

Too serious, too soon? A complex issue but there are some easy-to-remember messages we can give parents

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Some time ago, my colleague Chris Whatman asked me to write a guest editorial talking about some of the research I and my colleagues have been doing in the kids' sport space. It has been on my 'to do' list for a while but I was prompted to put pen to paper after a recent visit to my local physiotherapist. As I walked into his treatment room he appeared really down. He told me he was devastated that he had for the first time just encountered an ACL injury in an 11 year old. This was probably the lowest point for him over a period of time in which he had regularly expressed his concern regarding the increasing number of sports injuries he was seeing in children and adolescents.

So if there has been an increase, and recent ACC media releases show there has been a 60% surge in general injuries in the 10-14 year old age group,¹ what are some of the factors possibly contributing to this? We are conducting a programme of youth development research at AUT, with a team of people with expertise in coaching, sports parenting, physical activity, exercise science and sport injury prevention. I think that what we have witnessed over the last couple of decades is an increasingly serious focus on young people's organised sport, and this is occurring at increasingly younger ages. Cognisant of these worrying developments, Sport New Zealand funded a youth sport

'culture change' project in 2015. The project – 'Good Sports'² – was designed and implemented in the Greater Auckland area by Aktive Auckland Sport and Recreation working closely with researchers from AUT and Massey University. The resources utilised in Good Sports workshops were sourced by the research team and were drawn from the latest international research and NZ based research we were conducting. To date, over 2,000 parents/coaches/teachers have attended Good Sports workshops, and over 300 people nationwide representing over 100 sports organisations (NSOs, RSOs, RSTs, Schools etc) have been trained up as Good Sports 'developers', qualified to run the programme in their own communities.

Based on the latest research, Good Sports advocates for young people's sporting experiences to be conducted in a 'Climate of Development' as opposed to a 'Climate of Performance'. A Climate of Performance is characterised as one that focuses on outcomes (winning) as opposed to development; is usually accompanied by pressure (from coaches or parents); and leads to earlier and earlier specialisation. Evidence we are uncovering here in NZ and internationally suggests that a 'climate of performance' can result in elite performance, but comes at a cost for the vast majority, these costs including burnout, dropout and overuse injuries. Conversely, a 'climate of development'

creates an environment that supports early diversification in a range of sports; lots of 'free' and 'risky' play outside of the organised sport setting; is accompanied by parental support and a lack of pressure from coaches; and if specialising in one sport, then that happens later (15 yrs plus) and only if the child wants to and is ready. Evidence we are discovering here in New Zealand shows that this developmental pathway is also a pathway to elite performance, but more importantly can also result in kids staying with sport as they transition into adulthood. It also reduces the risk of overuse injuries in the adolescent age group.

As we now know, there are some simple guidelines that we can give parents based on recent evidence.³ These easy-to-remember guidelines basically state that children: should not participate in organised sport for more hours per week than years of age; should not exceed a 2:1 ratio of organised sport to free play; and not participate in one sport for more than 8 months of the year. Physiotherapists and other sports medicine practitioners are ideally placed to communicate these messages to parents. Most importantly, let parents know that sport should be fun and should not be overly serious too soon. The more their kids enjoy sport, the more likely they are to stay with it as they get older.

However, parents are only one stakeholder – no matter how well informed parents and coaches are, it is the competitive structures put in place by sporting organisations that can drive behaviour. Acknowledging this, Good Sports conversations are also happening at the sport organisational level. Partly in response to these conversations a number of provincial rugby unions, supported by the New Zealand

Rugby Union and Sport NZ, have removed junior representative rugby competitions.⁴ These changes reflect a move away from a 'climate of performance' and support a more developmental approach to children's sport. Structures can shape attitudes and drive the behaviour of not only adults but of children themselves. The Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) suggests that behaviours can be driven by: attitudes (beliefs related to the likely consequences of the behaviour); norms (the expectations of significant others, eg, parents, coaches); and perceived behavioural control (perceptions about external factors that will control behavioural performance).⁵ A number of years ago I interviewed three injured female athletes (two netball players, one hockey player). They had similar stories about playing on through injury, but I repeat an extract from the interview with the hockey player here:

Player: "Hockey is like rugby, you need to appear tough and take a knock. I had compartment syndrome – knew what it was – but told nobody as my age group trials were coming up for national selection. I got picked but injury got worse and I ended up missing much of the next season."

SW: "If you could go back in time, would you make same decision to disguise the injury?"

Player: "Yes."

SW: "What would make you consider telling your coaches about an injury?"

Player: "Reassurance that you are not forgotten just because you are injured – but that wouldn't happen."

The issues we face are complex. We need to have informative conversations with parents and coaches, organisations need to have a deeper understanding of the implications

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of their athlete development structures and processes (as evidenced by the attitude of the hockey player interviewed here). It is time in New Zealand for a 'think tank' involving representatives from key stakeholders involved with the delivery and support of sport for young people. There have been moves in the right direction, as evidenced by rugby organisations recently. But if we want to see a decline in the injury trends reported by ACC, that will require a multi-disciplinary approach. As researchers we have worked in silos for too long (sports medicine, exercise science, coaching, sport management), we have often ignored the knowledge and experiences of those at the 'coal face' (physiotherapists, coaches, teachers). We need to work together to enhance the ongoing delivery of sport for young people in our country. As a relatively small country, with a history of innovation, collaboration should be easy and we could lead the way in this area.

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