

## Response to Sept 2013 Forum on Teens and Sports Participation

By: Mandy Meyer

At the age of 12 my daughter Kayla received her first concussion. Ten months later she sustained her second concussion. I like to use the term Mild Traumatic Brain Injury. Believe me when I say there is nothing mild about this. If I use the term concussion her injury is dismissed rather quickly. What I do know is that a concussion is a Brain Injury.

I have more questions than I have answers. I now know that 1 in 10 high school athletes involved in contact sports sustains a concussion each year. I have learned that high school athletes who get a concussion are three times more likely to get a second concussion. It even has a name, second impact syndrome. I do know that teen age girls take longer than all other groups to recover from a concussion and 50 percent of college athletes have had a history of concussion. I do know that youth do not even really know what a concussion feels like. They may not even realize what is going on. The thinking has been if they did not see stars or did not black out they must be ok. They do know what a broken ankle feels like. How does a kid explain and even realize that their mind feels foggy, they can't concentrate, that they have headaches, that their vision is off, that the lunch room and band seem so loud all of the sudden. If they mention a bump to the head they do know that they will have to sit out of a sport they love, they do know that they will miss the team that depends on them; they do know that 2-3 weeks out means they may lose the spot on the team that they worked so hard to get.

I grew up in an active sporty family. I come from the iron range where hockey was a part of our school, community and family. When my son was five years old I geared him up and off to mini-mites we went. My husband was asking "Do we really have to do this?" My answer, "Yes we do." I love the team concept, working together, playing together. I wanted to know where my kids were and who they were with. By default our daughter, Kayla, came along all bundled up & strapped into a baby seat and later playing at the rink as her brother skated. She made a short run at dance and swimming and I was so relieved when she said it wasn't for her and all she really wanted to do was just play hockey. Sixteen years and two hockey players later I am a volunteer for the Minnesota Brain Injury Alliance and Connections4Concussions. With my background how come I didn't know anything about brain injuries from sports concussions? What I thought and may people still think is that a concussion is a short lived injury. I want to share with you what has become a long term trial, almost 4 years now, for Kayla and others like her.

Fourteen months after her second concussion I was still asking many questions of anyone I thought would even have an idea for progress in Kayla's daily struggles. A high school guidance counselor gave Kayla a copy of "Mind Matters". It is the quarterly publication that the Minnesota Brain Injury Alliance produces. It is free. What great timing, in 3 days we were off to the "Walk For Thought". Here I knew I would run into others who would have answers for us. I found a Minnesota Brain Injury Alliance employee and asked about the youth support group. I was told none existed. How could that be? We were not the only ones. I called the Mn Brain Injury Alliances Resource Facilitator that next week and did receive help with a referral, one of many from them over the next two years. Free, but where was

that youth support. In 2011 Kayla testified at the state capitol and was instrumental in passing the "Return to Play" law. How was it that my daughter was standing next to the Governor of Minnesota as he signed a law into action? After two years of seeking a youth group Kayla and her concussion friend Matt Holvia started one. Connections4Concussions is about to celebrate its second anniversary.

Kayla's health has been a struggle for her over the last four years but now imagine her academic struggles. We now have a student who now is on medications to help her sleep, help her focus, help fight pain. She misses school due to her brain injury, Physical Therapy and Dr. appointments. Due to her brain injury her eye focus from line to line and word to word starts to merge, reading becomes changeling not to mention calculus and geometry. She is extremely sound sensitive leaving her unable to attend sleep overs, dances, lunch at school and most all teen gatherings. Just walking in the halls at school is a daily challenge. Household sounds like timers on the microwave, blenders and vacuum cleaners send her from the constant headache she always has into migraine mode. We have had a role reversal: Kayla's Dad now has to turn his music down! Fatigue is common, getting up in the morning is hard from either no sleep or medication to make her sleep. Her Hockey Team rapidly abandoned her as she was unable to sit in a loud arena, hear a coaches whistle from the sidelines or even ride a team bus. Friends stopped inviting her over or worse yet they talked about the party's and sleepovers that they were all attending and she did not even get an invite to. Facebook became a torture page that remained unopened. It was a constant reminder of what she could not do and that now even her friends had fled. Educators, friends and family asked: Was she faking it? Was she being lazy? She just needed to try harder, she just does not want to come to school. Because of her brain injury she has gone from the honor roll to special education.

Up until the day of Kayla's second concussion I was just a "Normal" Hockey Mom; car pools, miscellaneous volunteer jobs and committees, announcer and music coordinator for both association and high school hockey games. What else would the mother of an overachiever do? Kayla was up early to Glee Club before school, on the Honor Roll in school and off to hockey after school. The inside of our house now stands quiet and lonely. Kayla is inside that house. I don't even want to be that hockey Mom again. I just wish for painless days and restful nights for my child. I wish for Kayla's singing to fill my silent house.

For more information: [www.connections4concussions.org](http://www.connections4concussions.org) and [www.braininjurymn.org](http://www.braininjurymn.org)

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