

HIV and Safety in Youth Sports

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In 2007, the estimated number of children under the age of 19 years of age living with HIV/AIDS was 9,295 in the United States. This only takes into consideration 34 states and 5 dependent areas that provide confidential reporting to the Center for Disease Control (CDC). (Department of Health and Human Services, 2007) These children live everyday lives including school, church, boy scouts and even participant in youth sports leagues. The majority of youth leagues are contact (both intentional and incidental) sports where participants frequently come in contact with one another. Should children infected with HIV be allowed to participate in youth sports?

Not only should children infected with HIV be allowed to participate in youth sports, the teams and leagues that they wish to play on are required by law to allow them to do so under the Americans with Disabilities Act. (ADA). (Americans with Disabilities Act, 2005). In order to determine whether or not a participant with HIV would be classified as being disabled under the ADA, disability must first be defined. Disabilities are defined many ways. HIV would fall under the classification of the “absence of competent physical, intellectual, or moral powers; impairment of earning capacity; loss of physical function that reduces efficiency; inability to work.” (Black, Nolan & Connolly, 1979, p.415) The loss of physical function that reduces efficiency is the closest linked to HIV. HIV, human immunodeficiency virus, attacks the immune system. Because of the lack of immunity, those with the virus are not able to fight off even the slightest ailments. Based on the definition from Black et al (1979), HIV would be classified as a disability under the Americans with Disabilities Act. After years of debate in many venues as to whether HIV could be classified as a disability, the argument was settled with the *Bragdon V.*

Abbott case. “The Court held that HIV infection at every stage from infection to final illness, meets the definition of disability under the ADA.” (Lazzarini, 1998) Failing to adhere to the rules set forth in the ADA requiring no difference between the disabled and the able-bodied can ultimately end in a costly lawsuit.

In order to take steps in preventing the transmission of HIV in youth sports, organizations must first know how it is spread. The most common way HIV is transmitted is through sexual relations and the use of needles or transmission from mother to child during birth. (Department of Health and Human Services, 1999) However, none of these transmission sources are associated with youth sports. The exchanging of bodily fluids on the sports field raises concern of parents and participants. According to the Center for Disease Control, “contact with sweat, tears or saliva has *never* been shown to result in the transmission of HIV.” (Department of Health and Human Services, 1999)

By staying informed on how HIV is spread and following safety procedures, an organization can take precautions to help prevent the spread of the disease. The American Academy of Pediatrics has developed a strict list of precautions that should be followed by sports with direct body contact or any sport where a participant’s blood may contaminate another participant. These precautions include the covering of existing cuts, abrasions, wounds or other broken skin; the use of hospital grade gloves when tending to an injured participant; the immediate removal of an athlete that has active bleeding from play until the bleeding has been stopped and covered; and the cleaning of equipment and playing areas containing blood with a bleach solution. (American Academy of Pediatrics, 1999). The AAP makes these safety procedures available on their website at www.aap.org.

Every individual involved in sports will not know if the person next to them is infected with HIV. Therefore, it is vitally important that HIV awareness and safety precautions to prevent the spread of this disease are a part of an organization's training manuals. Youth infected with HIV can comfortably participate in sports leagues through education and safety awareness of the league officials, parents and participants.

Reference

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