CHILDHOOD SPORTS PARTICIPATION: WHEN IS IT TOO MUCH?

OVERVIEW

This module delves into the ethical dilemmas regarding whether or not children should participate in competitive sports at a young age, and how participation in sports may impact them in the future. Students will get to learn about the potential benefits and risks children face when they start playing, and possibly specializing in, competitive sports from a very early age and the common injuries young athletes face. The module contains personal reflections and case-based activities. Within the module there is one activity in which students will review and discuss personal narratives from college athletes detailing their experiences with college level sports and two activities in which students will analyze case based scenarios regarding conflicts in sports.

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LEARNING OUTCOMES

1. Understand the risks and benefits of participating in sports at a young age
2. Identify and analyze perspectives and conflicting values when it comes to youth participation in sports
3. Learn how to be safe while playing competitive sports

PROCEDURES AND ACTIVITIES

This unit uses a student-centered and interactive approach to teaching. Activities are designed to allow for student participation. Activities are marked as an individual, partner or group activity.
With obesity and diabetes rates continuing to increase in the young, it is essential that children engage in physical activity as a part of a healthy lifestyle. Taking part in organized sports is one way that children can remain active; additionally, kids can have fun playing sports and making new friends. Participation in sports can have many benefits for children. However, there is growing evidence that points to the downsides of children specializing in and training aggressively for competitive sports from a very young age. For many, the objective of engagement goes far beyond staying active, having fun and developing friendships. Many children are “encouraged” to engage in highly competitive sports from an early age for reasons other than their health benefits, often driven by their parents or coaches: community recognition, pride, and the promise of future gain such as scholarships to college or lucrative professional sports careers. While very few high school athletes turn professional, many suffer long-term consequences from injuries resulting from their participation. Encouraged by the adults around them, they end up suffering in the long run – and they do not always have much of a say in this. Unlike a parent having to make a decision to try a risky therapy for a child who is ill, kids pushed into highly competitive sports at an early age start out healthy; but their participation can cause injuries and problems that may impact the rest of their lives. Is it ethical to aggressively encourage healthy children into specializing in a sport early when scientific evidence is now showing that the wear and tear of competitive sports can cause lifelong damage if started too young and with too much intensity?

2. OVERUSE INJURIES – AND WHY THEY OCCUR

Overuse injuries are by far the most common type of injuries experienced by young athletes. According to the article, “Overuse Injuries and Burnout in Youth Sports,” a position statement from the American Medical Society for Sports Medicine, “overuse injuries occur due to repetitive submaximal loading of the musculoskeletal system when rest is not adequate to allow for structural adaptation to take place.” What this means is that when young muscles, bones, etc. are excessively being used they can start to deteriorate; eventually resulting in greater injury. We see that in sports such as, baseball, gymnastics, cheerleading, and figure skating, the amount of injuries caused by overusing certain muscles is increasing tenfold. For example, pitchers in baseball have a much higher chance of getting chronic arm injuries due to the repetitive pitching motion. This then leads into the burnout problem.

What exactly is the burnout problem? What we mean by referring to the word “burnout” is that when a child, from a very young age, is specialized, meaning that he or she plays only one sport year round, they start to lose interest in said sport. By doing the same activity over and over again while also overworking the same part of the body continuously, child athletes not only get tired of the same repetitive routine but also are more prone to severe injuries. Overuse injuries lead into burnout and burnout leads into overuse injuries. This continuous cycle of overworking certain muscles, damaging those muscles, and then forcing yourself into the same workout routine, leads to future health problems in the youth.

Other injuries that young athletes face:

A. Strains and Sprains:

What is the difference between a strain and a sprain? According to Tony Sutton, “a sprain is an injury involving the stretching or tearing of a ligament (tissue that connects bone to bone) or a joint capsule, which help provide joint stability,” and “strains are injuries that involve the stretching or tearing of a musculo-tendinous (muscle and tendon) structure.” Most of the time, sprains or strains develop because of overusing the muscle or the ligament.

B. Growth Plate Injuries
What is a growth plate injury? According to the Mayo Clinic, “a growth plate fracture affects the layer of growing tissue near the ends of a child’s bones... An injury that might cause a joint sprain for an adult can cause a growth plate fracture in a child.” Growth plate injuries are among the most common injuries in child athletes. With the bones slowly starting to develop, the growth area of the bones can be subject to harm. When a growth plate is damaged, the bone has trouble growing properly and can lead to many problems coupled with pain in the future.

C. Repetitive Motion Injuries

What is a repetitive motion injury? According to physicians at the Johns Hopkins Medical Center, repetitive motion injuries (also called repetitive motion illnesses) are “temporary or permanent injuries to muscles, nerves, ligaments, and tendons caused by doing the same motion over and over again.” The problem that we see here is that children don’t know when to stop. Young athletes may have a fear of taking a break from their sports. With this, when an athlete gets injured and cannot play, they start to get worried that they are going to lose all of their skills. To combat this worry, many athletes say that they are fully healed and then go back to playing on a not-yet-healed injury. By playing on a still damaged bone, ligament, etc. the athlete is damaging the injury even more than before.

D. Heat-Related Injuries

What is a heat-related injury? According to physicians at the Johns Hopkins Medical Center, a heat-related illness is defined as “exposure to abnormal or prolonged amounts of heat and humidity without relief or adequate fluid intake...” Heat related injuries are very common among young athletes because “children sweat less, create more heat per body mass, and acclimatize slower to warm environments” (American Academy of Pediatrics). Therefore, when an athlete is training in hot temperatures while also moving at high intensities, their body starts to over-heat because it cannot get rid of the heat quick enough. This can result in many cases of heatstroke because of inadequate recognition of overheating.

E. Concussions

Concussions are among the most prevalent injuries experienced by child athletes. In most cases, see this type of injury in athletes playing American football. Concussions are caused by rapid and multiple collisions of the brain with the skull. The frequent head collisions that occur in football cause much damage to the brain. According to the article, “Keeping Kids at the Top of Their Game,” “among the most dangerous sports is football, with 920,000 kids landing in the emergency room or doctor’s office with concussion, ankle sprain, low-back injuries, and heat stroke.” With this in mind, concussions are very common among young athletes and should be monitored so that children don’t experience the hardships in the future that this injury can cause.

What happens to the brain during a concussion?
Discussion Questions:

1. Considering concussions are one of the most potentially long term damaging injuries in youth sports, how do you think we can better prevent concussions given that youth sports will continue to be very competitive?
2. Do you think that parents and coaches should limit contact sports for children to prevent concussions even though kids won’t be exposed to advanced competition as much while young? Is the risk worth it?

3. DEFINING THE SOCIOLOGICAL PRESSURES OF STARTING COMPETITIVE SPORTS AT A VERY YOUNG AGE

The official definition of pressure is “the use of persuasion, influence, or intimidation to make someone do something” (Wikipedia.com). Today, people use the word pressure very loosely in sports, almost too loosely. According to Emma Vickers, “if an athlete is experiencing ‘pressure’, it is more than likely because we perceive that there are expectations placed upon us.” Considering that parents, coaches, and friends have huge impacts on children’s lives, it comes as no shock that many young boys and girls feel compelled to do extremely well in the sports that they play. According to one physician, we live in a “society that pretends to care about its children” (“Overuse Injuries in Young Athletes.” Medical Ethics Roundtable. Hospital for Joint Diseases, New York, NY. 5 Apr. 2016. Lecture.). What he meant by this, in the context of sports, was that parents and coaches turn what should be a fun activity for children into a massive competition. They don’t care whether or not the child is enjoying what they are doing; they care about what will benefit them in the future. In decades past, it was common for children to come home from school and go straight to the field to play baseball, football, or any sport they pleased with their friends. Playing sports was an enjoyable way for kids to
stay active and interact with their friends. Nowadays, playing sports has almost become an industry. With lucrative scholarships being offered by elite colleges, more parents are forcing their children into specialized sports. However, more children are becoming overwhelmed with this “sport scholarship pressure”. In a recent NYU panelist discussion, a pediatrician stated that, “more children are being put on medications for anxiety because of this overwhelming pressure to always do well” (Prezioso 2016). However, does that mean they are enjoying what they are doing? Most of the time, the answer is no. Instead of focusing on what will potentially get ourselves into the high end colleges, maybe an alternative is to go back to when children played sports solely for the purpose of having fun.

Discussion Questions:
1. Reflect on your own relationship to sports. Does this narrative match your experience?
2. With all of the pressures from parents and coaches to do well, how can we lessen the effects of anxiety on young athletes? Is it just the pressure to do well causing the anxiety or are there other factors? If so, what?

4. INJURY PREVENTION

Parents, coaches, and athletes can take steps to prevent injuries. Here are some of the top ways to prevent injuries in youth sports.

A. Proper equipment

Though there have been few, if any, good clinical studies examining whether or not the use of proper equipment has an impact on the incidence of youth sports injuries, it is generally accepted that the use of proper equipment is very important in reducing injuries. Proper equipment protects vulnerable areas of the body that are prone to injuries, such as the skull, spine, etc. However, even though we are protecting the body from high impacts on the outside, it doesn’t necessarily mean that we are protecting the body from impacts on the inside. In the case of concussions caused in football, while players do wear helmets, it is actually the jerking around of the brain inside the skull that causes the damage. The helmet doesn’t protect from the internal collision. This doesn’t mean that players should not wear protective gear; actually the contrary is true. All evidence suggests that wearing recommended protective gear rather than not doing so, lessens the likelihood of getting a sports related injury. For example, wearing a helmet lessens the risk of skull fractures, and protective padding and guard material does the same for other types of bone fractures and breaks. A growing social problem with regards to attaining proper equipment for younger athletes comes about when instead of a child getting new equipment they get hand-me-downs. It is commonly known that parents with children just starting out in a new sport don’t want to invest a lot of money in equipment because their child might not like the sport. Therefore hand-me-down equipment, which is less protective than new equipment, is the best cost-effective substitute. However, proper equipment is necessary for protecting athletes against many types of high impact injuries, though even the best equipment cannot prevent injury 100% of the time.

B. Trained and qualified coaches

Having well-trained coaches is key to providing safety for young athletes. Today, however, many coaches serve on a volunteer basis. This means that they do not necessarily possess the standard of credentials to properly coach young, developing athletes. Anecdotes show that it is remarkably easy to
become a coach of youth sports teams. As one father said, when his children were younger, he decided to volunteer as their sport’s coach. The guidelines the athletic board gave to him to be a volunteer coach were very nondescript. Essentially, he was able to walk right into the job without having any training or verifiable credentials. This is a major problem because the children are not getting the correct training and instruction that they should be receiving; the critical instruction in how to prevent injuries may not be something a volunteer coach knows how to provide.

Also, even if a coach is qualified, their attitude and ambitions may not be in the best interests of the athletes. High school coaches want their teams to win not only because it is always nice to win, but also because a winning team can get the coach noticed and may be his or her ticket to college level coaching. Since high school coaches tend to have lower salaries than college level coaches, the prospect of a college level position can be very attractive. This incentive can make a high school coach push their developing athletes to compete at a college level, rather than a high school level. Consequently, coaches may push their students too hard in order to win, resulting in more injuries. Even well qualified high school level coaches may inadvertently hurt their athletes by trying to make their programs more like the college level programs. This level of competition and intense training is not ideal for the high school student’s physique. The only way a coach can be the “ideal coach” is by understanding both the mechanics of the sport and the intensity level their players are at. Then they can try to get their athletes to the next level, instead of themselves.

C. Proper hydration

Some of the most common injuries are caused by dehydration. Dehydration is caused when a person’s body loses more fluid than it takes in. Young athletes are prone to dehydration because they heat up much faster than adults, thus metabolizing more fluid when exercising. This can be a particularly big problem in extremely hot weather, since dehydration will occur more quickly than normal. Coaches, therefore, must ensure that they give a lot of “water breaks” during the course of a practice since good hydration is key to avoiding heat related sport’s injuries.

D. Good nutrition

Good nutrition is essential for an athlete to maintain the appropriate level of energy, mental focus, and body composition (muscle mass, etc.). Depending on what type of sport one plays, an athlete must adjust their calorie intake to compensate for the energy they expend playing their sport. A normal person takes in about 2,000 calories a day, depending on their weight. However, because an athlete is much more active than a normal person, their intake calorie must increase to stay healthy. Carbohydrates are especially important for athletes. This is because carbohydrates “supply the body with glucose for energy” (Health Guides). The glucose is then stored in the muscles and liver as glycogen. Glycogen is essential for athletes “during short bursts of exercise such as sprinting, basketball, gymnastics, or soccer,” because “your body relies on glycogen to keep your blood sugar levels stable and thus maintain your energy” (Health Guide). Another consequence is that if the athlete does not eat the right amount of food he or she can become malnourished. Eventually, this can lead to many chronic illnesses and a severe lack of energy.

Discussion Questions:

1. Are there other ways in which we can prevent serious youth sports’ injuries?
2. Should the focus be on prevention, or should we strive to “avoid” these types of injuries in young athletes altogether? Discuss the pros and cons of this.
3. If a child or a school district cannot afford proper equipment, trained coaches, or good nutrition, what should be done? What are the options? Should a child be denied playing on a sports team because he or she does not have proper equipment? What comes first – the child’s health or the value of participating in sports?

5. **LONG TERM PROBLEMS THAT ARISE DUE TO SILENCE AND INACTION**

If left unnoticed or untreated, some injuries that occur during youth sports can have lasting consequences. These consequences are not always considered in the present moment, but ought to enter the conversation when considering whether participating in competitive youth sports does more harm than good.

A. Cardiac

Because young athletes train their bodies to perform under harsh conditions, “child athletes have superior cardiac functional capacity compared with non-athletes” (American Academy of Pediatrics [AAP]). However, such intense workouts might take a toll on the heart. Studies have shown that with intense training the “myocardial function can be depressed,” which can cause, “transient decrease in left ventricular contractility after extremes of athletic competition” (AAP). While many signs show that the heart can be affected by overusing the heart, it is not certain how badly the heart is affected, or might be affected, by over-exercising.

B. Musculoskeletal Injury

Overusing muscles and bones or putting stress on them by working out can either build up the muscle or bone, or break it down. When the bone or muscle has too much stress placed upon it, the “muscle tissue becomes atrophic, and bone mineral content decreases” (AAP). Because of this, there is a higher probability that “excessive stress overload can lead to tissue breakdown and injury.” (AAP)

C. Nutrition

To reiterate the fact that a well-balanced diet is essential for the adequate development of athletes we have developed what is called a Food Pyramid. Young athletes need substantially more carbohydrates, which makes up the largest portion of the pyramid, for short bursts of high-intensity activity. However, athletes also need more proteins, fats, and lipids to replenish the ones that are currently being used. Because young bodies are in the prime of their developmental years, having a balanced diet is very important to avoid becoming too slender. If an athlete becomes too slender he or she might be more prone to major injuries such as bone deteriorations or fractures.

Calcium and iron are also very important nutritional components. Calcium is a mineral found in dairy products which promotes “normal bone growth,” while iron is needed for “adequate oxygen transport” (AAP). To ensure the athlete has a sufficient amount of calcium, he or she should consume foods with high dairy content. As for iron, an athlete should eat more red meats, because it contains a surplus amount of iron. A substantial amount of iron is a requirement during the growing years than at any other time in life. Without iron, oxygen transport (hemoglobin) and the use of the Krebs Cycle will be of no use. Therefore, calcium and iron intake should be modified for the needs of the individual.
D. Sexual Maturation

Girls tend to get their periods when they are around 12 years of age. However, some might get them later or earlier due to the development of their bodies. We see that most of the time with some female athletes, they lose a substantial amount of body mass causing them to “delay sexual maturation.” This is caused by “under nutrition, training stress, and low levels of body fat” (AAP). As a result of necessary factors for developmental growth missing, young female athletes develop with an abnormal menstrual cycle.

E. Psychosocial Development

Concerning the pressures that young athletes face from their parents and coaches, there has been a marked increase in problems related to anxiety and stress. When people become extremely anxious, large amounts of cortisol circulate in the bloodstream. Cortisol may temporarily impair one’s ability to think clearly and because of this, one might not perform to the best of their ability.

Discussion Questions:

1. Knowing the long term effects of sport injuries, it is justifiable for parents and coaches to push children into highly competitive sports?
2. Is it possible for a child to know what is good for them in the long term? Discuss the ethical implications of putting children in potentially harmful situations which could affect their futures when they have no ability to understand future effects.

6. PERSONAL REFLECTIONS ON COLLEGE SPORTS

In this activity, students will read stories about six students who were or are college athletes. They will then discuss how and why different decisions were made. Most of the student’s stories have been adapted from the article, “11 Student-Athletes On What They Learned From Playing College Sports” by Justin Block for The
Huffington Post. Blair Socci’s story can be found in her post on the website xoJane. The first set of stories highlights students that were disappointed by their college experience. The second set of stories highlights students who had positive experiences with college sports.

“I feel like it was worth it to be on the team, but I have to say, going through it really, really sucked.”

Before Julian McWilliams, Sumorwuo Zaza, and Blair Socci became a part of their college sport programs, they enjoyed playing high school sports. Julian was an amazing baseball player, Sumorwuo was outstanding at football, and Blair was gold in volleyball. They all had dreams of going to college and eventually going into the big leagues. However, their dreams would vanish once college started. Once starting college sports, Julian McWilliams, Sumorwuo Zaza, and Blair Socci all concluded that sports in college weren’t the best. Actually, Sumorwuo said, “I feel like it was worth it to be on the team, but I have to say, going through it really, really sucked.” Most of their complications came from bodily strains, long work hours, and setbacks.

Julian and Sumorwuo both noted that the amount of strain placed on their bodies was too much. Julian said, “they not only had me lifting more than others to put some more muscle on me, but they also put me on ‘football meal plan,’ giving me multiple meals a day.” Julian complained that with the “grueling schedule... I found myself sick a lot because of little sleep....”

Sumorwuo mentioned how he was already in a lot of trouble because of his numerous ACL injuries. In high school, “[He] tore [his] ACL [his] senior year. Basically, all the colleges [he] was interested in stopped talking to [him].” After he was recruited, however, he tore his ACL another two times; once in freshman year and once in sophomore year. From then on, everything became much worse. He mentioned that “On [his] third surgery, [he] had serious complications and had a pulmonary embolism and was in an induced coma for a day and the hospital for a week.” Due to this major setback, his coach called him and said that his football career was over. It was a huge blow to the Dartmouth football star, but he also knew that if he didn’t stop playing he might be dead soon. Sumorwuo said, “I was just happy to be alive”.

Similarly, Blair found that college sports weren’t the best for her either, mainly because an injury put her out of the game. During her freshman year at UCLA, Blair proved herself to be one of the best volleyball players on the team. However, the next year, she tore her meniscus. The pain in her knee was unbearable and she soon found herself on the bench for the first time. She was devastated, but knew that because of her injury she would never be good enough to play ever again. After her surgery, she told her coaches that she was quitting the game. It was a tough decision, but she knew that the other competitors were far better than her.

All along, they knew that the colleges they went to pushed them way too hard. Once college ended, Julian went on to be a professional baseball player in New Mexico, Sumorwuo engaged himself in his studies, and Blair pursued other passions that volleyball had previously held her back from. Their sports experiences resemble many other student’s experiences; they love the sport, but the college experience was not right for them.

The positives of participation in college sports
Unlike in the three athletes highlighted above, student athletes, Kim Bellware, Carly Ledbetter, Ali Watkins, and Paul Raushenbush, all thought that their experiences in college sports were overall, great.

In their interviews for *The Huffington Post*, they noted that college sports gave them better opportunities financially. Sports scholarships were a big help in paying for college tuition. Especially for soccer player Kim Bellware who said, “I have to note that I probably would not have even played reserve if I didn’t have an academic scholarship.” People, such as themselves, see sports as a way into college. Sometimes sports scholarships pay for everything, including equipment, books, food, and housing. Carly Ledbetter said at the end of her years at college, “...how incredible it is to graduate debt-free.”

Along the same lines, they all felt that in one way or another, the relationships that they formed “were what made it all worth it” (Kim Bellware). For Paul, he stated that although he loved politics, he also loved swimming because he had “an additional group of friends,” while also playing the “sport [he] had loved since [he] was six” (Paul Raushenbush). Sports teams were like a family, they did everything together so they all had to stick together. However, a couple of times they did mention that the college sports programs did have their downfalls such as “the institutionalism of college athletics sucks” (Ali Watkins). The main problem with institutionalism, as Ali Watkins stated, was that “certain teams got priority over ours” (Ali Watkins). Although there were some differences in how they looked at their individual sports programs, they all seemed to like them in the end, which is true for a lot of other college athletes.

Discussion questions:

1. Why do you think Julian, Sumorwuo, and Blair dislike their experiences, while Carly, Kim, Ali, and Paul loved theirs?
2. How did their decisions on school impact how they felt about the programs?
3. What could be done differently for student athletes to enjoy the college sports experience even more?

7. CASE STUDY #1: WHEN TO SAY NO? WHAT IS A DOCTOR'S ROLE?

Should the doctor intervene or should the doctor allow the parents to make the ultimate decision?

A girl named Claire is going into her freshman year of high school. All throughout middle school Claire was the star soccer player. She hopes that she can go into high school starting on varsity, just like both her older brothers and her dad. However, Claire has gotten two concussions already and her mother has concerns regarding future head injuries. She decides to take Claire to a specialist to get his opinion on the matter. While at the specialist, Claire’s mother explains the situation with the fear of concussions but also explains the opposing view of the father (in that sports allows for better social skills and helps with self-esteem). The specialist is confronted with two options. Because the concussions happened a year or so ago, the doctor doesn’t see a pressing concern right now, but knows that she is at higher risk for another in the future. However, because the concern is so low, as of now, and the daughter and father are so passionate about her playing, the doctor doesn’t see a great issue with her playing. Seeing that the mother’s concern is a great one, but that the father’s concern is also valid, the doctor decides to let the mother and her daughter go home and discuss what they think is best for themselves. The mother and daughter leave, but the mother is very mad at the outcome, because she left with the same concern that she had coming in.

Discussion Questions:
1. Given the circumstance, do you think the doctor handled the situation well?
2. What could the doctor have done to help the parents make the best decision?
3. Do you think the mother could’ve handled the situation better?
4. What information was missing to make a solid decision?
5. Knowing that the daughter has a higher risk of getting another concussion, should the doctor have acted in a more precautionary manner?

When and who should intervene when things have gone too far?

Kosta Karageorge’s story is adapted from a true story, as reported by Tim Rohan in the New York Times.

From a very young age, Kosta had been extremely involved in football and wrestling. His two older brothers were one of the main reasons that he became passionate about these two sports. Headed down the same path as his brothers, Kosta soon fell in love with sports. However, his competitive nature would drive him overboard. In the eighth grade, Kosta didn’t make it into the state championship for wrestling. He blamed it on his strength. Therefore, Kosta started to lift a lot more. After that, Kosta became pathologically obsessed with his fitness. He ate huge portions, worked out excessively, threw up occasionally, and even started to take steroids with his friend. These steroids had side effects, one of which made him very angry. As he neared closer to the state championship match, Kosta started to get incredibly anxious that patches of his hair would start falling out. His parents questioned why this happened, but when they found out they didn’t do much about it. Going into his state championship for wrestling, Kosta lost two matches. Losing these two matches drove him crazy. He walked home after the competition and sat in his basement holding his father’s gun. If it weren’t for his friend walking in, he might’ve killed himself. He was never a violent kid, but something was just not right.

Entering into university at Ohio State, Kosta realized he was not nearly as good as the other players. Trying to work his way to be as good as the rest, Kosta pushed himself beyond all reasonable boundaries. Over the course of all his years in wrestling, Kosta experienced a total of 15 documented concussions. However, because of his athletic nature and his drive towards “manliness”, Kosta never did anything to help heal his concussions. As time progressed, other athletes took the spotlight, leaving Kosta in the shadows. Having come to the conclusion that he wasn’t making it anywhere in wrestling, he decided that his last chance of becoming pro would be to go into football. He never did well in that either. So, the night before the big Michigan vs Ohio State game, Kosta, his girlfriend, and his friend went to a party. Kosta was acting strange at the party and when he got home that night he was acting almost as if he was depressed. Later, Kosta started to break down. The next morning he walked out of his apartment wearing a black hoodie and black pants holding something in his hoodie pocket. In the next coming days, a woman and her nephew found Kosta’s body in a green dumpster with a bullet in his forehead.

After Kosta was officially reported dead, his parents called for an autopsy report and shipped his brain off to a facility so that they could study it. They found out that due to his many concussions, Kosta had what was known as C.T.E., which is severe brain damage that can cause mood changes. This made it quite evident as to why he would kill himself. His former teammates said that he would complain about his head hurting or that he was hearing a buzzing noise but would never get checked because he never wanted to miss a practice. They said he was being manly. However, his coaches knew that he had gotten some concussions and they also knew that he went to the on campus doctor to get them checked out. The doctor would never report him because Kosta did not authorize for him to share any information about his condition. Knowing this, how do you think the doctors, the coaches, and the other athletes should’ve handled his situation before it got out of hand? Were the parents to blame? Was it
the pressure of becoming the best at his sport that drove him over the edge? If the risk of playing a high impact sport involved life-threatening concussions, why would one still play said sport?

8. PREVENTING INJURY: WHAT CAN YOU DO?

Here are some suggestions for preventing serious injury from playing sports.

Remember RICE right after an injury

**Rest:** When the doctor says that an athlete needs some time off from the sport to take care of an injury, he or she should do so. Even though many athletes and parents of athletes will argue against this, resting is the best and quickest way for injuries to heal. If an injury has occurred and the athlete doesn’t wait the allotted time for the injury to heal, the injury could get worse. This could then result in the athlete being out of his or her sport longer. When a doctor gives the initial amount of time that an athlete will be out with an injury, it is normally the minimum amount of time; don’t make it longer by damaging your injury even more.

**Ice:** Ice helps to relieve swelling from an injury. After a sprain, a strain, or any type of traumatic impact, ice is needed to help soothe the pain from inflammation. However, many think that ice is a treatment for injuries, but that is not true. Ice is meant to numb the pain of inflammation, not treat it. Many types of injuries use ice as an aid, such as, overuse injuries, fresh bruises, sprains, strains, bumps, anything that produces acute discomfort.

**Compression:** Compression helps by keeping oxygen in the part of the body where it is needed most. When we work out, the oxygenated blood turns into lactic acid. Lactic acid is what produces the infamous soreness and fatigue after high-intensity exercise. By applying pressure to an area that is already injured, it makes it harder for oxygen to turn into lactic acid. This means that when injured tissue is immediately compressed, it may heal more quickly.

**Elevation:** Elevation is a way of reducing swelling by using gravity. By elevating the part of the body that is injured, it helps the blood rush back to the heart, thus helping the injured part of the body.

Who is responsible?

Everyone is responsible for preventing sports related injuries. The parents are responsible for making sure that the children are doing what they love to do, not what they think they want to do. It has been shown, but is not proven, that enabling children to pursue their own passions is what makes them excel, not forcing them into something. The coaches are to blame for not taking better care of the athletes. Coaches must realize when an athlete is too exhausted to play or is not conditioned well enough to stay healthy in the game. However, most coaches over-practice, overfeed and over-schedule their athletes. The old mentality of just “pushing through the pain” is not healthy nor relevant anymore. While, coaches may have the best intentions for their athletes at heart, most of the time they are not properly educated enough to protect the athlete. Instead, the students should focus
on what they love and can keep them healthy, whether sports related or not. Recognizing when a player is not fully committed to the sport or is greatly depleted is key to giving the athlete a better future. Many might see a sport scholarship as “the holy grail for colleges,” (Holland & Schoen), but that is not true at all. Getting into college on a sport’s scholarship is hard, but going pro is even harder.

9. CONCLUSION: PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

Understanding the full spectrum of risks that can arise from having children play high impact sports competitively from an early age, we must ask ourselves--is the benefit worth the risk?. Obviously, there is no black and white answer to this question. What is good for one child, who may show incredible talent and ability in a given sport from an early age, may not be good for another (or even for the general population of children who have “average” ability). In general, children should be encouraged to be active from an early age. There is great benefit in having kids learn healthy habits early, including the need to move and exercise. However, it is not clear that there is any benefit for a very young child to play sports competitively. At such an early age, the greatest benefit of engaging in sports seems to be social interaction, learning how to play well with others, having fun and staying active. Sports at this age should be kept “fun.”

Since there is greater risk for longer term damage from overuse injuries and other sports related injuries if they are sustained very early, the risks of forcing a young child in primary to focus on a given competitive sport. In the hopes that he or she will get a scholarship to college later in life, these risks seem to outweigh the benefits. Unless a child shows unusual talents early on and actually enjoys a specialized sport (such as skiing or gymnastics), there is little evidence to point to the child having a greater chance of becoming good enough in the sport to get a college scholarship later in life. Also, the likelihood that a student will get into a competitive college on a sports scholarship is not very high; competition at this level is very intense; further, the likelihood that a child will go on to become a professional athlete and earn a living from their sport is very low.

So, is pursuing a sport competitively as a child a bad thing? Of course it isn’t. Some kids genuinely like the sports that they play and are genuinely good at them. Some sports, such as specialized sports (swimming, gymnastics, skiing, etc.) benefit from starting early in life, when flexibility is high, fear is low, and it is sometimes easier to learn. Additionally, playing sports in school and focusing as you get older with the desire to get a scholarship in school is also a great goal. College costs are high and for some kids, this is a great path to a good education.

But for all the benefits, there must be general criteria in place to ensure safety as a child engages in sports. Additionally, children should enjoy what they are doing and not feel pressed to do something that they don’t want to do. Forcing them to do so based on a parent’s or coach’s desire to win is not beneficial. It will be harmful to the child in the long run and could strain relationships within a family. There may be other sports that the child is good at that they would enjoy better (or other activities—like music, art, etc.). Additionally, since competitive sports and participation in sports will always be attractive to many, it is essential that children, their parents, and their coaches ensure that proper safety precautions are always followed.

- Engage in practices and activities that are age appropriate—center on fun and learning sportsmanship and rules at the primary school age, introduce more technique at the middle school age and become more ‘competitive’ at the upper school age in preparation for college level play.
- Always ensure that proper equipment is being used and when injuries arise, allow them to heal properly before re-entry into competitive sports.
- As a child progresses, ensure that they understand the proper ways of training and the need to maintain good nutrition, sleep and to “listen to their bodies” and tell a coach or parent if something
doesn’t feel right. An undetected injury could lead to long-term problems that can ruin your life in the long term.

Being a part of a team is hugely satisfying and important socially. Playing sports, either competitively or for fun, can be an enriching part of a person's life. Sports, for some, can be their safe havens—they enjoy playing, they are good at it and they have lots of social connections because of the sport. It can also open the door to a good education or a professional career for the very lucky few who are good enough. Specialization can, therefore, have benefits. But, it is also true that school and college athletes should have a backup plan. If their whole plan is to make a career in their sport, they have to realize that the chances are very low. College athletes in particular should be required to keep up with their academic classes in order to graduate; they should also be encouraged to have other interests to fall back on if something happens. With the possibility of injury being high and the likelihood of professional success low, it is important that athletes and those who support them give them the guidance that they need; if something happens and they don’t have a backup plan, that is a problem.

As you think about the issues raised in this module, consider how you view the risks and benefits of engaging in competitive sports at an early age. Do you believe the risks outweigh the benefits, or vice versa? Competitive sports will always be with us. It is a part of our culture and history. But we can be smarter in ensuring that we don’t cause injury and harm to those who compete by making poor choices and forcing kids to compete too early.

10. REFERENCES AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES


“Growth Plate Fractures.” Mayo Clinic.


How Likely Is It, Really, that Your Athletic Kid Will Turn Pro? NPR. Podcast 4 Sep 2015.


“Kid’s Sports Injuries- the Numbers Are Impressive.” Nationwide Children’s.


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