appropriate protective equipment.** Make certain the equipment is the proper size and adjusted to each athlete. If proper protective equipment isn't available for a child, give the child another responsibility: scorekeeping, providing water to players, or working with the coach. Plan to try to get the proper equipment donated or purchased before the next practice so everyone can participate.
- **Maintain safe playing conditions.** Clear the area of debris. Beware of broken glass, rusty nails, used syringes, rocks and other items that would increase injury if a child fell or slid on them. Watch weather forecasts; have a set of guidelines for postponing or calling practice or a game. Pay attention to days with Code Red or Code Orange.
- **Have an emergency plan for injuries during practice or games.** If at all possible have an adult trained in first aid techniques on hand. At least have an adult with a charged mobile phone. Provide the adult supervisor with a notebook of emergency phone numbers for parents or guardians of all athletes. Carry a well-stocked first aid kit.
- **Enforce safety rules.** Those who break the rules should be warned or penalized depending on the severity of the infraction, the danger to other players and the rules of the game being played and the age and skills level of the participants. By all means, prevent bullying of athletes by adults or children. Young athletes need to focus on the game, not on their shame, embarrassment or humiliation. Overachieving has resulted in severe injury and even death. Ensure children drink plenty of liquids while participating in athletic activities. This is especially important in high heat, high humidity or high altitudes or with athletes who are just beginning their training/play and aren't toned.
- **Provide trained adult supervision of play.** Many youth sports associations provide training for adult coaches of their sport. Adults learn the rules, what to expect from the age range they'll be coaching and

techniques for managing disputes among athletes or their adult cheering squad.

- **Provide proper training and skills building for the young athletes.** Anticipate children's needs based on where they are in the developmental process. Ages birth to five years old is a period of developing strength and coordination sequentially from head to heel. Ages five to 11 strength and coordination grow, as do attention spans, which are short in the beginning and lengthen. It's a time to build fundamental skills. Early adolescence, 11-14 years old, have to learn about cause and effect relationships, reach puberty—the dividing line for severity of injury. Late adolescence, 15 to 21 years, are testing the boundaries of independence and still need guidance to help them develop personal safety and judgement. By understanding the developmental stages of the children it serves, the organization can anticipate and develop strategies to manage the risks created by the normal maturation and development of the children it serves.
- **Match and group children according to skill level, weight and physical and mental maturity.** If it helps to understand why, consider the sport of wrestling where body size, weight and skills are taken into account. Only then are opponents matched against each other. This safety precaution protects the participants, the organization and makes for a more even contest.

This article has been compiled from information featured in *The Season of Hope: A Risk Management Guide for Youth-Serving Nonprofits*. For more information, [click here to order the book](#).