

# Coaching Our Kids to Fewer Injuries

## Advocacy Guide: A Challenge for School Boards



“I once heard that the injury rate in the NFL is 100 percent. It looks to me, in girls’ soccer, it’s the same thing.”

— David Cooper, father of Bethesda–Chevy Chase High School soccer player Hannah Cooper, *The New York Times*

### Introduction

This guide to advocacy for a sports safety prevention program at the school board level has two purposes. First, it is designed to give you a roadmap for a real time advocacy effort at the grass roots level; second, it will provide you with some ideas to guide you in other advocacy efforts you undertake as a Safe Kids coalition or chapter. We are here to help you in any way we can. This guide is part of our Safe Kids Week (April 21-28) focus on youth sports safety, the third year of an effort which is funded by our founding sponsor Johnson & Johnson.

### Sports: Fun, Safe and Essential

School sports are a fundamental part of growing up for many children, and we must be vigilant in preventing injury as much as possible, while keeping it fun and a growing experience. Much progress has been made in providing education information about concussions sustained in school sports. However, sports injury is not reserved to those who play football, or for boys for that matter, and public policy must move towards attention to presenting sports injuries in a comprehensive way: the broader spectrum of injury and sports, and for both boys and girls.

### How Do We Get There?

*“All politics is local.”\**

Our approach is to effect real results in preventing sports injuries at the local level, through advocacy aimed at schools boards — men and women, many times parents, who give their time to making local schools the best they can be. We urge Safe Kids coalitions and chapters to join together in this campaign to urge school boards to adopt best practices to deal with all sporting injuries.

### Nine Steps to Success

**1. Set Your Goal.** Every campaign must have a goal. Put simply, we are hoping that school boards around the nation will establish a program to ensure that all coaches are trained in the common injuries that occur in their teams and more specifically have a protocol for dealing with injuries. A starting place may be the three-prong strategy adopted by many states to prevent complications from concussions in sports. The model has been the [Zackery Lystedt Law](#) passed in Washington State in May 2009. [The language of the Washington state law is here.](#)

- If a young athlete is suspected of having a concussion, he/she must be removed from a game or practice and not be permitted to return to play. When in doubt, sit them out.

\* Quote attributed to Thomas P. O’Neill, the late Speaker of the House of Representatives.

## What's a School Board?

A school board or board of education is the functional equivalent of the board of directors of a local school district. 96 percent of school boards are elected. Larger cities such as Chicago, Cleveland, Boston and Philadelphia are more likely to have appointed school boards.

— Frederick M. Hess, National School Boards Association, "School Boards at the Dawn of the 21st Century," 2002



Suspect an injury? "Don't go back into the game, no matter how you feel when the adrenaline is flowing."

— Zackery Lystedt

- Athletes, parents and coaches must be educated about the dangers of concussions each year.
- A licensed health care professional must clear a young athlete before he/she can return to play in the subsequent days or weeks.

This is applicable to other injuries sustained in many youth sports.

**2. Just the Facts.** The foundation of any successful advocacy campaign is knowledge of the facts that govern the public policy you are seeking to influence. We have provided you a set of national facts at the end of the guide. Because all politics is local, however, you will more likely succeed with some key facts relevant to your local schools, such as:

- Number of kids injured.
- Sports with greatest number of injuries.
- Who's being served? Who's being left behind?
- Does your state have a law to establish best practices when a sports injury occurs? Is it limited to football? Is it limited to concussions?

Also, be prepared for the arguments against programs to prevent sports related injuries. Here are some:

- These rules will kill the spirit and fun of sports.
- These rules can't be enforced; the person who knows best is the kid and he/she will want to go back in, shake it off, won't want to be teased by or let down his/her classmates.
- We don't have the money to implement such a program.
- We don't need this because industry is producing safer football helmets.

**3. Storytelling.** One of the most important aspects of successful advocacy is telling stories that touch a nerve. You will notice that there has been a trend over the past few decades to name laws after victims, almost always children, and there's a tragic story behind the names: there's Megan's Law (predators), Matthew Shepard and James Byrd, Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act, Matt's Safe School Law (bullying) and the law passed with the work of Safe Kids, the Virginia Graeme Baker Pool & Spa Safety Act (drowning).

Here's Zackery's story that led to the passage of the Lystedt Law in Washington State. Zackery was a middle school football player in Auburn, Washington who went back in a game too quickly after a hard hit. Airlifted to a hospital, he underwent life-saving surgery in which both sides of his cranium were removed. His father Victor said, "There's no one tougher than my son." ([See video.](#)) Victor Lystedt was right about his son. After intensive physical therapy over several, Zack got back on his feet. When he graduated from high school he was able to climb the stairs of the stage and pick up his diploma. Zackery's message to young athletes is: "If you're suspected of having a concussion, don't go back into the game, no matter how you feel when the adrenaline is flowing."

Safe Kids' goal is to establish a program at the local level ensuring that all coaches are trained in sports injury prevention in the sports they coach.

### A Note about Tone

Playing team sports is fun, and we don't want to take the fun out of sports with this campaign. Our intent is to emphasize that sports can be *fun and safe*. Involvement in sports is also a vital part of a kid's time in school. Let's make this campaign a partnership for safety. *The time to act is now.*

The lesson here is to have stories to tell about kids in your area who have been hurt by not following best practices. It is effective to have parents or kids act as spokespeople, write letters and op-ed articles, appear on electronic media, post on Facebook or even start a blog.

**4. Know Your Targets.** Another kind of research that will be crucial is knowing about the school board members you will be trying to convince.

- What was their inspiration for running for the school board seat?
- Were they child athletes, and what did they play?
- Do they have kids who are in the school system or who graduated from it? Did their kids play sports? Did they have any injuries?
- What makes them tick? Are they sports fans?

**5. Build Your Network.** There are always common interests with other organizations in a campaign to affect change, and on sports safety, some of your allies include the following:

- Children's Hospitals.
- Universities with physical education degrees.
- Athletic trainers.
- Sports medicine physicians and their organizations
- Parent-teacher organizations.
- School nurses.
- Active or retired coaches.

What could really make a campaign like this go viral would be a celebrity, e.g. a respected football player, as a spokesperson. The National Football League has a [significant program](#) to cope with sports-related concussion injuries. As of April 2012, at least 21 of the 31 states passed concussion laws with the support of the NFL or a pro-team including California, Colorado, Texas, New Mexico, Maryland, Louisiana, Alabama and Missouri.

In some states and towns, college sports is the thing, and a star athlete can be an effective spokesperson. Also, check to see if any recent U.S. Olympic competitors live nearby.

### What's a concussion?

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, a concussion is a type of traumatic brain injury (TBI), caused by a bump, blow, or jolt to the head that can change the way your brain normally works. Concussions can also occur from a fall or a blow to the body that causes the head and brain to move quickly back and forth. Even a "ding," "getting your bell rung," or what seems to be a mild bump or blow to the head can be serious. You can't see a concussion but signs and symptoms of concussion can show up right after the injury or may not appear or be noticed until days or weeks after the injury.<sup>1</sup>

But remember: concussions are not the only injuries sustained in sports.

<sup>1</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Injury Prevention & Control. Concussion and Mild TBI. Available from: <http://www.cdc.gov/concussion/> Accessed April 17, 2012.

## Key Reminders

1. This program is not just about concussions, no matter how tragic they can be. Coaches must have a broad knowledge that covers the range of injuries in the sports they coach.
2. Coaches are our partners. They have tough jobs.
3. Sports are supposed to be fun, and are fun. We cannot be seen as trying to take the enjoyment out of sports.

**6. Media Plan.** Generating media might be harder than you think. Some sports reporters are skeptical about school sports injuries. So, your media plan must be backed up with facts and hardened to deflect some amount of cynicism.

- You might try to hold a “desk side” meeting with a reporter or editor.
- Here is where stories of young players are especially important. The media will want a good story to tell.
- Write op-ed pieces under your own names, especially ones with stories. Recruit stakeholders to write them, too.
- Pitch the story to the local “newsmaker” television and radio programs.
- Milestone dates and periods of time can help to sell your story such as the first day of school, the first day of a sport’s practice, Safe Kids Week, before the Super Bowl or during the World Cup or this summer’s Olympics.
- Research where your newspapers have been on covering sports safety and specific stories about injuries.

**7. Social Media.** We could talk for pages about using social media in your campaign, but here are a few particularly important tips. The goals are: 1) building your coalition and 2) spread your message.

- It’s important that you market your social media efforts so that you build a constituency of Facebook friends.
- The main stop should be your Facebook page. If you don’t already have a website, a Facebook identity will be enough.
- Populate Facebook with pictures, stories, links with other, similar campaigns, announcements of events, support received from public officials and other groups, videos and surveys.
- Keep things short. Social media, in some ways, is not very social because it encourages brief messages, but that’s the world in which we are living and tweeting.
- To build your social community, contribute to blogs in your local community and those involving your kids’ schools. Don’t have a blog? Start one. It’s easy. Try Google blogger.
- Get the party started. Participation in social media is like jumping into a swimming pool or ocean at the beginning of the summer. No one wants to be first—it may be too cold—but once someone jumps in, many follow. The same is true for Facebook and other forms of social media. So, when you post something, make sure a few others in your Facebook village post to the message. Others will follow. (see next page)

## NFL Lineman: No Stigma to Stop Play

Wisconsin just recently passed its “Shake It Off” law to deal with sports concussions. A powerful player on the advocacy team was former Green Bay Packer lineman Mike Tauscher. He spent time at the State Capitol in Madison, urging legislators to pass the bill. He has emphasized spiking the stigma attached to players as not being tough if they don’t shake off a hard hit. Our Safe Kids coalition was critical in this fight.

## Social Media/Twitter

Example:

**Safe Kids Takoma** Councilman John Wilson joined our campaign today: “The School Board must act,” said the Councilman. “It’s the job of all of us to keep our kids safe, and that includes on football fields and basketball courts.”

**Councilman Wilson supports Safe Kids Safe Sports Campaign**

[www.wilson.takomacouncil.wa.us](http://www.wilson.takomacouncil.wa.us)

**Phillipe Samson** You go, Councilman.

**Samantha Clarke** Thanks for your leadership, Councilman Wilson.

**Allison Grantham** My daughter was hurt badly playing soccer last week and thankfully the coach knew to take her out of play. It’s gotta be the rule.

**8. Meetings.** A milestone in your advocacy efforts will be your meetings with school board members. Here are some key points:

- It should be easy to set up the meeting with members of the school board. If a person in your coalition or chapter (or other colleagues) has a personal relationship ask them to make the call to schedule the meeting.
- Make sure you have a cross section of stakeholders in the meeting. An effective group would include a parent, a player, a coach and a doctor.

**9. Hearing (The Big Meeting).** Your school board might decide to hold a hearing or public meeting to discuss the proposal. Choose your witnesses carefully, especially in terms of their personal connection with sports safety injuries. The rules discussed above are the same for a public hearing:

- Tell a good story.
- Be prepared with the facts, especially answers to the tough questions.
- Know all you can about the school board members.
- Have written copies of your statements for the public and press.

## Conclusion

We are here to help. Our new President and CEO Kate Carr has made it a priority for those of us in Washington to provide you with all the assistance, guidance and time we can give. Please feel free to contact me if I can be helpful in anyway. Just the same, I hope you will keep us aware of your activities and successes.

— Anthony Green, [agreen@safekids.org](mailto:agreen@safekids.org), 202.662.0606

## Kids' Sports by the Numbers\*

- More than 38 million children and adolescents participate in sports each year in the United States. Nearly three-Quarters of United States households with school-age children have at least one child who plays organized sports.
- Each year, more than 3.5 million children ages 14 years and under receive medical treatment for sports injuries.
- Approximately two-thirds of all sports-related injuries leading to emergency department visits are for children. The rate and severity of sports-related injury increases with a child's age.
- From 2001 through 2009, it is estimated that there are 1,770,000 emergency department visits, 6% of these for traumatic brain injuries, among children ages 14 and under for injuries related to sports or recreation.
- Though rare, traumatic brain injury is the leading cause of sports-related death.
- Approximately one out of five traumatic brain injuries among children are associated with participation in sports and recreational activities.
- More than 90 percent of sports-related concussions occur without the loss of consciousness.
- Most organized sports-related injuries – 62 percent – occur during practice rather than games.

These statistics tell part of the story on why we need a broad-based program on sports injury prevent. The rest of the story is told in testimony by parents, children and coaches on the pain and tragedies they have encountered.

### Sample Quote – Use a local quote.

“I once heard that the injury rate in the NFL is 100 percent. It looks to me, in girls' soccer, it's the same thing.”

– David Cooper, father of Bethesda-Chevy Chase High School soccer player Hannah Cooper, *The New York Times*

\* Source: Sports and Recreation Safety Fact Sheet. Washington, DC: Safe Kids Worldwide, 2012.

## Sample Letter Requesting a Meeting with a School Board Member

*(Yellow highlights are signals for your inserts)*

Dear *Ms. Boardley*:

I congratulate you on your public service as a member of the *(name of municipality)* School Board and your commitment to the schoolchildren. As a leader in the Safe Kids *(name of coalition or chapter)*, I write to request a meeting with you to discuss the important issue of the many injuries sustained by our schools' athletes, many of which are entirely preventable.

Participation in sports is a significant and important part of growing up and a well-rounded education, but it is vital that our kids participate in a safe manner. Injuries sustained by boys and girls, playing anything from football to soccer, from basketball to cheerleading, are reaching significant proportions nationally.

- Athletic activities lead to nearly four million concussions per year, according to the Centers for Disease Control.
- Concussions in high school sports are rising at a 15% annual rate.
- Girl athletes are five to eight times more likely than boys to tear their ACLs; it is predicted that twenty-five percent of girls will re-tear their ACLs, and having torn one ACL, a girl is at increased risk for tearing the other one.

Just the same, sports related injuries are a significant problem here in *(name of city or town)*. *(Cite facts and/or story relating to a sports injury in your area.) (If your state has a Lystedt Law: While it is true—and important—that (state) has passed a law dealing with concussions sustained in football, we need programs similar to the concussion “Don’t Shake It Off” laws for other sports-related injuries as well.) (If your state has not passed a Lystedt Law: Many states have passed a law that deals with concussions sustained in football, here in [name of city or town] we need programs similar to the concussion “Don’t Shake It Off” laws for football and other sports as well.)* We believe the best way to create a broader spectrum of safety is to work with school board members like you.

Safe Kids is a global network of organizations with the mission to prevent unintentional childhood injury, the leading cause of death and disability to children ages 1 to 14. More than 600 coalitions and chapters across the U.S. bring together parents, health and safety experts, educators, corporations, foundations, governments and volunteers to educate and protect families. *(Contact information)*

Sincerely,

*(Your name here)*

## Sample Op Ed Article

### Go Team, but Go Safe

My daughter Samantha is taller than I am, and she beat me in height when she was just 13. Samantha's height gives her that natural edge in basketball and her team, the Lower Merion Falcons, has been very competitive this past season. Samantha was disappointed when she had to sit out the last two games, but she injured her knee (the ACL) in a practice and fortunately decided to sit out the rest of the practice. We took her to a sports doctor at Montgomery Medical Center and the doctor prescribed "no play" for several weeks. She will be back on the court next season for her senior year.

Other kids are not as lucky (or wise) as my Samantha. They suffer ACL injuries, or other injuries like concussions and decide to "shake it off." But that is dangerous. Twenty-five percent of girls will re-tear their ACLs if they don't give it a chance to heal. Moreover, having torn one ACL, a girl is at increased risk for tearing the other one.

I didn't know any of that. But Samantha did because she watched a story about high school sports injuries on ESPN.

Without dampening the spirit and dedication of young athletes, our schools must do a better job of making sure school sports are safe sports. I am working with other parents as a member of Safe Kids Lower Merion to encourage the LM school board to develop a program to ensure safe sports. The plan is designed after a law that has been adopted in 31 states, but in most states is limited to concussions. The three common sense reforms are as follows:

- Athletes, parents and coaches must be educated about the dangers of injuries sustained in sports, and the signs and symptoms of serious injury.
- If a young athlete is suspected of having a concussion, he/she must be removed from a game or practice and not be permitted to return to play. When in doubt, sit them out.
- A licensed health care professional must clear the young athlete to return to play in the subsequent days or weeks.

There are a number of tools to help you run a sports safety prevention program on the website of the national organization, Safe Kids Worldwide, [www.safekids.org](http://www.safekids.org). I hope you will join me in convincing the LM School Board to put this program into play.

Samantha's going to the doctor one more time before the next basketball season starts, and we all hope she'll be good to go. And my husband Vic and I will be in the stands, cheering for Samantha, and safe sports.