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Game On!

From the moment your kids are born, you have one basic goal: to keep them alive, of course! So when they're finally old enough to start piping up about which sports they *reeeeaaally* want to play, the best you can hope for is that they don't pine for something that involves being body-slammed or thrown into the air. And you know how often that works out. That's why *Parenting* developed a team-sports safety guide that rates the possible dangers of seven popular activities, each with a handy risk rating. But we *also* outline the benefits kids stand to gain from participating—even in football. The most important point to remember? If they're having fun, it's a fit!

BY ERIC BUTTERMAN



Risk Rating
(1 bear = safe, 5 bears = risky)



Soccer



What kids can gain: Balance. Foot dexterity is a must to juggle the ball while finding teammates to pass to or a goal to shoot at. And the constant running is a big boon to their endurance levels and cardiovascular health.

What kids risk: Routine hazards include shin splints (pain in the front of and inside the lower legs), ankle twists, and the like. The bigger issue stems from heading the ball, which has been linked to concussions and possible brain injury. And it can happen whether the move is done correctly or not.

How to keep them safe: The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) now recommends no purposeful heading of the ball before age 10, says Teri McCambridge, M.D., chair of the AAP Council on Sports Medicine and Fitness. And some coaches encourage players to hold off until 13, says Karl Dewazien, coaching director for the California Youth Soccer Association North. Younger kids' brains are just more susceptible to injury. You also need to protect your child by limiting games. "We're in a time where coaches are bragging about playing their kids in 120 to 140 games a year," Dewazien says. "The pros don't even do that. You need 48 to 72 hours to rest between games, not 40 minutes."

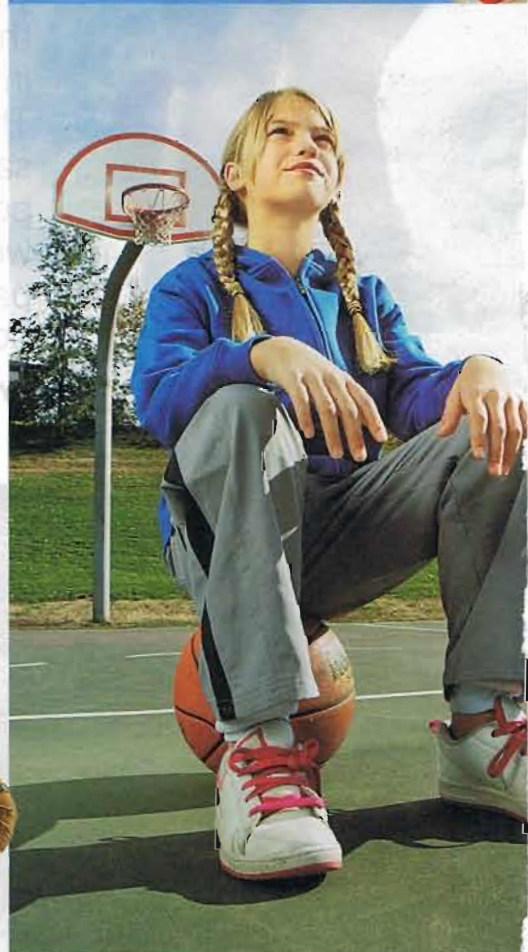
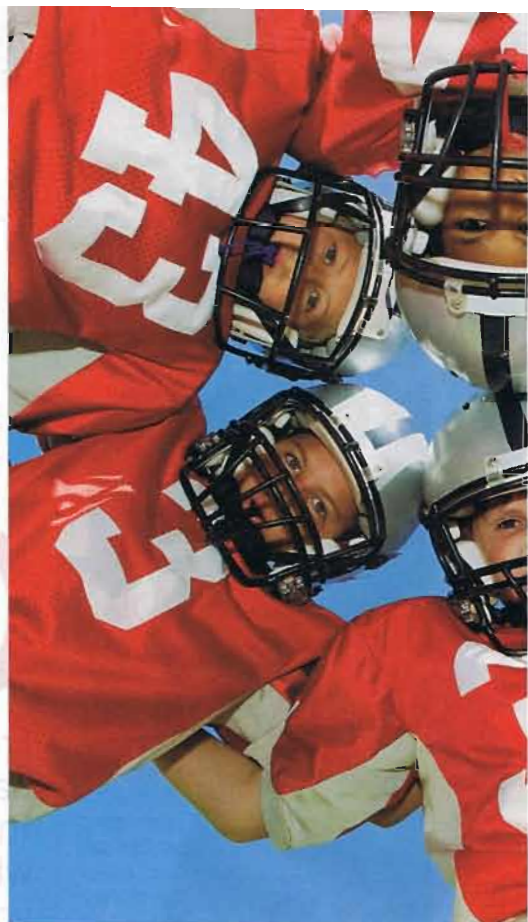
Baseball



What kids can gain: A sense of focus. "Keep your head in the game" is never more appropriate than in baseball. Because there's a lot of waiting around between pitches, you need to be patient and ready.

What kids risk: Baseball can seem pretty harmless, especially when most of the time you're not even moving. The typical complaints involve shoulder and elbow injuries, particularly among pitchers and catchers, as well as pulled hamstrings. "The most serious concern in baseball is the condition called *commotio cordis*, where a fast-moving ball hits a child in the chest wall at a particular phase in the heart cycle, and triggers arrhythmia," says Dr. McCambridge. It's rare, but can be life-threatening.

How to keep them safe: Because it's inevitable that your child will get nailed by a ball—and there's no reliable way to prevent *commotio cordis*—it's crucial that kids learn to turn away from a fast-moving pitch, says Mark Holzemer, a former major-league pitcher who's now a youth baseball instructor in Denver. It's a lot better to take it on the butt than the head or chest. If your child's a pitcher: Ban curveballs until he reaches at least 13 (they can harm a developing arm) and limit the total number of throws he makes per game. The rule of thumb: His age times six or seven.





BEAR & SPORTS EQUIPMENT THROUGHOUT: SHUTTERSTOCK MIDDLE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: MASTERFILE, PATRIK GIARDINO/CORBIS, BIG CHEESE PHOTO LLC, ALAMY, FANCY PHOTOGRAPHY/VEER



Hockey



What kids can gain: All that skating means kids get calorie-burning at its best. The sport is also a top way to gain leg strength and endurance. Kids' manual dexterity improves, too, through controlling a fast-moving puck with the stick.

What kids risk: Kids eventually learn to fly around the rink at ten-plus miles per hour, flinging themselves at one another along the way. That's not taking into account the potential for lost teeth, wipeouts (and concussions), and a culture of fighting that has softened but not disappeared. Stephanie Mullen of Blauvelt, NY, was concerned about getting her son involved in hockey but has now made peace with it. "He wanted to play hockey from such an early age, and we've been lucky," she says. "But I'm still concerned about head injuries. Bones will heal, but concussions can have a lasting effect."

How to keep them safe: Good equipment is a must, says Andy Calandro, a former coach for hockey's Team Maryland and co-owner of Elite Hockey Instruction in Laurel, MD. It can't keep your child 100 percent injury-free, but it can certainly make a difference. It's also smart to seek out leagues that ban "checking"—an act that mostly involves bumping, or rather slamming, another player.

Football



What kids can gain: As in all team sports, kids learn that you can't win alone, says Dr. McCambridge. And because of the intensity and duration of the practices, it teaches time-management skills. Ike Taylor, cornerback for the Pittsburgh Steelers, says football was critical to his development as a young boy growing up in New Orleans. "Football kept me away from so many other things that could have been bad for me," he recalls. "It taught me to work hard."

What kids risk: Say hello to one child taking another and throwing him down hard into the earth—and being encouraged to do so. Deep bruises and concussions are common; broken legs and spinal injuries are possible, though rare.

How to keep them safe: Heather Lutz-Silver of Sarasota, FL, believes the sport is safer than it once was but still takes additional measures for her 9-year-old son. "We buy extra pads—and the padding is much better than it used to be," she says. Just as important: She also recommends purchasing a new helmet if you don't feel confident in the one issued (you can paint it to match the team's colors). Lutz-Silver also feels evaluating the adult supervision is critical. "I credit my son's coaching staff because they make sure the kids are under control," she says.





Basketball



What kids can gain: Freedom from boredom. Basketball is the easiest sport to organize on the fly because it relies on the least amount of equipment—a ball plus a park hoop and you've got a game. Basic moves such as dribbling without looking and quick passes can vastly improve a child's hand-eye coordination.

What kids risk: Though not as dangerous as many other sports, basketball can certainly take your legs out of commission if you land incorrectly—or, worse, have someone land on top of your foot. Common injuries include pulled hamstrings and the occasional eye poke when kids reach for the ball. Younger children are less susceptible to knee problems, like the excruciating torn ACL (a ligament in the groove between the thigh and the lower leg bone), but the odds do rise, especially for girls after they hit puberty.

How to keep them safe: Helping your b-ball player strengthen her hamstrings (stretching them well before and after play) and practice proper landings (keep legs bent when landing, knees in line with the heels) will go far. Older kids might want to take a cue from Orlando Magic guard J.J. Redick, who recommends, of all things, Pilates. It helps the body gain greater flexibility and also handle the starts and stops better.

Cheerleading



What kids can gain: Cheerleading is the ultimate in teaching teamwork—if even one participant isn't in sync, the whole routine is off. The sport also promotes flexibility and agility, as leaps and flips have become ever more a part of the cheerleading ritual. It also requires full-body conditioning and toning, unlike many other sports, says Dr. McCambridge.

What kids risk: As kids move up the ranks and begin to do more gymnastic-type stunts, there are some real dangers. Each year, there are about 27,000 cheer-related injuries, and the most common are what you'd expect: muscle pulls, tendon and ligament strains and sprains, knee and ankle injuries. More serious accidents, though relatively rare, still exist. New guidelines are now in place that ban double-twist dismounts and basket tosses (where a kid is thrown in the air by two others with interlocked arms) for middle-schoolers.

How to keep them safe: Talk to the coach, and find out about her background and training. In particular, ask if she's certified by the American Association of Cheerleading Coaches & Administrators; these coaches have completed medical, legal, and safety training. And watch for peer pressure: the fear of looking weak can make kids stay quiet about injuries or routines they aren't ready for. It's vital to teach your children to speak up.



Lacrosse



What kids can gain: Confidence. It's easy to believe lacrosse is dangerous because of how fast the ball is flung from those sticks, but, in fact, you might want to encourage this sport for the tyke who's desperate to seem tough. The reason is that although it looks risky—and this is our little secret—it's actually fairly safe. For a child you believe is too small for football, it will allow him to feel that he's not being overly coddled. The girls' game is even safer, as there's no (or very limited) checking allowed in many leagues.

What kids risk: Lorne Smith, a former player at Princeton who now runs a lacrosse camp in Orinda, CA, says a few bruises are usually the worst a participant can expect. "Hockey and football are collision sports," Smith says. "Lacrosse is a contact sport. You're not trying to knock anyone over—but you might bump them." Other potential bang-ups may include twisted ankles and shoulder injuries, when your kid is at a more advanced level and whipping the stick harder.

How to keep them safe: Make sure the padding and helmets aren't old and worn. Other than that, just let them have a ball! ✨

Eric Butterman has written for more than 50 publications.