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HEADING IN YMCA YOUTH SOCCER PROGRAMS

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Links of Interest

www.cdc.gov For information on concussions in youth sports program, see the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's tool kit, *Heads Up: Concussion in Youth Sports*.

Statement of the YMCA of the USA Health, Risk, and Safety Advisory Committee (HRSAC)

Soccer is one of the most popular youth sports activities in YMCAs across the country. Striking the soccer ball with the head (heading) is part of the game. There is concern that heading may cause injuries to young players, including injuries to the brain, skull, neck, and spine. However, a critical review of the literature does not support the argument that purposeful heading is likely to lead to either acute or cumulative brain damage, and additional study is necessary to confirm evidence of neuropsychological consequences of sub-concussive soccer-related head-to-ball contacts.

The YMCA of the USA Health, Risk, and Safety Advisory Committee recommends that heading in soccer be introduced and taught to players at the appropriate age and time. Teaching the skill of heading before a child has developed the required strength and coordination for proper heading or using improper heading technique at any age may expose a player to certain temporary or long-term risks.

The YMCA of the USA Youth Super Sports Soccer program recommends that the teaching and/or practicing of heading be done only with youth age 12 and over. As the level of play advances and the participants' skills increase, proper heading techniques need to be introduced progressively to prepare the player for proper execution. It is recommended that proper techniques first be learned through the use of softer, Nerf™, or inflatable balls, thus avoiding unnecessary, repetitive heading of a regulation soccer ball. Further, a lighter, less dense soccer ball is preferable in games and practices as proper techniques are being learned. YMCA staff and coaches should refer to the manual *YMCA Champions: Soccer* for information on how to teach proper heading technique. Although proper technique is foremost in reducing the risk of headaches or head injury from heading the ball, it is also imperative that soccer balls be water resistant, be sized appropriately for age, and not be hyperinflated.

It should be noted that soccer is not the leading source of sports injuries to the head and neck, so the act of heading should be regarded within a complete context of risk. Studies related to soccer do indicate that head-to-head contact among players, head contact with the ground, and head contact with goalposts and other associated playing equipment pose a greater risk than the simple act of heading the ball. These kinds of risk are associated with most outdoor team sports.

Heading causes more apprehension than any other soccer skill, particularly with younger players. Therefore, the coach needs to be aware of this apprehension and the poor technique that may result. Players who demonstrate a fear of the ball should not be forced to head the ball before they are ready. Following are some general guidelines for heading:

- Introduce heading no earlier than age 12.
- Teach the skill correctly using lighter, softer balls, and ensure players are using proper technique.
- Never force a player to head the ball.
- Discontinue heading any time a child displays signs of a head injury or complains of headache, dizziness, or other symptoms of head injury.

REFERENCES

American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP). 2010. "Clinical Report—Injuries in Youth Soccer." *Pediatrics* 125 (2): 410–414.

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AAP. 2010. "Clinical Report—Sport-Related Concussion in Children and Adolescents."

Pediatrics 126 (3): 597–615, www.pediatrics.org/cgi/doi/10.1542/peds.2010-2005

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). 2009. "Heads Up: Concussion in Youth Sports: A Fact Sheet for Coaches." www.cdc.gov/concussion/HeadsUp/youth.html.

For related information, refer to the YMCA of the USA Health, Risk, and Safety Advisory Committee statement, "Prevention of Head, Mouth, and Eye Injuries in Sports."

