My son was benched by a bodycheck

The one word that came to consume a hockey-loving boy's life: concussion

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The last time my son had hockey skates on, his team was winning the league championship. "I didn't really like being on the ice," he told me that night in his room, which is crammed with NHL banners, posters and pucks. He's a hockey maniac to the core of his 8-year-old soul, a kid who is astonished when I can't, for example, list the top goal scorers of the Winnipeg Jets in descending order.

Yet when his house-league team won the seasonending game, in double overtime, with five seconds left on the clock — the parents going wild, the kids in their oversized jerseys pouring onto the ice for the ritual pile-on of the goalie — Alex* stayed on the bench. He ventured onto the ice only for the medal ceremony.

Once all the kids had their medals, the boy who scored the game-winning goal was assigned the championship trophy. A small, lightning-fast player, he was also the league's highest scorer. The packed arena echoed with cheers as he hoisted the mammoth cup over his little head and began to skate.

From the distant upper stands I watched this mini-Sidney Crosby glide toward my son and in a gesture of true sportsmanship that still brings a tear to my eye, tried to give it to him. Alex declined. "I didn't really feel like I deserved it," he told me later. Why? Because Alex hadn't actually played in the championship game. In fact, he hadn't played hockey in more than two months, instead cheering on his teammates every Saturday from the bench. Why? One word, that came, quite randomly, to consume his life: concussion. Why? Because during a routine Sunday morning practice, aboy on another team checked him from behind. Alex hit the boards hard then fell. His head slammed against the ice and

as he stood up, in a daze, the kid pummelled him in the temples a bunch of times with both fists. Why? I'll never know. The two boys had never laid eyes on each other, there was no grudge and all mine did was steal the puck away during a scrimmage. This is what Alex has consistently told anyone who's ever asked, and I have no reason to doubt him. How do you make a kid stay still? The emergency room visit was the first of several to come. Alex confessed to seeing double, his head hurt and most alarming to me, he could recount only two of three single-syllable words the doctor had assigned him just a few minutes earlier. My son's memory can outdo mine any day — but not now. The young doctor seemed unfazed. She gave Alex a gentle smile then turned to us, his panicked parents. "He may experience some confusion for a while," she said.

In fact, Alex had a minor head injury more than a year earlier, after tripping in the schoolyard. He was groggy for a few hours but symptom-free by the next day. We figured the same would happen again. But this time his head had received multiple blows in one go — to the front, back and sides.

A lot of people assume you can just shake off a concussion no matter how hard the hit — get back in the game or at worst be back a week or two later. To which I say: if you're lucky. And this time we weren't.

If you're not lucky this is what life becomes: a long progression of cancelled play dates, birthday parties, ski lessons, soccer games, piano recitals and family vacations. Your child peering out the window on a snowy day as other kids drag their sleds to the park, the laughter just reaching him through the frosty glass. Day after day of missed school. Night after night of vomit-inducing headaches, the walls tilting, the world too confusing for your child's damaged brain.

Our all-time low was Alex's own cancelled birthday party. Six weeks after that hockey hit, my normally loud, bossy, energetic about-to-turn-8-year-old still couldn't handle the noise and commotion of a few friends playing laser tag. Instead, his three best buddies came by for a simple gathering. They ate cake, sang songs and ran around the house a bit. Even that proved too much. His symptoms were so severe that we ended up back at the hospital emergency room in the middle of the night.

In the weeks following his concussion here's what else Alex's brain couldn't take: reading, computers, video games, iPads, TV, cards and board games. The doctors urged not only physical but also mental rest until the symptoms subsided. But how do you make a kid stay still? We hauled out all the sheets and built a fort in the living room, hoping to make lying down somehow feel like fun. It didn't. A brief, fitful "rest" would be followed by a lot of foot stomping and shouts of frustration. When you're in Grade 2, resting feels like punishment no matter how much you may need it.

There was little rest for me either. Both my husband and I work. Since my job is writing TV scripts from home and my son was there much of the day, I ended up writing in the middle of the night after we finally got Alex to sleep. Pounding at my keyboard, bleary-eyed.

I dreaded Alex's bedtime most of all, the usual rituals of teeth brushing, story reading and tucking in replaced with violent illness. Alex would overexert himself by day and always, always, his brain would rebel by night. At a time when he would normally be drifting off to sleep, he was now writhing in pain and commanding us to make it stop. In between, he would throw up. My husband and I rotated sick bowls, one of us rinsing out the first while the other held the second under our boy's chin.

Over the next several weeks, Alex would start to recover, get partway back to school and then the neurons would rebel. He'd get sick again. "The confusion is the worst," he told me.

When he eventually did return to school, there was no gym, no recess, no music class and no busy hallways because all that noise and bustle triggered symptoms. Alex came home for lunch and entered and left classrooms before or after everyone else.

One day, we arrived at the edge of the schoolyard a bit early, just as the end-of-lunch bell rang. We stopped for a moment, watching from the far side of the fence as kids formed their rambunctious lines. For some reason, I wanted Alex to join them even though the doctors had said not to. It was a beautiful day, the start of spring and he looked perfectly fine. I was feeling optimistic and maybe also subconsciously replaying the variations of a theme we had been hearing from people throughout Alex's recovery: "How could it take so long?" "I had my bell rung plenty of times and nothing like that happened to me."

"In my day you just got back in the game."

It felt like lengthy recovery somehow equated to personal failure, although that may not have been the intent. Even I had started to wonder. What were we doing wrong: pushing him too hard? Not hard enough? Doting? Overlooking something? There are a million ways to fail when your child's illness lingers.

"You could give it a try," I coaxed from our corner of the schoolyard. "See how you do."

Alex studied the busy scene in front of him. "I'd better wait," he said.

"Sure?" I said with that falsely cheerful voice mothers sometimes use.

"Yes," he said firmly. We hung around, watching the other kids head indoors. My son's face was impassive but clearly something was happening inside his brain. For all the books I'd read, all the doctor's visits, all the logging of symptoms and constant badgering — "How are you feeling? Any symptoms?" — I still couldn't tell what it was. 'It's all my

fault' After Alex's final hockey game, I watched him step gingerly onto the ice to collect his championship medal. It was the first time in almost two months that his blades had touched a hockey rink. He hadn't wanted to do it but we, his parents, encouraged (or was it pressured?) him to get out there and stand alongside his teammates. He deserved to be there, and had earned his medal.

From the stands, I saw him stumble and fall to his knees, more than once, on the short journey toward the blue line. He'd get up, stumble again, get up. To the rest of the packed arena he must have looked like a comically bad skater.

My son had no scars, no cast or bruises. He's tall and lean, like athletes should be. I thought of how he'd been at the start of the season — not the best skater but surely among the most eager, his body straining forward over the ice, his long legs pumping with all their might. It wasn't the falling now that ripped me up inside. It was the caution in his skates, the tentative self-restraint. It was so very far from the boy I knew.

That night, sitting in bed, Alex stared gloomily at the wall in front of him. It was the start of a terrible night of head-spinning vomiting. (At some point during the game, one of his earplugs had fallen out, dribbling onto the ice, but he didn't want to bother his coaches during such an important game. The usually happy sounds of the arena — the piercing referee's whistle, the coaches shouting encouragement, the teammates celebrating after every goal — did his brain in.)

Now, in the dark stillness of his room he finally broached the subject he had studiously avoided all this time. The ill-fated practice, the hit that changed everything.

"It's all my fault," he said fitfully. "I saw that boy going after other kids." He pounded his bedspread with a fist. "If only I'd stayed away from him this never would have happened." Throughout his recovery, Alex had rarely shed any tears. But now they flooded out. "I'm so stupid!" he shouted. "Stupid, stupid, stupid!"

For a variety of unbelievably frustrating reasons, which taught me first-hand how institutions are mainly interested in protecting themselves, the kid who went after my son was never disciplined. In fact he skated for the opposing team in that championship game, whipping up and down the ice while Alex watched from the bench. He scored three goals, dropping to one knee and fist-pumping after each one like the pros do on TV. What my son makes of all this I may never know, but it's surely more than his 8-year-old brain can comprehend.

"It's unfortunate that from time to time, like with any sport, children get injured," the league president told me. No doubt there are hockey parents and coaches and league executives across the country who believe the benefits are worth the risk. Who believe that

helmets stop concussion and that grade-schoolers play nocontact in house league. But they haven't lived what we have. I hope they never do.

In spite of everything, Alex still wants to play hockey; saying "no" to him is just one more punishment he doesn't deserve. But the specialists recommend against it for now, saying another big blow to the head could cause worse symptoms. Who knows how many hits it might take before the repercussions are permanent, the brain so overwhelmed that it can no longer fully recover? It's a question we'll have to ask ourselves repeatedly as we navigate childhood with our sport-loving son.

Alex has played many sports, but he loves hockey most of all. There's something about the game that captures the soul and holds on tight. No doubt we saw some wonderful things in our son's season of house-league hockey. The camaraderie of the bench, the generosity of volunteer coaches, the sweaty enormity of cardiovascular effort. Yet none of that compares to what we lost.

In a split second, at morning practice, when nobody was looking. Postscript In December, 11 months after his hockey hit and several months after his symptoms had subsided, Alex took a basketball to the head during recess. He wasn't near the hoops but was playing some distance away with a friend when an errant ball struck him from behind. It wasn't much of a hit. The doctor says his brain had likely not fully recovered from the hockey injury and so became more vulnerable. Now the dizzy spells are back. So are the endless doctor's visits and day after day of missed school. Even a light swim gives him vertigo. "It's like the whole world is tilted," he tells us, lying on the couch, unable to move.

How long this will last, we do not know. It's just one of many gut-wrenching questions we must live with now.

Because of the personal nature of this story and the young age of my son, I have chosen to refer to him by a pseudonym.