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5 Ways to Help Teens Cope With Sports Injuries

By Suzanne Ritter



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If you're the parent of an adolescent athlete, it's possible you've also been the parent of an injured athlete or may be in the future. According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, sports-related injuries were the leading cause of emergency room visits for children ages 12-17 in 2017.

My eldest son has experienced three injuries in the same number of years and I'm keenly aware of how upsetting it is that we can't prevent or predict all injuries. Of course, some sports are more dangerous than others. Contact sports such as football can be expected to result in a higher number of injuries than noncontact sports such as swimming. Yet, all teen sports have a potential for injury.

When it comes to dealing with sports injuries, the best defense can be a good offense. The following are five important things parents of a pre-collegiate athlete can do to help adolescents and teens handle and recover from the challenges of a sports injury and set them on a course for healing and, hopefully, continued play.

1. **Don't assume coaches know.** High school and competitive premier club coaches are well-trained and dedicated. Coaches are usually aware of potential sport-related injuries. But until college level athletics, they often aren't trained in the nuances of sport-related injuries other than the most common and, of course, concussions. It's up to parents to be proactive and keep coaches and trainers informed of the type and extent of a teen's injury, as well as your doctor's instructions.
2. **Find a doctor who will work with you and your teen.** A typical first step after an emergency room or initial doctor visit is to get a referral for an orthopedist. Injuries manifest in unique ways depending on physical history, development and injury event, so your teen will need a doctor or surgeon who specializes in musculoskeletal injuries. It's important to find an orthopedist who works with teens and has experience in the specific area of injury. Your parent network can be a wonderful source of referrals. Find someone you trust who also appreciates the need for teens to be involved in treatment decisions.

Dr. Steven Bernstein, an orthopedic surgeon in Chevy Chase, Maryland encourages parents to talk with, not at, their teens, about injuries and treatment options. "I want them to feel like they're active participants in these big decisions affecting their ability to get back on the field," Bernstein says. Allowing teens to take the lead in decisions, while using medical advice and judicious parental guidance, will result in greater responsibility for and commitment to recovery from them.

3. **Stay involved with the team or sport.** Teens often consider their athletic abilities to be a large part of their identity. This is both developmentally appropriate and also a challenge, as it can be difficult for a teen to broaden her perspective about who she is. You can help your teen continue to see herself as a part of the team by attending games and practices, whenever possible. Continue to volunteer for team activities as a parent and encourage your teen to inquire about additional ways to support the team. Often, more than one player is injured at a time, and working together with a teammate may be more fun than doing it alone.
4. **Encourage your teen to increase other activities or hobbies.** While remaining a part of the athletic organization, your teen can also take small steps toward broadening his identity with other activities. If he has other interests - such as playing an instrument, student government or theater - encourage him to do more and support those efforts. If he has no other activities, encourage him to join a new club, take an art class with a friend or get a part-time job. If physical activities are possible, help your teen find one that helps him stay as active as possible. Fostering other interests is healthy and can be a good distraction.
5. **Be patient and listen.** Support your teen as she works to accept her situation. A few months out of play can seem like an eternity to a teen. It may take time to fully grasp what's involved with treatment and recovery, including possible surgery, pain management and time away from her sport. Dr. Bernstein emphasizes the importance of helping teens understand that trying to play with an injury isn't helping themselves or their team. "Once teens understand this," he observes, "They often just want to proceed with treatment so they can get back to their sport and life as they knew it."

When listening, try to empathize with any feelings of fear, anger, loneliness or loss your teen may be experiencing. Try not to take grumpiness personally. Speaking with other athletes who've experienced similar injuries can be validating, providing perspective and offering a sense of hope to an injured player. If your teen is feeling especially discouraged, bring in the coach and/or a school counselor. They're good listeners, have experience and can help players create focus during recovery. Find a good talk therapist if you suspect your teen is feeling depressed. Warning signs of depression can include sleeping or eating more often or less frequently than usual, lack of participation with other usually enjoyable activities and friends, frequent or strong outbursts, physical violence, self-injury and substance abuse.

If an injury requires physical therapy (which it probably will), find a therapist you're willing to visit at least two days a week in the beginning, and offer to help your teen set up appointments and create a routine for continuing those exercises at home. Acknowledge what can often be small, yet real, efforts and improvements. You'll be more helpful when you use a light touch with your teen and stay focused on the light at the end of the tunnel.

Finally, help your teen ease *slowly* back to practice when ready, according to your doctor's protocol. Be encouraging without seeming pushy or anxious. Make sure coaches and trainers have all medical protocol documentation that is specific to your teen's case, and keep the lines of communication open.

Injuries that prevent teens from playing a beloved sport can be discouraging, even devastating in extreme cases. Although it won't heal a physical wound, attending to both your teen's physical and emotional needs during recovery can foster and encourage the resiliency needed for him to persevere and return to play, or courageously adapt if a new direction is required.

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