

Study slams kids' bodychecking

In Quebec, boys 10 to 13 not allowed to hit each other

Researchers find Ontario players twice as likely to get hurt

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Bodychecking should not be allowed in hockey for boys younger than 14 because the risk of serious injury is too great, according to a new Toronto study.

Boys 10 to 13 in Ontario were almost twice as likely to have a checking-related injury send them to a hospital emergency room than those in Quebec, where bodychecking at that age is banned, says the study, published today in the American journal *Pediatrics*. Ontario players were also more likely to suffer a concussion or fracture.

The study, by York University kinesiologist Alison Macpherson and Dr. Andrew Howard, an orthopedic surgeon at the Hospital for Sick Children, analyzed 4,736 hockey injuries in the two provinces from 1995 to 2002.

While the Canadian Hockey Association banned bodychecking under the age of 11 in most provinces, it has been allowed in Ontario among Atom players in competitive elite leagues since 1998, when the Ontario Hockey Federation launched a pilot study of the extent of injuries it causes. In Quebec, bodychecking is not allowed until age 14. At the time the study began, Atom players were 10 and 11 years old. That has now been lowered, so Atom players are 9 and 10 years old. But most Ontario house leagues don't allow bodychecking at any age, said John Gardner, president of the Greater Toronto Hockey League and chairman of minor hockey for the provincial federation. "Two-thirds of all hockey players in Canada are house league players — close to half a million kids," he said.

"At least two-thirds of those wouldn't have checking. It's not a case of hockey people trying to force something down people's throats." But Gardner argues boys have to learn to bodycheck so they won't get injured later. "If you get kids in their teens bodychecking and they haven't learned to do it, that's when injuries are going to occur," he said. "It's like a baby learning to walk, they fall down at first."

But the study found just the opposite was true. Players in Ontario 14 and older who had learned bodychecking early were significantly more likely to have checking injuries than players in Quebec, it says, "suggesting there is no protective effect from learning to check earlier."

Howard says he sees hockey injuries in Sick Kids emergency all the time "and anybody who's doing orthopedics in Canada sees them.

"I'm a little surprised they allow it — it doesn't fit with my world view," he said.

"I wouldn't tell children of 9 and 10 to start driving a car because it will be more natural and safer when they're older. You want to introduce children to things at a developmentally appropriate age.

"I'm not sure it's appropriate to dress up kids in armour and tell them to go out and hit each other."

Children who have concussions can have trouble with concentration and learning difficulties years later, he said, and the risk of permanent damage goes up with every concussion.

"If they start young, you have all those years of childhood when concussions can be repeated," he said. "That's the worrying aspect of checking injuries." Even with fractures, which usually heal with time, there are risks that the bone will change shape and not heal properly, he said.

The study looked at injuries reported by parents or players at pediatric hospitals in Ontario and Quebec. Of the 4,736 injuries, 3,006 or 63 per cent were in Ontario, compared to 1,730 in Quebec. Only those injuries where bodychecking was specifically mentioned in the hospital report were included.

The difference was most pronounced among 12- and 13-year-old players, where 48 per cent of the injuries were checking-related in Ontario compared to 27 per cent in Quebec. But Gardner said everyone has a different interpretation of what bodychecking is.

"We're not talking about a bunch of Tie Domis running around slamming each other into the boards," he said. "Every contact isn't checking. It's disappointing to hear people go off on these tacks."

The Canadian Academy of Sports Medicine has recommended that checking be gradually introduced at the Bantam level of hockey (ages 14 and 15) and full bodychecking not be allowed until the 16- and 17-year-old Midget level.

"With the drive to win at any cost permeating the game, it is not surprising that aggression is a commonly used tactic and has helped to turn hockey into a collision sport," said a commentary by two neurosurgeons at St. Michael's Hospital in 2003 in the *Canadian Medical Association Journal*.

"Eliminating bodychecking could refocus the game on fun and skill — on skating, shooting, passing and team play," it said.

Variations in body size and strength are most pronounced between the ages of 13 and 15, the commentary said, and since most physical growth is not complete before a person is 17 or 18, "bodychecking and hitting should be banned until at least that age." The link between bodychecking and injury is similar to that between lung cancer and smoking, it said, and the younger developing brain is at even higher risk of injury. Ontario's bodychecking pilot project is complete and is now being evaluated, said Phil McKee, executive director of the Ontario Hockey Federation. In May, it will meet officials from the national association to vote on what age bodychecking will be allowed in future. "There are a lot of questions and everyone has emotional and personal views on it," he said. "Some parents strongly believe it in, some are neutral and some are against it. We want to get all the data so we can make a proper decision."