

YOUTH SPORTS | USA HOCKEY

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Youth sports can play a significant role in the development of children. They can have a positive impact, teaching important life skills that may be difficult to learn elsewhere. Athletes often have improved time management as students and learn to set goals, learn teamwork, understand commitment, deal with both success and failure, and develop the skills of interpersonal relationships. Many of these qualities have been shown to produce success in academics, personal and professional situations.

Recently, youth sports have come under scrutiny due to the reported increased injury rates, especially concussions. Issues such as single sport concentration, sport specific training, equipment protection, and the pursuit of college scholarship/professional money have been identified. Parents have become concerned about the toll injuries may take on their child's short term and long term development. Concussions and the possibility of CTE are of particular concern.

USA Hockey has become a leader at the national level, trying to promote safety for their players. Ice hockey is a collision sport, played at a high rate of speed, requiring split second decisions, played in a confined area with walls and glass barriers, and with a stick in the hands of the players. They have been using data collection and injury analysis to understand the factors that lead to injuries. They also look at equipment, add rules and regulations, refine coaching techniques, and skill development. USA Hockey has over 500,000 participants and 65,000 coaches spread over 12 districts in the United States. There is a national committee of Safety and Protective Equipment and a Coaching Education Program with a close interaction between those national bodies.

Most recently, USA Hockey identified body checking as playing a role in injuries. In 2013, the age of body checking was raised to 13, Hockey Canada followed this recommendation in 2014. Rules against, checking from behind, head checking, and use of the stick in dangerous ways have been instituted.

The Coaching Education Program emphasizes the principles of proper checking as part of a body contact sport and not as a contributor to injury when used appropriately. The coaches teach skill development, injury prevention, respect for fellow players and the game.

Recent discussions were held in 2019 about further modifications of the checking policy. Several proposals were discussed at the most recent Winter Meeting, including raising the age of checking to age 16, returning to no age restriction, and further emphasis and instruction by the coaching Education program on the transition from "body contact" to "body checking" for the 11-13 age group. Proponents of raising the age to 16, were concerned about the maturity differences (height/weight) in boys between the ages of 13-16. But, eliminating body checking until age 16 would be a significant change to the sport, with no new evidence that it would reduce concussions—women's hockey is "no-check" yet continues to report concussions in their injury statistics. Those in favor of returning to no restriction on checking supported better education on checking from the earliest years of participation. In the end, USA Hockey is going to keep the current age restrictions and pursue better education and skill development as 11-12 year-olds prepare for the introduction of checking at age 13. Future programs are also in development including the "Fair Play" initiative currently under study in Minnesota.

For those of us, who were former student-athletes, we believe in the importance of youth sports. We also believe it is important that we give back in helping to shape the future and evolution of youth sports, making it safer for kids so that they can experience all that sports have to offer.