

Why do we keep talking about the “A Step aHead” program?

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If you have read the AHAI newsletter for the past month or so you have seen numerous mentions of the joint initiative called *A Step aHead*. Yet, you may not fully understand why this program was started and why it is so important to the hockey community.



Over the past 10-15 years there has been increasing focus on concussion in sports, but much of the attention has been on football. However, there is a high rate of concussions in hockey, particularly given the number of practices and games that occur over the lengthy hockey season. Unfortunately, hockey players are not provided with baseline neurocognitive testing at their schools because hockey is typically a club sport. This raises significant concerns that these athletes were not getting adequate education on concussions and may not be receiving optimal post-injury care. Neurocognitive testing is a component of concussion management as it provides objective data on post-concussion cognitive changes.

Then in 2011 four organizations joined forces to address this issue; The Chicago Blackhawks, AHAI, Athletico, and the Midwest Center for Concussion Care (in 2012 MWCCC became part of NorthShore University HealthSystem). The program had two main objectives: 1) provide education on concussions to the entire youth hockey community in IL and; 2) provide baseline ImPACT testing to the all 13-18 year-old AHAI hockey players. The age-range was based on the age-restrictions of the ImPACT test and the increased incidence of concussion in Bantam and above. AHAI and the Chicago Blackhawks graciously offered to cover the costs of baseline testing.

Through the generosity of these four organizations and a great deal of hard work by a number of dedicated people, the program has met with great success. In the past two years we have tested 1,700 athletes and we hope to significantly increase that number this year. We have also provided extensive in-person training to coaches, athletes and parents on concussions, and distributed educational materials to all AHAI coaches and parents.

However, we know we can do more. We want, first and foremost, to keep our kids safe while they continue to play the sport we all love. We want all AHAI players and parents to be well-versed on the signs and symptoms of concussion and knowledgeable on how to best manage these injuries. We will continue the *A Step aHead* program if we believe it is achieving that goal but we need your help.

Educate yourself on concussions (I recommend www.cdc.gov/concussion as an up-to-date resource). Schedule an appointment for baseline neurocognitive testing now through 11/30/13 (www.athletico.com/impact) if you haven't done so in the last two years (we recommend re-baselining every two-years), make sure your coaches are educated on concussions, talk to your children about the signs and symptoms of concussion, and talk to other parents about this important issue. Finally, let AHAI know what else can be done to reduce the incidence of concussions in youth hockey.