

Just Another at the Park

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On a beautiful Sunday afternoon, the kind of day that has made Southern California famous, I headed to a neighborhood park to play baseball with my 5-year-old son. A few months earlier, as an assistant T-ball coach, I had learned that nothing is more dangerous than an excited 5-year-old with a baseball bat. For that reason, my wife and I had decided my son would have to make do with a foam-covered bat, at least for another year or two.

On this day, however, one of my son's friends met us at the park with a new Louisville Slugger. My first reaction was anxiety, but I decided I could manage this risk by closely watching the boys when they were at the plate. I also asked them not to pick up the wooden bat until I was ready to pitch them the ball.

The game consisted of my pitching and fielding the ball, while the boys took turns batting and running the bases. After we had been playing a short time, two young brothers whom I never had met asked if they could join the game. The older boy (I'll call him Mikey) was about 8, and his brother may have been 4. All the boys really could hit and were keeping me busy chasing the ball into the outfield, then trying to throw them out at home plate. One usually was waiting his turn to bat and would act as a catcher.

Everything went well for about an hour. My son and his friend were on base when Mikey's turn came to bat. He hammered the ball deep into the outfield, and, by the time I had chased it down, I was about 80 feet from home plate. Mikey's younger brother was standing on the plate, watching Mikey round third base as I threw him the ball.



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Suddenly, I was horrified to realize Mikey's brother was not wearing a glove. Instead, he was holding the Louisville Slugger! As he saw the ball approaching, the younger brother raised the bat to swing. The ball was low, and Mikey was sliding. His head and the ball arrived at the same instant. I yelled, "Stop!" but it was too late.

The end of the wooden bat caught Mikey in the forehead with a loud c-r-a-c-k. He immediately went down, covering his eyes and forehead with his hands. By the time I got to him, he was screaming hysterically, and blood was seeping from under his hands. I tried to get him on his back, with his head in my lap, but he was fighting me. He had no intention of letting me move his hands to look at the wound.

I finally succeeded in getting Mikey on his back and saw a nasty gash under his left eyebrow. It was about 2 inches long, a half-inch wide, and appeared to go to the bone. He was bleeding badly; his face and chest were covered with blood. I needed something to stop the flow, so I started taking off my shirt. In a moment of selfishness, though, I decided to use his shirt. "He certainly will be going to a hospital," I rationalized, "and if I use my shirt, I'll probably never see it again."

While trying to get his shirt over his head, I realized I had made a mistake (Mikey continued holding his hands to his face). I finally succeeded, however, and was applying pressure to the wound when his mother, a woman whom I never had met, arrived. Seeing her screaming son and me covered with blood, she quickly became as hysterical as Mikey and tried to pull him away from me. Under the circumstances, I knew I was in better shape to administer first aid, so I refused to let him go. We ended up compromising, with me applying pressure and her hugging him in a sitting position.

With the bleeding controlled, I became concerned if he had a concussion or neck injury and whether he would go into shock. In any event, I was sure he shouldn't be sitting. I persuaded his mother to lay him down as my wife found someone with a cell phone and called for an ambulance. A fire station was only a block away, so the ambulance arrived quickly. The emergency-medical technicians managed to calm Mikey's mother, assuring her that he likely would need only an X-ray and a few stitches.

As I walked back to my house, covered with blood from my neck to my knees, I had time to think about what I could have done better. First, I should not have let the boys use the wooden bat, even if it was a recent gift from grandparents. One adult isn't enough to supervise four young boys with a deadly weapon and play a game at the same time. I was uncomfortable with the bat from the beginning but said nothing because I didn't want to offend anyone.

Second, I should have insisted that no one pick up the bat until I was ready to pitch. I had made that rule at the beginning of the game, but I let it slide as the game progressed.

Last, I shouldn't have tried pulling a shirt over the head of a hysterical boy. I easily could have aggravated the wound or a neck injury. I should have used my shirt because keeping victims warm is an essential part of treating them for shock.

Overall, I was pleased I had been able to remain calm and administer first aid, despite a bloody wound, a hysterical victim, and a distraught mother. I was reminded that risk management applies to all parts of life and that first-aid skills are as perishable as they are valuable. 

The author was assigned to HS-14 when he wrote this article.