

Q. My son plays high school basketball and I want him to wear a mouthguard. He tells me he can't talk to his teammates with that "thing" in his mouth. "Besides mom, it's SO not cool!" Then I get the teenage eye roll. Should I insist?

A. This is when it gets tough for a mom. My heart sinks every time I see a child with a fractured or bumped tooth from a sports injury. He or she is suddenly implicated to a lifetime of dental restoration. A fifth grader once reminded me what he learned in his science class: The teeth are the only part of the ectoderm (the body's outer covering) that doesn't repair itself after an injury. So while we heal from a break in the skin, hair, fingernails, and even the cornea of the eye, we can't heal a fractured tooth.

We all know that many "non contact" sports such as soccer, volleyball, gymnastics or basketball have a huge risk of injury from body impact. Your son might not be impressed with this statistic but I am. Every year athletic mouthguards prevent more than 200,000 permanent tooth injuries among U.S. athletes.

And the truth is, mouthguards DO interrupt normal speech and lip closure. After all it is a hunk of plastic in your mouth! The least expensive way to protect teeth is the boil-n-fit, self-molded mouthguards available in most sporting goods stores. These, however, are often uncomfortably large, and quite bulky—making compliance a real challenge among athletes.

If you really want your son to consistently wear a mouthguard, consider having your family dentist fabricate one. The custom-fitted mouthguard, formed from a quick alginate impression, is much less bulky and more retentive. Your son will be able to speak more comfortably (and be less self-conscious) with it in place. Mouthguards can be made with a strap, to connect to a helmet, or not. Your dentist will likely be happy to accommodate whatever specifics your coach recommends. Yes, it will cost a bit more but if he will wear it, it is well-worth the investment!