

Schools can tap into free online education resource to teach kids about concussion

BY SHERYL UBELACKER, THE CANADIAN PRESS

POSTED SEP 1, 2016 5:13 PM EDT



Andrea Covaco works with students in her concussion education program at Emily Carr Public School in Oakville, Ont., in this 2014 handout photo. Schools across Ontario -- and indeed anywhere in the country -- can now access a research-based online resource that teachers can adapt for educating their students about the dangers and prevention of concussions. THE CANADIAN PRESS/HO - Halton District School Board *MANDATORY CREDIT*



TORONTO – Schools across Ontario — and indeed anywhere in the country — can now access a research-based online resource that teachers can adapt for educating their students about the dangers and prevention of concussions.

The free and bilingual Internet resource (www.sportconcussionlibrary.com/) has already been classroom-tested by the Halton District School Board, near Toronto, which modelled its own concussion-education program on the interactive, module-based platform.

That program, which emphasizes give-and-take student input, was introduced to more than 4,000 Grade 9 students in 2014 and has since been expanded to pupils in Grades 3 and 6.

“It was highly successful,” said Joanne Walsh, a consultant to the Halton Board, who helped design the program with Dr. Paul Echlin, a concussion researcher and sports medicine physician who daily sees the devastating effects of the traumatic brain injury on young athletes.

The key is engaging students in conversations about concussion, said Walsh. “The learning is the conversation. The learning is the kids telling their stories or asking the questions and wanting to know more, and teachers facilitating that.

“It really provoked them to think about their experiences and making connections to their own health,” she said of Halton’s program, in which students also produced projects such as “commercials” for classmates and posters detailing facts about the brain injury.

“And that’s the importance of this education: understanding what concussion is ... and for them to recognize the signs and symptoms of a potential concussion, either in themselves or others, and knowing what to do about it, not to keep it quiet, not to go back in the game until they get medical attention.”

A concussion occurs when the brain is jostled about inside the skull, much like an egg yolk within its shell. The injury usually results from a blow to the head, but it can also occur when the body takes a hard knock, such as during a hockey check or a fall from a skateboard.

The person may or may not lose consciousness, but may feel dizzy and disoriented, develop a headache and even vomit. Lingering symptoms — sensitivity to noise and light, poor concentration, irritability and disrupted sleep patterns — can last for weeks. In some cases, such symptoms can linger for months.

Treatment involves resting the body and brain — avoiding physical exertion and limiting or eliminating all screen time and reading — until the individual is cleared by a doctor to return to school or work and to physical activities, especially team-based contact sports. Having had one concussion significantly increases the risk of suffering a subsequent one, which may be more severe.

Andrea Cavaco, who began teaching Halton's concussion program to Grade 6 students while at Emily Carr Public School in Oakville, Ont., said many of the kids believed concussions primarily happened to professional athletes, such as hockey's Sidney Crosby, who was sidelined from the ice for a long period in 2011 after taking blows to the head.

"They didn't associate it with things that could happen everyday to anybody," said Cavaco, citing falls on the playground as an example.

"Once they realized it wasn't a small percentage of the population that it could impact, that it was something they needed to know to protect themselves and protect their loved ones, they really bought more into the concept because it was more relevant and meaningful to them."

She knew the message had really gone home while coaching a Grade 5-6 boys' volleyball game, when one of the players was smacked in the face by a hard serve from the opposing team that knocked him on his back and left him appearing somewhat dazed after he was helped to his feet.

The other five players on the team then stopped the play and called Cavaco over to make sure the boy was OK.

"And when the ref blew the whistle (to resume the game), my team all came and sat down. They wouldn't go back on the court," she said.

"It had nothing to do with me. The boys were all rallying around their teammate with the new information they had about the possible effects should this boy go into the game and get hit again.

"They weren't prepared to move on with the game until the boy had spoken up."

In 2015, all Ontario schools were mandated by the Ministry of Education to provide concussion instruction to students. The Ontario Physical and Health Education Association (OPHEA) has reviewed the online resource and deemed it in alignment with physical education safety guidelines. Those guidelines include protocols to help prevent

and identify suspected concussions and manage a student's safe return to learning and physical activity.

"It's giving a platinum standard of how to translate information about concussion to the children," said Echlin, adding that the online resource can be used not only by teachers and students, but also coaches and parents.

"We can save your child. We can save your child through education and allow children to continue to participate in recreation or elite sport," he said. "We want to promote kids to be active, but we also want to prevent this epidemic of traumatic head injuries from continuing to occur."

Cavaco said another goal of the program is to have students take their knowledge about concussion to family, friends and the larger community,

"And the more that these messages get out to a community, then we can turn around and advocate for our kids," she said.

"That's the cool part of it," agreed Echlin, "that you go from inside-out, from the primary source of education out into the community.

"That's the unique part — education reaches generationally, as it did with seatbelts and smoking."

Online:

Halton Student Concussion Education Project: www.sportconcussionlibrary.com/halton-student-concussion-education-program-hscep/

Follow @SherylUbelacker on Twitter.