

Lack of respect among NHL players sends wrong message to children: Higgins

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MONTREAL - A lack of respect among NHL players is behind a recent wave of vicious hits that have threatened the careers of some of the league's brightest stars, says Montreal Canadiens assistant captain Christopher Higgins.

The 25-year-old forward painted a bleak picture of violence in hockey on Monday while taking part in an awareness campaign about the dangers of concussions to young athletes

"You see these devastating hits now from behind and I think the respect in the game is at an all-time low," Higgins said during a news conference at the Montreal Children's Hospital.

He indicated there is widespread concern in the NHL about the hits that have caused career-threatening concussions to such star players as Boston Bruin Patrice Bergeron, whom he called "arguably the most talented player on that team."

"Guys are going after the head because that's the easiest way to knock a guy out of the game," Higgins said. "It's a guy's livelihood, it's a guy's life you're affecting each time you go to hit someone in the head."

He called on the league to impose stiffer suspensions on reckless hits to help foster more respect between players.

But Higgins expressed the hope that higher levels of respect at the professional level would limit dangerous play involving young athletes.

"When that respect is ingrained in these kids growing up, you'll see less and less of these types of injuries," he said.

According to the Canadian Pediatric Society, the incidence of traumatic brain injuries such as concussions is 180 per 100,000 annually in youths under 16 years old.

Concussions - which are essentially caused by the brain slamming into the skull - can be prevalent in hockey and other contact sports. However, they can pose acute problems in children.

"Children can have many side-effects," said Carlo Galli, trauma prevention co-ordinator at the Montreal Children's. "It can affect their performance in school, their homework, their social life and limit their recreational activities."

As part of their awareness campaign, doctors with the Montreal Children's trauma program are releasing a "Concussion Kit" for parents and coaches.

"It is important for kids to be active and have fun while at the same time being informed and encouraged to make healthy choices," Galli said.

The kit provides guidelines for identifying a concussion as well as suggestions on when it is safe to return to physical activity.

Above all, though, the kit highlights the dangers of playing through a head injury.

While such advice may seem self-evident, Higgins points out that concussions have only recently been treated as a serious injury that needs treatment.

"In the past coaches have blown off those types of injuries," said Higgins, who himself suffered a concussion while playing for the Hamilton Bulldogs.

"The mentality in professional hockey is 'you know you have to play through that.' Now it's becoming more and more apparent that's not really the smartest thing."

A recent study of more than 2,500 retired NFL players concluded those that have sustained three or more concussions were three times more likely to have memory problems or chronic depression, and five times more likely to develop Alzheimer's disease.

The Montreal Children's is among several hospitals in North America developing more sophisticated treatment programs for young athletes who suffer head injuries.

"It's a step-by-step way to make sure you're ready to play instead of just taking a gamble," said Matthew Yane, a 14-year-old hockey player who has suffered a series of concussions and recently finished the treatment program.

Yane blanked out briefly after being hit from behind during a bantam hockey game. But it wasn't until his ear-splitting headaches continued for several days and he had trouble remembering things at school that he checked himself into a hospital.

Now Yane has a simple message for other athletes his age.

"If you have a concussion don't tough it out," he said. "Just take a break."