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Healthy Kids

Protect your Athlete's Teeth

Insist on safe play with mouth guards

By Dr. Glenn V. Hemberger

Is your child ready to safely compete in sports? You have provided them with protective gear such as helmets, body pads, elbow guards and shin shields. But could your child be missing one of the most important pieces of equipment: a mouth guard!

■ Why are mouth guards important?

Over 5 million teeth are knocked out every year due to sports injury and an athlete is 60 times more likely to sustain an injury to teeth by not wearing a mouth guard. A mouth guard protects not only the teeth, but also the tongue, lips and cheeks. It is especially important in a child with braces. Trauma to the teeth can occur from a direct blow, but frequently occurs when the chin is hit, causing the upper and lower teeth to "slam" together. The latter trauma can result in the fracturing of multiple teeth, including the molars. Not only will the mouth guard greatly reduce such injuries, but also reduce jaw fractures and concussions.

■ When should a child wear a mouth guard?

Whenever there is an activity that could result in a fall or head contact with other players or equipment. This includes most sports such as football, baseball, basketball, skateboarding, hockey and even

gymnastics. Although we think of football as the most dangerous to teeth, well over half of all injuries occur in basketball, soccer and baseball.

■ What kind of mouth guard should I choose for my child?

Ultimately, the only good choice for a mouth guard is the one your child is willing to wear!

■ There are three basic types of mouth guards:

Prefabricated or off the shelf – U-shaped mouth guards made from rubber or vinyl may be purchased over-the-counter from a sporting goods store. These mouth guards generally do not fit well and, as a result do not evenly distribute the force of an impact.

Mouth formed "boil and bite" – Mouth guards made from a type of plastic that softens in boiling water. Once the plastic is soft, it is placed into the mouth; your child will bite down on it, and mold the softened plastic around the teeth. You may or may not get them



to fit comfortably and retention may be a problem.

Custom-made - Athletes prefer well-fitting mouth guards that are comfortable, soft and allowing for easy speech. This is most characteristic of a *custom* made mouth guard produced by your child's dentist. This is made by taking an impression or mold of your child's teeth from which a specialized mouth guard material is vacuumed formed and trimmed to fit properly.

■ No Mouth guard - No Play

Although there may be some initial resistance from your child, parents must be firm and make it a requirement to participate in sports play. Ironically, some children are not sold on wearing mouth guards until *after* they've fractured or knocked out a tooth. The cost of a *custom* mouth guard is minor compared with the pain and expense of an unexpected trauma. ■

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