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Pop Warner Football And Head Injuries

What's Your Reaction?

Our son, Adam, just finished his second season of Pop Warner football. He's 10 years old and loves the game and playing with his team. Ron and I enjoy his involvement, too. We love cheering him on, and Ron, who is also the assistant coach for the team, gives him pointers. Sports can be such a key component to a child's development. We're big supporters of that. But as parents, we're also concerned about the safety of both our boys. As you know, football is one of the roughest sports out there. Many parents hesitate trying out the sport for fear of their children experiencing serious injuries.

Thankfully, Adam has made it through both seasons with just the usual scrapes and bruises that come along with blocking and tackling. His coaches (Ron included) make it a point to teach proper technique and sportsmanship, which helps keep the team safe. No matter how much you teach the boys, though, someone is bound to get hurt. That's the nature of full-contact sports. When that happens, it's our job as parents and coaches to step in and make sure our kids are safe.

Lately football concussions and head injuries have been front page news. Big-name players like the University of Florida's quarterback Tim Tebow or the Philadelphia Eagles' running back Brian Westbrook have suffered concussions. Some, like Tebow, have missed playing time, sitting out a few weeks to give their brains and bodies full time to heal. But others, like Westbrook, suffered a concussion one game and returned the next. In the running back's case, he took a hit and suffered a dangerous second concussion early in the next game.

Westbrook's situation isn't uncommon. The Associate Press surveyed 160 NFL players and reported that 30 of them have hidden head injuries from coaches and training staff in order to stay on the field and keep playing. The NFL is looking into the situation and there may be more rules and regulations coming to keep the players safe, but it's going to be hard to do if players aren't honest about their injuries.

Here's my question: what kind of message are these players sending to the kids who idolize them?

Adam is a big Patriots fan and loves all the players. One of the Pats' all-time great linebackers, Ted Johnson, is now an unfortunate spokesperson for the dangers of concussions in sports. In this Boston Globe article Johnson says, "Officially, I've probably only been listed as having three or four concussions in my career, but the real number is closer to 30, maybe even more. I've been dinged so many times I've lost count." Johnson retired after 10 seasons in the NFL and now suffers from severe depression, memory loss, and has signs of early brain damage, which doctors believe are the results of head trauma from his playing days.

Football is all about being tough. But sometimes you have to be smart, too. As parents and coaches, we need to encourage our children and their teammates to play their best while being concerned for their safety. It's up to us to teach our kids that injuries aren't something to laugh at--if they're hurt, they need rest. Now, if we're watching football on TV and see a player suffer a concussion and then return to the game (which is, unfortunately, common practice in the pros), we tell our son that the player and coaching staff were acting irresponsibly. The player isn't being tough, and he's not being smart.

I hope the message that those players are putting their future health at risk sinks in for Adam.

We have to protect our children on the playing field. That means safety should take precedence over everything else, including competing and winning. As a parent in the stands, I've seen kids get hurt on one play, then return later in the game. Sometimes that means the boys are being brave, but it doesn't always. There's a fine line between bravery and risk. It's sometimes a tough one to decipher, especially when the kids are begging their parents to go back into the game.

If a child suffers a concussion, a head injury (thankfully, this isn't too common at the Pop Warner level), or complains of dizziness or a headache, then parents and coaches should not risk putting them back on the playing field, even if the child says they're ready to go back out there. Research shows it takes a minimum of seven days to recover from a concussion, but you should consult a doctor if it happens to your child. Some recommend taking off at least a month because a second head injury is more likely to cause long-term problems.

Other injuries have to be taken on a case-by-case basis. But (and I'm not just saying this as a concerned mom), it's my advice to take a conservative stance. Your children have their whole lives ahead of them--you don't want to put any of that at risk by sending them back into a game before they're fully healed and ready to return.

Parents and coaches should educate themselves about sports injuries. Even though we do as much as possible to protect our kids with the best available equipment and training, injuries are bound to happen. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention has great information about childhood sports, including takeaways and tip sheets on concussions.

Stay safe out there! Your children will appreciate it.