My career in sports medicine will hit 20 years this August, and I would not change a thing. I thoroughly enjoy the profession I have chosen. I am thankful for all of the athletically active patients for whom I have had the pleasure of providing care. I am in a university-type practice and have a practice profile that involves seeing a lot of middle school, high school, and collegiate athletes. This is an enjoyable group to provide care for, but the majority of my time involves including parents in the care decision-making process and discussion.

I have noticed a distinct change over the past 10 years of my career compared with my first 10 years in practice. At first I thought that it was just me noticing this change, but after discussing my thoughts with numerous other orthopedic sports medicine professionals, I found they had come to the same conclusion I had: some parents have given up their parental role and now behave as if they are their child’s sports agent when it comes to decisions about safety, surgery, and return to play issues.

After injury, it seems more important for some parents to be their child’s friend as opposed to their parent. Instead of supporting the physician’s recommendation, which is based on science and objective facts, they focus on the wants and desires of their child. Parents seem to want to remain friends with their teenager and let you, the physician, be the bad guy. Every week, I spend a lot of time explaining to parents why their child cannot play in the travel tournament this weekend—4 months after anterior cruciate ligament surgery. I can promise you that if I said yes, irrespective of what the science says, which parents can easily find on the Internet, a majority of the children would be playing. Is it wrong to at least hope that parents should be the ultimate safety net for their child’s health?

To completely understand this, one has to understand the culture of the sports world we live in. Most children have specialized in a single sport by the time they reach 12 years old, and almost all have specialized by the time they reach high school. Their parents have committed time and money to their participation in their chosen sport. This involves year-round training sessions, practice, and local and regional games, and often family travel that lasts an entire weekend. Not only does the child’s entire social circle revolve around a club soccer team, but the parents’ entire social circle now revolves around the other parents on the team.

You can understand why the parents are in the room discussing an injury that will prevent participation in their child’s sport for the next 6 months, their entire social network comes crashing down. They do not have a backup plan for this. Also, if their child does not return quickly, he or she may lose the starting position or run the risk of not getting a Division I scholarship. Sports participation in 2013 with financial and social involvement from the family has complicated office interactions when discussing treatment decisions.

Although I do not have the answer to how and why this changed, sports medicine professionals must be prepared to deal with these complex relationships. Parents are now friends with their child’s coach—I’m not sure my parents ever spoke with a single coach of mine, and I played sports in high school and college. Parents advocate on behalf the child to have the coach to get the star player back into play, irrespective of...
whether it is safe. Parents believe that the more friendly they are with the coach, the more the coach will play and promote their child, and a Division I scholarship will surely follow. If a player returns too soon after anterior cruciate ligament surgery and damages the ligaments again, the coach will not be around 10 years later when the player is having arthritic problems after 2 anterior cruciate ligament reconstructions in the same knee.

What surprises me is that parents are more interested in pleasing the coach than doing what physicians tell them is safe for their child. My colleague has parents in his office asking him to do Tommy John surgery on their high school son’s elbow so he can pitch in college and be drafted into the majors, irrespective of whether the surgery is indicated.

I am sure that I am old-fashioned and people will say to me “Darren, times have changed.” However, when it comes to the safety of children’s participation in sports, I can only hope the majority of parents would support the physician and err on the side of safety instead of the tournament game this weekend. Hopefully one day parents will return to their roles as parents as opposed to their child’s friend when it comes to safety decisions and participation in sporting activities.