

No gain in letting your kids play through pain

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During the first round of the Stanley Cup playoffs, Sidney Crosby played with a broken foot as his Pittsburgh Penguins were eliminated by eventual finalists the Ottawa Senators.

But the 19-year-old, who didn't reveal his injury until the series was complete, opted out of playing for Team Canada in the world hockey championship because of his injury.

A new report published in *Pediatrics*, the American Academy of Pediatrics' medical journal, suggests that parents and coaches of young athletes should make like Sid the Kid and let their kids rest and recover.

And don't even think about letting your developing child play through serious pain.

"Unfortunately, it's different when professional athletes are out there making millions of dollars, and they're adults and they can make their own decisions," says Joel Brenner, the report's author.

With the National Hockey League playoffs in full swing, young athletes may be tempted to try to emulate the macho ethic of players such as Anaheim Ducks forward Chris Kunitz who, after suffering a broken hand in the semi-final and a bruised abdominal muscle in Saturday night's loss to the Senators, may still suck it up and take to the ice.

"If [professional players] did that kind of thing when they were young and developing, they would never get there in the first place," says Cyndie Flett, the director of Canada's National Coaching Certification Program.

The program, Ms. Flett says, is developing new training modules this fall for Canada Games athletes that deal with injury prevention and training recovery, with a focus on proper nutrition and rest.

"We're trying to be as proactive as possible, and there's so many scenarios where kids are specializing in sport younger and younger these days," she says.

Dr. Brenner found that children active in competitive sports were training too much and too often in hopes of achieving high-level athletic success.

"I've seen gymnasts who are training six to seven days a week who end up in my office with stress fractures," he says, adding that young swimmers who trained year-round would also visit him with shoulder problems.

The report recommends, among other things, that young athletes train no more than five days a week, participate in only one sport a season and take two to three months off from the sport every year.

The recommended time away from a sport - two days off a week plus two to three months a year - is critical because a young athlete's developing bones cannot handle the same stress as an adult's mature bones, the report says.

With young kids, parents should enroll them in a variety of sports so they can develop a range of skills and abilities, Ms. Flett says.

"You don't want to see kids focus on one sport, training excessively for that one sport over the course of a week. That can lead to some stresses that their body wouldn't be able to deal with in that time frame."

The situation can get difficult, Ms. Flett says, when an adolescent is one or two years from getting an athletic scholarship and wants to get it at all costs - even if it means playing through injury.

"I would no way condone anyone playing through injury, but professional athletes have medical staff and medical personnel around them, around the clock," she says. "Those are adults, those are grown men, and we should never be equating what's possible by a child to what's possible by an adult in any situation."

To combat this, the NCCP has a mandatory ethics module for aspiring coaches that deals with injured players.

Most of the time, Ms. Flett says, recognizing a child's limitations comes down to common sense.

"If you're taking your kids from one event to the next to the next constantly, and the kid's not getting enough sleep and not eating properly, it increases the likelihood of injury."

Five ways to keep your young Gretzky healthy

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Don't get hung up on your child making it to a professional league or the Olympics; fewer than 1 per cent of high-school athletes reach the big leagues.

Children and adolescents need time to recover psychologically and physically from a sport. They should take one or two days off each week from competition, sport-specific training and scrimmaging.

Don't increase a child's training time, repetitions or total distance by more than 10 per cent a week. (If he or she is running 40 kilometres a week, the weekly distance should increase by no more than four kilometres.)

If children play several sports that use the same body parts, make sure they take a break between seasons to avoid overuse injuries.

Young athletes should join only one team each season and should take two to three months off from a specific sport.

Source: American Academy of Pediatrics