

## **Macho Ears and Rising Rates of Dementia?**

I grew up in a neighborhood where many of the young boys wanted to become boxers and we did have boxers in the neighborhood only they were used more as punching bags by amateur fighters. Their days of glory had never come, but they wore the familiar sign of the worn fighter; the cauliflower ear.

Now a new generation of young boys is, according to a recent article in The New York Times, waiting for their newly deformed ears to take firm hold. They believe that this deformity sets them apart and provides a sign of virility or masculinity and that they are "fighters." In their quest for these male attributes, they disregard treatment and opt for ear calcification.

My concern is that the ear points to something more serious that may be going on, too, but which will hardly be noticed until many years later. I'm thinking, of course, of brain damage just like the brain damage I saw in those men in my neighborhood. They couldn't walk straight, had slurred speech and were challenged by the simplest tasks. They were "punch drunk." The technical term for it is "dementia pugilistica" and many of the famous fighters have it. Just do a search on-line and you may be shocked who turns up. Jerry Quarry and Jack Dempsey are just two of the names you'll recognize.

Let's talk about kids in this context for a moment. How many kids get head injuries playing sports each year and how many are girls? What are the sports more girls play in school than, possibly, any other? How about soccer? According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, 30 million kids are in sports programs and 3.5 million injuries are logged in these activities and the leading cause of death is head injury.

Sixty-two percent of the injuries are in practice for contact sports. Seventy-five thousand youngsters are hurt playing soccer, but what of the long-lasting effects of sports where the head and neck are pounded and twisted? How many concussions does it take for a child to suffer irreversible injury decades later? Don't they do similar or worse pounding and twisting in full-contact martial arts fighting? Forget about the ears and think about what's between them. For boxers, the disorder usually shows up after 16 years of fighting. True, kids won't be playing sports repeatedly for that long and won't get all those punches, but they are in an extremely vital period of their lives where the brain and the nervous system are growing. This will go on until around age 21.

### **Punch Drunk Kids?**

The disorder won't be as apparent as those fighters, but the signs may be there, only on a more subtle level. The severity of the injury increases with age, according to the National SAFE KIDS Campaign. Looking at their listing of sports and the injuries associated with them, there's no mention of karate, wrestling or mixed martial arts fighting. But, then, the latter is fairly new in terms of kids and adults and the first one is something many kids are encouraged to do to develop self-esteem and discipline. I have no doubt it does do those two things, but I am concerned about the level of competence of instructors in all these sports.

Some pretty old stats from a medical journal indicated that, in one group of just over 1,200 kids who had mild traumatic brain injuries, 63% were from football, 10% from wrestling and 6% in girls' soccer.

Another study indicated that girls have three times the rate of concussions as boys in basketball and in soccer it's 1.5 times higher than boys. The researchers, in fact, felt that smaller heads and weaker necks may place girls at higher risk for injury in sports.

### Brain Injury Signs

I'm a psychologist and I've seen brain injured adults as well as kids in my years working in the community and in hospitals. What should you be looking for if you have a child who engages in one of these contact sports? Here are some things:

1. problems concentrating
2. memory problems
3. headache
4. feeling anxious or irritable without cause
5. being overly tired

In school, these children may be seen as unmotivated, lazy or somehow learning disabled and the danger is that they will fall through the cracks and not received the evaluation and treatment they need. Should kids stop playing sports? Absolutely not, but there needs to be more attention paid to the potential for injury and the training of people who supervise these activities.