

PROTECTING AGAINST ABUSE

Knowing the Facts

Children have the opportunity to gain so many wonderful benefits from their sports participation, but in order for it to be a positive, safe and rewarding experience coaches must be actively engaged in ensuring that abusive and inappropriate behaviors have no place in the program.

Sadly, child abuse - in its many forms - can occur anywhere and at any time, and youth sports programs certainly aren't immune. So it is important to make sure that the youth sports environment is a safe haven - a place where all children can fully enjoy their participation while being free from all forms of abuse.

Children participate in youth sports for the following reasons:

1. To be with friends
2. To have fun

Children are also learning many of the life skills that will help them become productive members of society. When coaches involved in the youth sports experience lose perspective, potentially abusive situations may occur and these simple reasons kids have for playing can disappear. When the people who should be guiding young athletes are instead being emotionally, physically or sexually abusive, it becomes a hostile, destructive environment that erodes self-esteem, confidence and trust. The child is not only assaulted by these immediate behaviors, but is often robbed of the potential life-long benefits that a positive experience in sports can offer.



Understanding that child abuse can occur in youth sports is important. Also important is the understanding that children who are being abused, or who have been abused outside of youth sports, may be participating on your team.

It is likely that right now you know a player who has been, or is being, abused. The child abuse statistics are startling:

- Experts estimate that 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 6 boys are sexually abused before their 18th birthdays. (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention)
- There are 42 million American survivors of childhood sexual abuse and 3 million are still children. In addition, it is estimated that just as many children suffer from physical and emotional abuse and child neglect as they do from sexual abuse. (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention)
- 90% of abusers are people that children know. (Darkness to Light)

- 20% of child sexual abuse victims are under the age of 8. (Darkness to Light)
- Approximately 5% of all men have a predilection to be sexually attracted to children. (Santa Clara University)
- 14% of all men and 36% of women in prison in the U.S. were abused as children. (U.S. Department of Justice)
- As many as two-thirds of the people in treatment for drug abuse reported being abused or neglected as children. (National Institute on Drug Abuse)
- Children who experience child abuse and neglect are 59% more likely to be arrested as a juvenile, 28% more likely to be arrested as an adult, and 30% more likely to commit violent crimes. (Childwelfare.gov)
- About 80% of 21-year-olds that were abused as children met criteria for at least one psychological disorder. (Childwelfare.gov)
- Abused children are 25% more likely to experience teen pregnancy. (Childwelfare.gov)
- Abused teens are less likely to practice safe sex, putting them at greater risk for STDs. (Childwelfare.gov)
- About 30% of abused and neglected children will later abuse their own children, continuing the cycle of abuse. (Childwelfare.gov)
- 8% of coaches acknowledge encouraging their athletes to hurt opponents. (University of Notre Dame)
- 33% of coaches acknowledge yelling at players for making mistakes. (University of Notre Dame)
- 20% of coaches acknowledge they made fun of a team member with limited skills. (University of Notre Dame)

Despite these startling statistics, most coaches involved in youth sports would never purposely harm a child, but sometimes your words and actions can have devastating consequences to a youngster without you even realizing you are causing pain. Plus, there are those individuals who harbor horrific intentions and get involved in youth sports programs simply because of the immediate access to lots of children - and they do so by pretending to be caring adults interested in making a difference in kids' lives. Every one of us has a responsibility to prevent abusive situations and protect all children. In order to do this, we must know the facts, understand what child abuse is, how to protect yourself from false accusations and how to protect the children from harm.

What is Child Abuse?

As part of the NYSCA Code of Ethics you have agreed to do your best to provide a safe playing environment for your players. This agreement expects you to shield your players from all types of abuse in youth sports. Following this agreement will not only help protect players from physical and

mental harm but will also allow you to uphold your NYSCA membership and keep in good standing within your league.

Let's define the five major types of abuse as well as "grooming," a technique abusers use to set up their victims.

Physical Abuse can occur as non-accidental injuries caused by a coach, official or other adult involved. It is defined as intentional physical injury resulting from hitting, punching, kicking, biting or other forms of bodily harm. All adults must be certain that no inappropriate physical contact occurs between adults and children. Some examples include:

- Grabbing players by their facemasks or equipment
- Hitting or shaking a player in a fit of anger
- Wrapping athletes in plastic wrap to force weight loss to make a weight limit

Warning signs that a player on your team has been physically abused

- Repeated pattern/unexplained injuries, bruises, welts or cuts that are uncommon in the sport.
- Constantly ripped or torn clothes/uniforms.
- Avoids or flinches from your instructions.
- Gets physically abusive with other players.
- Seems afraid to leave the practice or game.

Child Neglect is the failure to provide a child with the basic necessities of life. Neglect often overlaps with other forms of abuse. Neglect can involve:

- Failure to allow participation or inadequate supervision
- Delay in allowing an injured player to seek health care
- Lack of encouragement or effort to work with the athlete in order to help them improve
- Depriving young athletes of water or use of the restroom

Warning signs that a player on your team has been neglected

- Seems excessively dehydrated or hungry before practices or games.
- Is frequently unsupervised or left alone/allowed to play in unsafe conditions.
- Injuries are untreated.
- Seems overly unkempt or dirty.

Sexual Abuse is any sexual act between an adult and a minor or between two minors when one exerts power over the other. Child sexual abuse often involves the misuse of authority and power by a coach. As a coach, you wield enormous power over your players and it should never be used to make a child feel uncomfortable. Examples of this type of abuse include:

- Forcing, coercing or persuading a child to engage in any type of sexual act or sexual contact.

- Non-contact acts such as exhibitionism, exposure to pornography, voyeurism and communicating in a sexual manner by phone or Internet.

Warning signs that a player on your team has been sexually abused

- Trouble walking or sitting, or showing signs of discomfort.
- Sudden interest or display of sexual acts inappropriate to their age; or even seductive behavior.
- Makes a strong effort to avoid adults.
- Refuses to go home or runs away from an activity.
- An STD, genital injuries or pregnancy, especially under the age of 14.

Emotional Abuse is considered the most common form of maltreatment (psychological/verbal abuse) that occurs in youth sports. Emotional abuse attacks a child's emotional development and sense of self-worth and is considered an assault on a child's psyche. It is a pattern of harmful behavior that can cause serious behavioral, cognitive, emotional or mental disorders within children. Examples include:

- Name calling or making cruel comments about body type
- Using racial slurs or sexual insults
- Cursing, yelling or using 'put downs' that demean a child



Warning signs that a player on your team has been emotionally abused

- Withdrawn, fearful or anxious about playing or doing something wrong.
- Shows extremes in behavior (complaining, demanding, submissive or aggressive).
- Wants to quit the team.
- Sleeping or eating disorders.
- Playing ability has suddenly changed for the worse.

Philosophical Abuse involves inappropriate use of a core philosophy. "Win-at-all-cost" mentalities, encouraging unsportsmanlike behaviors and condoning aggressiveness are all forms of philosophical abuse. When these attitudes override a child's right to safely participate in a positive youth sports experience, it is abusive and can set the stage for other forms of abuse. Examples include:

- Teaching and/or expecting players to taunt, cheat, intimidate, fight or trash talk
- Demanding unrealistic expectations, or perfect performances

Warning signs that a player on your team has been philosophically abused

- Attacks or gets in fights with teammates, opposing players or friends on and off the field.
- Cheats during games or at school and tries to explain why that is acceptable.

- Obsesses with perfection in everything they do.
- Mood swings if perfection is not achieved.
- Taunts teammates or opposing players during practices and games.

Grooming is a process that occurs when an adult takes a special interest in a child or gives preferential treatment or pursues a relationship in order to create a situation to sexually abuse. To protect children, we need to know that most abusers develop a relationship with a child (and often with the parents) - a relationship which harms the child and often makes the child feel responsible and unable to tell. Secrecy is fundamental to the abuse continuing and children are often trapped before they know what has happened.

Sexual grooming involves a process with the following elements:

1. Find a vulnerable child with low self-confidence, low self-esteem, or that is paid little attention by his or her parents.
2. Involving the child in peer like activities, such as hanging out away from the activity.
3. Desensitizing the child to touch, such as by tickling, patting, stroking or wrestling.
4. Isolating the child by spending a large amount of time with the child and urging them to keep secrets.
5. Making the child feel responsible for the sexual misconduct that has occurred.

Warning signs that a player on your team has been groomed

- New clothes, equipment or items that a parent has not bought for the player.
- Too much private time with an individual that is not their legal guardian.
- Inappropriate touching between a player and an individual that is not their legal guardian.

Remember, child abuse can and does occur in and out of youth sports. As a responsible coach, you cannot ignore the overwhelming statistics of 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 6 boys being abused during their childhood. You must be willing to admit that abuse does occur and you should have a pre-season meeting with parents and also review the steps your league is taking to protect players during their participation. The next section will cover these steps in detail.

Protecting Yourself

Child abuse occurs in youth sports whether we want to believe it or not. Parents are increasingly more cautious and suspicious when letting their child play an activity and they have every right to be. To protect yourself from a parent falsely accusing you of abuse, follow these four steps throughout your season.

Step 1 - Check with your league

Some leagues and organizations mandate a no touch policy as the most comprehensive way to avoid inappropriate touching. No touch means that you have been mandated to not touch children in any way, including during practices while providing instruction. While some organizations mandate

no touch as the most legally sound way to avoid misinterpretations or false allegations, not all organizations agree. Many encourage respectable and appropriate touching among their coaches and staff with the youngsters participating. If some types of appropriate touching are encouraged, or accepted, the organization must clearly define what is appropriate within their policy.

Touching that is generally considered inappropriate refers to hitting, biting, punching and any other types of acts that may hurt the child. Confusing touch is also inappropriate and refers to contact that may not feel quite right to the child. Any touching that makes children feel funny, uncomfortable or scared is inappropriate. Any unwelcome touching is also inappropriate and a child's wishes must be respected at all times. Often, a high-five after a good play, or a comforting hug following a defeat, are considered appropriate - unless a child, for whatever reason, is made to feel uncomfortable by this touching. **NOTE:** Always check with your league for the proper policies that they enforce regarding touching.



It is also a good idea to check with your league if you are unsure how to handle a situation which you feel involves abuse or might be misinterpreted as abuse to one of your players. A league administrator should be able to guide you in the right direction in handling any type of abuse related situation.

Step 2 - Meet with parents

Before the season begins plan to have a meeting with your players' parents and explain your personal background as well as how you are going to coach throughout the season. You should take the time to explain that some light contact or difficult training might be necessary when showing skills and drills to the players. If the child or parents feel this contact is inappropriate please ask them to tell you immediately so you can adjust your teaching methods. As a coach you must welcome questions and concerns from parents at any time to create a good flow of communication between everyone involved.

It is also recommended to require parents to stay for all practices and games, and to be an active part of the experience. This sends a strong message to the parents that you have volunteered for all the right reasons.

Step 3 - Abide by the *Two Adult Rule*

This rule states that no child should ever be left alone with an adult on the field, at events, in a locker room or during any other situation associated with the team. Another parent, coach, official or administrator should always be present to protect the child from harm as well as any false accusations against you. In some rare cases a child may report a situation where you were left alone with that child and a protective parent might misinterpret what happened and accuse you of abuse. To prevent these types of situations from happening, always make sure another adult is with you at all times in the presence of your players. Parents and guardians should also have access to all areas of the facility where children may go. Nancy McBride, national safety director for the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, warns about being alone with your players:

“There are some really common sense things that should be immediately apparent. No alone time with the kids. If you are in the locker room make sure there is enough adult supervision. If you are going on an approved overnight trip make sure you have those chaperones and you have enough of them. If it is a co-ed sport you have to make sure you have the same gender there. Those are the kind of things that are good for the children and also for the adults who are coaching the children. I always tell people who are working with kids - don't set yourself up. Don't set yourself up in a situation that could be misperceived. That it looks like something weird was going on because you will have to explain your way out of it. So, if you don't put yourself in those situations and I am talking to the good people out there, then it is less likely that you are going to face this. Because good people should be transparent - You want me to get the background screening? You want me to make sure I have got enough chaperones on the field trip or enough people in the locker room? Then I am all for it! That is what I want! It is the ones who are resistant to that you have to look at. Why can't I take this child on an overnight trip alone? Or why can't I spend extra time with this child on my own. Well there are many many reasons and the most important reason of all is because we are protecting kids.”

Step 4 - Pay equal attention to all children

As a coach you must be mindful to not show favoritism or want to spend an excessive amount of time with one player. You might feel the need to help a child that is lagging behind the other players or you might want to focus your time with the best player to help your team, but this can cause a problem. In today's society, parents are often skeptical of adults they do not know - and rightfully so. Showing favoritism to any one player might cause their parental instincts to go into effect and cause them to overreact. If you feel a player needs additional help discuss with their parent the best course of action for that player. Activities and practices can often be adjusted to make sure everyone is included and learning on the same level.

Protecting the Players

Protecting yourself from false abuse accusations throughout your season is an important task to learn but it is of the utmost concern that we protect the young children that are participating in youth sports. Follow these three steps to make sure your players remain free of abuse during your season.

Step 1 - Talk with your players

Just like with parents, you should plan a meeting before the season to speak with your team about the upcoming season. Go over what you want them to learn throughout the season and stress that they should have fun while doing so. Talk to them about how you might show skills and drills and that light contact might occur. Instruct them to let you know if they feel uncomfortable with contact like that and you can then adjust your training techniques. Also, stress that you do not allow bullying or abuse between players. If such a situation occurs between players, they should come to you immediately so you can address the situation accordingly.

Step 2 - Assistant coaches

The head coach of any team has the responsibility to protect all of the kids that they coach. Anyone you bring on board or is assigned to your team should be league approved and must uphold the same standards as you do when in the presence of the players. Having an assistant coach will also be helpful to follow the *Two Adult Rule* when coaching your team.

Step 3 - Reporting abuse

A) Assistants or other coaches - At some point you might be required to report abuse caused by your own assistant coach or an opposing coach. A discussion with the alleged coach often can resolve minor issues that arise during the course of a season. However, all abuse should be reported to the league and if you feel the abuse is serious enough it should be reported to the proper authorities.

B) Abuse at home - You are responsible for protecting your players when they are participating in the activity. You must also be aware if your players arrive at the activity showing any signs of abuse that may have been suffered at home or in some other aspect of their personal life. Just like a teacher, you will have contact with your players on a weekly basis and might notice some changes within a child that may indicate abuse. This abuse should be reported to the league AND the proper authorities to, first and foremost, protect the child; and secondly, to protect you from a false accusation that you are possibly harming a child emotionally or physically. Also, it is important to note that all but a few states impose penalties on mandatory reporters who knowingly or willfully fail to make a report when they suspect that a child is being abused or neglected. Failure to report is classified as a misdemeanor in 39 states; and in some states misdemeanors are upgraded to felonies for failure to report more serious situations. If you need to report a suspected child abuse case contact the local authorities or contact one of these national child abuse prevention organizations found [here](#). Ms. McBride explains how coaches should be on the lookout for signs of abuse:

“Who better to know than that person who spends that kind of time with the child and again we go back to changes in a child’s behavior. You have a kid who acts one way - outgoing, extroverted and then you start seeing some real behavior changes where he doesn’t seem to want to participate anymore or he is much more introverted - really take a look at that and really have a conversation with that child as well. Don’t be afraid to come forward. I think one thing we learned in Penn State is we have to give people permission to do the right thing. The right thing is not just telling someone else, hoping for the best. You have to have those standards and those policies established so that everybody who comes forward knows this is going to be taken seriously and is going to be dealt with appropriately.”

C) Parents on the sideline - As a coach, a difficult task during the season can be dealing with parents if they try to live through their child and the athletic activity. Sometimes these parents direct various types of abuse toward their own child. If you notice any type of abusive behavior, make an effort to pull the parent aside and discuss the proper conduct you expect while they are on the sideline or in the stands. If that is unsuccessful it might be necessary to report the parent to the league for possible removal from the activity. If you let one parent get away with misbehaving, a whole group of parents might start to act inappropriately around the kids. You are trying to provide a safe, fun and positive experience for the players and this requires the cooperation of the players' parents.
