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Extreme cheerleading

Injuries are up—so how do you keep kids safe?



who suffered a concussion after falling during practice.

Photo courtesy of Wendy Bakkum

If your vision of cheerleading includes perky, popular girls in cute outfits waving pom-poms, wake up to the new millennium. In recent years, cheerleading has become a sport in its own right—one that may be dangerous.

A study in the January issue of Pediatrics found that cheerleading injuries have more than doubled in the last decade and cheerleaders as young as 5 are getting hurt.

"Cheerleading used to be just standing on the sidelines ... leading the crowd in cheers, but now it's incorporating highly technical gymnastics skills, pyramids, throwing each other up in the air," says researcher Brenda Shields of the Center for Injury Research and Policy in Columbus, Ohio.

Shields says cheerleaders ages 5 to 11 were more likely to injure their head and upper extremities, while those ages 10 and older suffered more injuries to their ankles and knees.

Brittany Bakkum, 11 of Aurora, is a flyer—she's at the top of the pyramids. This year, she suffered a concussion after falling during practice. "I do worry," says her mom, Wendy. "As a mother of a flyer you always have a lump in your throat wondering, 'Are they going to catch her this time?' "

During the more than 10 years included in the study, 209,000 children were treated in U.S. hospital emergency rooms for injuries—some, like Brittany's, were serious. In 2002 the University of Nebraska-Lincoln banned cheerleading stunts and tumbling because they caused so many injuries, including one girl who fractured her neck.

Sheilds and her study co-author, Dr. Gary Smith, say that, for parents, it is all about asking the right questions. They advise parents to ask:

- Is the coach present at all times during practice, games and competitions?
- Is the coach trained as a certified cheerleading coach by an organization such as the American Association of Cheerleading Coaches and Advisors?
- Do practices take place on a padded surface, rather than in a school hallway or other area that offers no protection?

· Do trained spotters monitor all above-ground moves?

The answer to all of the questions should be yes.

Brittany Bakkum participates in cheerleading through Cheer Spirit in St. Charles, a competitive team for kids age 4 and up. Mom Wendy says Cheer Spirit's professional nature gives her some peace of mind. "[Brittany] is always on mats, the coaches are certified, and she has to master one skill before they will even let her try the next in degree of difficulty. I wouldn't feel comfortable with her doing the same types of stunts in a high school gymnasium with a coach who is a parent, but not trained in the sport."

Heather Cunningham

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