

## Keeping Youth Sports Safe and Fun

Besides the lack of homework and spending the day at the pool with friends, most children's favorite summer activity is participating in recreational sports leagues. Perhaps it's Little League, a youth soccer program, dance class, or swimming lessons. Whatever sport it may be, young children love to get out and be active. It's important to keep kids active and healthy so they can continue to play sports for years to come. Children's overall health includes both their physical and emotional health. Parents should get involved to make sure their youth sports league is an appropriate and safe learning environment for their children to grow physically and emotionally.

### Physical Health

An important part of athletics at any age is the warm-up. Even if young athletes are playing at a beginning level, it is still crucial to getting the body ready to play in order to help prevent injury. The children should be doing a proper warm-up before starting both practices and games. The warm-up should include a light jog and stretching, holding each exercise for 20-30 seconds. Dr. Chudik's youth in-season exercise program is a great example of a program that includes warm-up and conditioning exercises to help prevent injury. This warm-up increases circulation throughout the body and warms up the muscles so they are less prone to strain or tear. It also increases flexibility, which decreases the chance of a strain or tear as well.

Coaches and parents should be prepared to deal with injuries. It is important that both parents and coaches are knowledgeable about children's injuries and safety techniques for preventing injuries. Make sure that you and the coach communicate with the children the importance of telling an adult if they are in pain. Playing on a small injury can lead to a bigger injury, so be sure the children know to stop when they start to feel pain. At the beginning of each season, children should have a physical exam to make sure they are healthy before starting.

Children are susceptible to overuse injuries, so getting proper rest between practices and games and allowing the body to recover is essential. Gradually building strength and endurance is another way to help prevent injury and ease the body back into activity. After any injury or time off, Dr. Chudik emphasizes, "Bones react to the stress they see," so going from no activity to high activity can be dangerous for the body, especially at the beginning of the season. Make sure the stretches and exercises are explained clearly to the children so they perform them correctly. Poor training and conditioning are often the root cause for injury.



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Parents and coaches should do their best to keep track of how much water each child drinks, making sure everyone stays hydrated. Especially in the summer, it is necessary to know and watch for the signs of heat illness, such as sweating irregularities (too much or too little) combined with weakness, nausea, headache, lightheadedness, confusion and muscle cramps.

Make sure all of the children's equipment fits properly. When worn right, equipment is beneficial and helps to protect children. Poorly fitting equipment, however, can cause injuries to the child. At the beginning of each season, check the children's equipment and spend time teaching them how to wear it so it is always worn correctly.



### **Emotional Health**

Parents should attend both practices and games in order to observe their children in each setting. You should be looking to see if your child is participating in all of the activities, if your child is interacting with the other children in a positive manner and how your child interacts with the coach.

Your child is spending a large portion of time with the team, so it is imperative the children respect the coach and each other while enjoying their time at practice and games. Ask the coach what you can do to help without interfering, especially if your child is having trouble adjusting to the setting. Talk to the coach about expectations for the children so you can help reinforce these with your child and make practices run smoother. The better experience the children have at practices and games, the more they'll enjoy the sport and want to continue playing in the future.

Coaches do their best to make sure the children are in a safe learning environment, but it is difficult to keep an eye on all of the children all the time while trying to run practice. That's why it is so important parents do their part in observing their children too, without getting in the way. Talk to your children after practice and games to make sure they are still having fun. Remind your children and their friends sports should be a positive experience that involves making friends, learning about teamwork and developing a sense of personal satisfaction.

### **Here are some common injury terms:**

**Sprain**—an injury to a ligament, which connects bone to bone. Ankle sprains are a common injury.

**Strain**—an injury to a muscle or tendon, which connects muscle to bone.

**Growth plate**— a line of multiplying and developing cartilage cells in the end of the long bones in children that are eventually replaced by solid bone when the child is done growing. Growing children have “open growth plates.”

**Stress fracture**— incomplete fracture of the bone due to repeated stress.

