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Researcher: Raising the age for body checking a mistake

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Increasing the age at which bodychecking is introduced into [hockey](#) could result in an escalation of serious injuries, a leading concussion researcher warns.

And surprisingly, Barry Willer also said the majority of hockey injuries occur as a result of incidental contact, not the deliberate act of one player trying to bodycheck another.

"I don't think the bodycheck should be the culprit it's made out to be," Willer said in an interview on Wednesday.

Willer, a Canadian who describes himself as a passionate hockey fan, is a professor at the University of Buffalo, where he is the director of research for the concussion clinic. He has been studying brain injuries for 25 years and was introduced to the issues of concussions in hockey in 1997 by Carl Lindros. Lindros's son, Brett, had his National Hockey League career cut short after suffering a number of concussions.

Willer didn't like a USA Hockey proposal that would make bodychecking illegal for players under 13.

"Personally, I think that would be a mistake," Willer said. "All you're doing is putting it [bodychecking] off and putting it off to an age where the players are bigger and stronger and have more testosterone. The injury rates will not only be higher, but I think more serious."

The USA Hockey proposal will be voted on at its annual congress in June and will be monitored closely by officials at Hockey Canada, which allows bodychecking to begin at the peewee level (aged 11 and 12).

The topic of when to introduce body contact to young [hockey players](#) has become a hot-button issue in amateur hockey circles as the prevalence of concussions appears to be on the rise.

John Gardner is the president of the Greater Toronto Hockey League, which boasts approximately 40,000 players on 2,800 teams.

"That's getting a little crazy," he said when asked for his thoughts on the USA Hockey proposal. "You wait until the kids get older, instead of it becoming an instinctive reaction or action, it becomes a mechanical one. And that's when the kids get hurt."

USA Hockey says its proposal is based on a series of studies, including research conducted by Carolyn Emery of the University of Calgary. Her study followed 2,000 peewee players over one season, half from Alberta, where bodychecking was permitted, and half from Quebec, where it was not.

In Alberta, 73 players reported concussions during the year compared to 20 in Quebec.

While lauding the Emery study, Willer said it did not go far enough to try to examine the underlying reason behind that increase.

Willer's study, which monitored the rates of injuries among roughly 3,000 kids who played in the Burlington Lions Minor Hockey Association over a five-year period, produced some surprising data.

The study, published last month, noted a "spike" in injuries among players in the first year that bodychecking was introduced. The report added that the majority of those injuries (66 per cent) were the result of "unintentional collisions" and not a result of a deliberate attempt to bodycheck.

Willer explained that "unintentional collisions" included players accidentally running into one another or injuring themselves when they fell to the ice, into the boards or goalposts.

Willer said his findings echo that of a study that was carried out in Kingston and released in 2009. The study looked into the effects of Hockey Canada's bodychecking rule in 2002, when body contact was allowed at the atom level (ages 9 to 11).

The report stated that "overall rates of injury to minor hockey players and also hockey injuries due to bodychecking were, in general, equivalent or even lower in the five years" after bodychecking was introduced at the younger age.

Both Willer and Gardner believe it is important to look at areas other than bodychecking when trying to come up with a solution to reduce the number of concussions.

Gardner believes it all starts with the National Hockey League, where head shots and hits from behind have captured plenty of headlines this season.

"Kids are copying what they see in the NHL," Gardner said. "I don't care what anybody says, that's a fact. And when the kids see it, they don't understand why they can't do it."

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