

Coach's Notes

PREVENTING

Sexual Abuse
of children in sport

As a coach, you play an important role in a young person's development – both off and on the field of play. Your influence goes far beyond a single season and far beyond teaching the skills of a game.

You are trusted. You have to be, to be a successful coach.

Because young players want to please their coach and because their self-confidence and self-esteem is just building, many find it difficult to refuse what a coach asks of them. This gives a coach an enormous amount of power.

Most coaches use this power positively and work hard at helping to develop a young person's sense of success, self-worth, confidence, and positive values.

Unfortunately, there are a few people who seek out opportunities, such as coaching, looking for a chance to take sexual advantage of a young person. They know that being a coach means they can gain the trust of – and power over – young people.

The very thought that one of your young athletes may be a victim of sexual abuse seems unthinkable—even impossible. That's why sexual abuse can go undetected.

Making it

safer

WHAT IS CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE?

Child sexual abuse may be characterized as the use of a child by an older or more powerful child, adolescent, or adult for sexual gratification. There are two categories of sexual abuse – contact and non-contact.

Non-contact:

“flashing or exposing sexual body parts to a young athlete; watching intrusively as a young athlete changes or showers; speaking or communicating sexually/seductively with a young athlete; showing pornographic films, magazines or photographs to young athletes; having young athletes participate in the creation of pornographic materials; forcing a young athlete to watch a sexual act performed by others; objectifying or ridiculing a young athlete’s body parts.”²

Contact:

“kissing or holding a young athlete in a sexual manner; touching a young athlete’s sexual body parts or forcing a young athlete to touch another person’s sexual parts; penetrating a young athlete anally or vaginally with objects or fingers; having vaginal, anal or oral intercourse with a young athlete.”¹

WHAT SHOULD BE DONE IF YOU SUSPECT SEXUAL ABUSE?

The law says that any person in Ontario who has reasonable grounds to suspect that a child is or may be in need of protection should report it directly and promptly to the authorities. In Ontario, this means notifying a children’s aid society and where appropriate, the police. You should also report to the Board of Directors of your organization. However, reporting an incident to your organization does not absolve you from the personal responsibility of reporting it to the authorities.

If you are performing official or professional duties, you **have a legal obligation to report a suspected case of sexual abuse, or other situations where a child may be in need of protection.**³ You are liable to a fine of up to \$1000.00 if you fail to make a report.

SETTING THE BOUNDARIES

Not everyone feels the same about their personal space so it is important to set the boundaries to ensure that there are no misunderstandings. It is up to you, as a coach, to take the lead in helping your team, including the players, parents, team officials and everyone involved, understand and determine where the appropriate personal space boundaries lie.

The heightened awareness of the risks of sexual abuse means that we have to be more conscientious than ever about boundaries and about not crossing those lines.

Here are some guidelines on boundaries.

¹ Woodhouse, P (1998). Abuse and neglect. *Speak Out! ... Act Now!* Section 1, Chapter 3, Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women and Sport and Physical Activity, and Canadian Hockey Association. Ottawa: Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women and Sport and Physical Activity, p. 4

² Ibid, p.5

³ Refer to the Ministry of Community and Social Services’ brochure “Reporting Child Abuse” for more information, including other situations (not just child sexual abuse) which require a report to be made.



Emotional/Verbal Boundaries

Positive feedback and constructive criticism on performance is important. However, negative feedback or criticism about the person is not acceptable and crosses the emotional/verbal boundary line. Coaches should critique the skill, not the person. “You’re stupid,” “You’re too fat” are definitely unacceptable criticisms.

Sexual Boundaries

Coaches often have to stand close to athletes or touch them while demonstrating or correcting a skill. Coaches, athletes and parents should be in agreement about what kind of contact is necessary and appropriate for a specific age group in a specific sport. Any physical touching that makes an athlete uncomfortable is inappropriate. Coaches should not be in dressing rooms or showers while athletes change. Children too young to dress themselves after a sporting event should be accompanied by a parent.

Social Boundaries

Attending sport-related events like awards, banquets and team barbecues is completely appropriate—it is integral to building individual and team spirit. However, a coach should avoid non-sport related parties or other activities with athletes.

Physical Boundaries

Remember too, there are physical boundaries that dictate that drills are only used to develop fitness and skills. Exercise should never be used as a punishment.



FAIR PLAY: CODES OF CONDUCT FOR COACHES, PLAYERS AND PARENTS

A safe environment is one that encourages fair play, dignity and respect. Having a code of conduct for everyone involved – the organization, the parents and the children themselves – goes a long way to Making it SafeR. It's a coach's responsibility to lay the ground rules and set the standards.

Players have the right to protection and support. They also have a responsibility (according to their age and experience) to do their part to build protective and supportive environments. Talk to your players about their role within their code of conduct – not just once, but throughout the season. Perhaps you could focus on one section at each practice. Point out examples of when the code is not being respected, and remember to emphasize when it is!

Parents, as every coach knows, are key to the success of a team and a season. Work with parents in helping them understand the part they play in promoting a safe and healthy sporting atmosphere. Their being involved is the first step.

Here are some suggested codes of conduct that will go a long way to promoting an atmosphere of respect and responsibility and encouraging safe sport.

Coach's Code


As a coach I will:

Respect others, in victory and defeat by:

- treating players, parents, opponents, coaches and other officials fairly, regardless of gender, ethnic background, colour, sexual orientation, religion, political belief or economic status
- directing all comments at the performance rather than the person
- never criticizing other coaches.

Put the health and wellbeing of my athletes first by:

- co-operating with the parents or legal guardians of my athletes, involving them in their child's development
- conducting practices and games in ways that are mindful of the academic pressures placed on my student athletes and promote their academic success
- ensuring that the activity being undertaken is suitable to the age, experience, ability, and fitness level of the athletes
- co-operating with registered medical practitioners in the overall management of my athletes' medical and psychological health
- recognizing and accepting when it is time to refer athletes to other coaches or sport specialists and allowing athletes' goals to take precedence over my own



Be a good role model by:

- displaying high personal standards
- abstaining from and not tolerating the use of drugs, alcohol, and tobacco products in conjunction with sport and discourage their use, and that of other banned performance enhancing drugs, by athletes at all times
- not using profane, insulting, harassing or otherwise offensive language

Stand on guard against abuse and promote a safe environment by:

- reporting any suspicion of sexual abuse (and other situations when a child may be in need of protection, such as neglect) to the authorities and advising the board or executive
- refraining from verbal or physical behaviours that constitute harassment or abuse
- educating athletes about their responsibilities in contributing to a safe environment

Player's Code

As a player, I will:

- play by the rules and in the spirit of the game
- respect my fellow players, my coaches, the officials, and my opponents
- do my best to be a true team player
- remember that winning isn't everything, that having fun, improving my skills, making friends, and doing my best are just as important
- acknowledge all good plays or performances, both those of my team and my opponents
- participate because I want to, not just because my parents or coaches want me to
- control my temper – fighting and mouthing off spoil the game for everyone
- remember that coaches and officials are there to help me. I will accept their decisions and show them respect.

Parent's Code

As a parent, I will:

- remember that my child plays sport for their enjoyment, not for mine
- encourage my child to play by the rules and to resolve conflicts without resorting to hostility or violence
- teach my child that doing one's best is as important as winning, so that my child will never feel severely defeated by the outcome of a game or event
- make my child feel like a winner every time by offering praise for competing fairly and trying hard
- never ridicule or yell at my child, or another child, for making a mistake or losing a competition
- remember that children learn best by example. I will applaud good performances by both my child's team and their opponents
- never force my child to participate in sports
- never question the official's judgement or honesty in public – I will take concerns to the proper officials
- respect and show appreciation for the trained volunteer coaches and other team leaders who give their time and energy to provide sport activities that help my child grow and develop.

A COACH'S GAME PLAN FOR Making It SafeR

Here's a seven-point game plan for a safe sporting environment.

1. Learn the rules and practice the Coaches Code of Conduct.
2. Learn what sexual abuse is and work to ensure that it does not take place on your team.
3. Report any situation where you suspect a child may be in need of protection, as in the case of possible sexual abuse. Know who to talk to and how to make the report.
4. Learn and fulfil your responsibilities as defined by your league or organization.
5. Introduce the players to the Players Code of Conduct and their parents to the Parents Code of Conduct.
6. Communicate regularly with your players and their parents throughout the season, so that everyone is clear about the rules and expectations.
7. Have fun!!

Parts of this booklet were adapted from **Sport Safe, BC Coach's Guide**

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