



EMPOWERING PARENTS TO RAISE
THEIR CHILDREN TO BE SUBSTANCE-FREE

Talk Early And Often About Alcohol, Tobacco And Other Drugs. Even When It Gets Tough

Know! The Importance of a Balanced Athletic Identity Among Youth

* Special thanks to “The Sports Doc” - Dr. Chris Stankovich, Professional Athletic Counselor

Actively participating in sports is considered “constructive use of a young person’s time;” a protective factor against a wide range of high-risk behaviors that also increases a child’s likelihood of thriving. What parent doesn’t want that for his/her child? Sports can be an extremely positive asset to a child’s development, so long as a healthy balance of self-identity is established.

In the case of many student athletes, the way they see themselves and how they are perceived by others is predominately that of an “athlete.” These students further solidify their athletic identity by regularly wearing team t-shirts, letter jackets or jerseys to school, hanging posters of sports figures on their walls and delight in talking about last week’s game or sports in general. According to The Sports Doc, this is healthy, normal behavior. It is when athletic identity is an adolescent’s *exclusive* identity that potential problems may arise. The Sports Doc says, “When a youngster only sees himself as an athlete and overlooks all the other great parts of his personality and life experiences, he may be unknowingly setting himself up for an incredibly difficult eventual sport retirement.”

As students transition into junior high and high school, the athletic competition becomes increasingly more difficult. Many student athletes end up not making the cut, others voluntarily opt out, and for some, it is an injury that will take them out of the game for an extended period of time or permanently. Regardless of how, why or when one steps into “sport retirement,” it can be devastating, especially for those who exclusively identify themselves as athletes. For these youth, they may have suddenly lost all sense of self: “If I am no longer an athlete, who am I?”

The other potential problem involves student athletes with high levels of athletic identity who do go on to play in the upper grades. The greater their athletic identity, the greater their risk for problems as well. These are the athletes willing to do whatever it takes to be on the team, to maintain their starting position and/or to be a top player – even if it involves unhealthy, unethical and even illegal means – like performance enhancing drugs. The use of such drugs to gain speed, strength and endurance, is on the rise among teens, with 11% of high school sophomores, juniors and seniors reporting having used synthetic human growth hormone without a prescription (up from just 5% the previous year). Athletes have also reported using recreational drugs in a poor attempt to relieve stress from the pressure they feel to perform – which may also be associated with high athletic identity.

As parents, it is important for us to gauge how closely our children identify or over-identify with their athletic status, and we need to help prepare them for the potential difficulties of eventual sport retirement.

Share the Statistics: The conversation starts here. Youth (and parents) with aspirations of a college scholarship or becoming a pro-athlete should be made aware that only 5% of all high school athletes go on to play at the college level, and from that small group, only 2% will go on to play professionally.

Talking regularly with kids about the dangers of alcohol, tobacco and other drugs reduces their risk of using.

Know! urges you to encourage other parents to join Know!.

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Link to the article on the Drug Free Action Alliance Facebook Page

Be Proactive: Encourage children to broaden their identities. Help them find another activity to channel their competitive spirit or assist them in discovering other new interests. What we don't want our children to do is to fill that void with alcohol or other drugs.

Be Understanding: If your child is going through sport retirement, be aware of how trying and difficult it can be on him/her. The comradery and social support once provided by teammates may have come to an abrupt end, along with your son or daughter's athletic identity. And that can create mild to intense feelings of fear, isolation and depression. Be sure to let your child know you are there to support and help him/her through this challenging time.

As parents, we have both an opportunity and an obligation to help shape our children's overall self-identity to be healthy and balanced. For those of us with student athletes, in addition to supporting them in their athletic endeavors, it is critically important that we also praise, recognize and reinforce all the other positive aspects of who they are and what they accomplish off the field/court/ice/etc.

For additional information and resources on the well-being of your athlete, please visit <http://www.drstankovich.com/>.

Sources: Interview with Chris Stankovich Ph.D., "The Sports Doc," January 2015. Website: <http://www.drstankovich.com/>. [Partnership for Drug-Free Kids: National Study: Teens Report Higher Use of Performance Enhancing Substances, 2014](#). [Search Institute: 40 Developmental Assets for Adolescents](#).



Dr. Chris Stankovich is a professional licensed athletic counselor and the Founder of Advanced Human Performance Systems. His work has been featured in USA Today, ESPN, and ABC World News and he has developed a variety of programs and products designed to help with happiness, health, and peak productivity. For more information please visit www.drstankovich.com