

# Playing It Safe



## Tips to keep your young athlete healthy and safe

30 million kids participate in organized sports and even more take part in neighborhood football scrimmages, basketball pick-ups and other games with their friends. And while no one will argue that getting outside and playing is important to keep kids healthy and happy, you should also know that 1.9 million children under 15 are treated each year in Emergency Rooms for sports-related injuries! Here's a few tips to help your kids stay on the field and out of the injury zone!

### SWITCH IT UP

Kids today often focus too much on a single sport – putting all their energy into excelling in one area. This can lead not only to mental burnout – and a lot of pressure – but also to physical injuries from exerting the same muscles 10 to 12 months out of the year, in the same sport. Research shows that young athletes who play different sports have fewer injuries and play longer than those who specialize before puberty.

### COACH CAREFULLY

Practicing, supporting and giving your child pointers about the sports they play is great – and what every parent should do. But avoid putting yourself in the role of your child's coach – screaming advice from the sidelines, pulling them aside during the game to correct their playing or putting pressure on them to perform. Remember, your child needs to know that your love is not dependent upon their performance in a sport. If you have time to volunteer as your child's little league or other team coach – GREAT! – just talk to your child beforehand to make sure they're comfortable with it. When you're in your coaching mode, make sure you don't demand more from your own child than other kids on their team. Talk to your spouse for perspective if there seems to be friction. You might want to rent a copy of the Will Ferrell flick *Kicking and Screaming* for some funny "don'ts" on coaching your kids!

### GET IT IN GEAR

Make sure your child has the proper gear for their sport – and that it fits. Be careful using hand-me-down gear from older brothers and sisters. Shoes or other equipment that is too big can actually CAUSE injuries, instead of helping your kids play better.

### GET THE DOC'S O.K.

Just as adults shouldn't start an exercise program without checking with their doctor, kids should have a physical before starting a new sport (and really, once a year too). Your child's doctor can make sure there aren't any physical limitations you should be aware of.

### CHECK OUT YOUR TEAM

Make sure the organizations your child participates with have safety procedures, good sportmanship rules and are committed to preventing injuries. And do your part as well – instruct your own child in sports safety, make sure the organization has updated medical records including information on medications, allergies, doctor and dentist names and numbers, etc. and know how to reach you – or another responsible party – in case of an injury or emergency.

