

Education, gear head off soccer injuries

By Elizabeth Voss

For many kids, back to school means back to sports. And for parents, that means it's back to worrying about injuries.

No matter what sport your child passionately plays, there is a risk of injury. But the rip-roaring fun and high-flying balls in soccer make it one of the riskiest for head injuries.

More than 88,000 children between the ages of 4 and 18 play on Michigan State Youth Soccer Association (MSYSA) soccer teams, and thousands more participate in school leagues. Unfortunately, many of the soccer kids – and their parents – don't realize how dangerous the sport can be. That's why the MSYSA launched a safety campaign this year to help educate the public.

“It is a contact sport,” said Adam Keller, program manager of MSYSA. “Injuries occur. We would like people to know how to prevent injuries and identify concussions.”

The risk

Often parents think of soccer as a safer alternative to football, but studies show the risk of head injury is similar in the two sports, said Dr. J. Scott Delaney, 38, of the Department of Emergency Medicine in McGill University Health Centre, Montreal.

A Canadian study compared university football and soccer athletes, and found two-thirds of both types of athletes experienced symptoms of concussion during a one year period, he said. A concussion is an injury to the brain that is caused by a violent blow and results in temporary or prolonged loss of function.

“There is definitely a concern about head injury in soccer,” said Dr. Joseph Congeni, who is on the Council of Sports Medicine and Fitness for the American Academy of Pediatrics. “There are fewer (concussions) among small children, it increases in junior high, and it is much higher in high school and college.”

It’s important that children learn proper techniques for bouncing the ball off their foreheads, which is called “heading.” By bending his knees and tensing his neck, a child’s whole body absorbs the impact of the ball, which reduces the chance of head injury.

But most concussions happen when players knock their heads against hard surfaces, such as other players’ heads, the ground, or other players’ elbows, said Delaney. Fewer concussions result from accidental contact with the ball, he added.

Identifying concussions

Unfortunately, many concussions go unrecognized, said Congeni, who lectures widely on brain injury. Children are four times more likely to re-injure the brain after a concussion has already occurred, he said. People often mistakenly believe that a child must be “knocked out” if he has a concussion, Congeni said. Actually, loss of consciousness occurs in fewer than 30 percent of concussions, he said.

Symptoms of concussion include loss of orientation, dizziness, headache, double vision or blurred vision, nausea and weakness, Congeni said. Players, trainers, parents and coaches should be taught to recognize these symptoms. If a child complains of any these symptoms, he should be pulled from the game, said Congeni.

“A good rule of thumb is ‘When in doubt, hold a kid out,’ ” said Congeni. If a child experiences any symptoms of concussion, he should be evaluated by a doctor.

Usually the brain will recover from a concussion after seven to 14 days, Congeni said. New international guidelines recommend that players wait at least five days after symptoms have disappeared to return to active play, he said. These guidelines are used in most high schools and universities.

Headgear prevents injury

Four years ago, after his daughter suffered three concussions playing soccer, Jeff Skeen, 47, of San Diego, designed the leading brand of soccer headgear, Full90.

“As a parent when you watch your kid go through that, it’s horrifying,” said Skeen, a product designer who has developed headgear for many sports. “My ambition is to reduce the number of head injuries out there.”

Skeen contacted the MSYSA with the idea of an educational safety campaign. Full90 is sponsoring the three-year initiative, donating \$5,000 each year, Web site assistance and \$15,000 in headgear to be given to 500 low-income soccer players in Michigan.

Many soccer players don’t wear anything on their heads, but headgear is becoming increasingly popular. Skeen predicts that five years from today, most soccer players will wear some form of head protection.

“There will come a day when we look back and wonder what were people thinking (not to wear headgear).” Skeen said.

Ed Gotfredson of Grosse Pointe said he feels good that his 9-year-old son Teddy is wearing headgear now when he plays soccer. He purchased headgear for Teddy two years ago after finding Full90 on the Internet at www.full90.com.

“It makes sense,” Gotfredson said. “You wear shin guards for your legs, but you don’t wear anything for your head? Your child’s head is so fragile. (The headgear is) insurance to protect their heads.”

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