



Abuse, Safety, and Misconduct, On and Off the Field

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Our organization, stopsportsinjuries.org, spends most of our efforts trying to reduce injuries during athletic activities. This article addresses issues not directly related to sports injuries, but extremely important issues related to safety and abuse that can occur on and off the field or court.

Safety getting to and from games and practice:

Pedestrian safety: Pedestrian accidents are unfortunately becoming more common as a result of drivers becoming distracted with cell phones.

1. Children should not walk to athletic activities without an adult until they are ready, not earlier than age 10. They should hold hands with an adult whenever crossing the street. Practice and plan out the exact route before walking without an adult. Do not take short cuts.
2. When walking without an adult, children should preferably walk in groups.
3. Wear bright-colored clothing and reflecting objects on backpacks or other items the child is carrying. Wear a helmet.
4. Walk on sidewalk, facing traffic, and cross in crosswalks or areas with signs or traffic lights. Walk on left side of road.
5. Look both ways before crossing street.
6. Walk only in daylight.
7. Do not be distracted by cell phones, texting, etc.
8. Make eye contact with drivers.
9. Do not take rides from a stranger or anyone who was not pre-arranged, even if you may know them. If an unfamiliar person or vehicle approaches you or calls out to you, do not get close. Run away and yell if necessary and find the nearest adult you trust.
10. Be extremely careful entering a street between parked cars where the passing drivers may not be able to see you. Do not cross behind bus or car.

Biking safety:

1. A child should have experience walking to and from games or practice before biking to games or practice. Many of the rules that apply to pedestrian safety also apply to biking safety.
2. Ride on the right side of the road.
3. Look both ways before entering the street or crossing the street.
4. Use proper hand signals before stopping or turning.



5. Only ride in daylight and use bright-colored clothes and reflectors.
6. Practice with adult before riding on your own.
7. Stop at all intersections.
8. No cell phone use or other electronic distractions.

Abuse During Youth Sports:

The experience of youth sports can have extremely important effects on a child's development. An excellent coach can have a profoundly positive impact on a child's emotional development. Actually, learning life lessons is one of the most important reasons why children should be involved in sports. Unfortunately, children can also be injured emotionally from an abusive coach or other adult associated with the team. While most coaches and other affiliated adults in youth sports are excellent teachers and role models, there are instances of abusive adults associated with youth sports. In many cases, adults prone to abuse specifically become involved in youth sports because of the access they have to children. While rare, it is important that we learn to recognize unhealthy situations and learn how to protect our children from these abusers.

Types of Abuse:

Emotional Abuse:

This type of abuse is usually verbal and results in injuring the self-esteem of an athlete. A coach should never ridicule, insult, name-call or punish an athlete for losing. Of course, it is sometimes appropriate for a coach to demand discipline and hard work, but these goals can be met by supporting the emotional confidence of the child and usually abusive coaching has the paradoxical effect of decreasing the athlete's performance. A subset of emotional abuse is harassment whereby coaches threaten or intimidate the player. Racist, homophobic, and sexist remarks are examples of harassment. Parents should be attentive to recognizing the difference between demanding coaches and abusive coaches.

Physical Abuse:

A coach should never physically touch an athlete except to perhaps give a quick pat on the back or high-five. Any type of striking, shaking, or pulling is physical abuse. Throwing equipment is also physical abuse. Punishment by prescribing excessive exercise or withholding water are other forms of physical abuse. A recent study showed that in American tackle football, training deaths were related to abusive coaching, including excessive exercise and punishment drills.

**Neglect:**

Neglect is a type of passive abuse. Examples of neglect include withholding proper medical care, allowing the athlete to play injured, and improper or improperly maintained equipment. Another form of neglect is allowing bullying.

Sexual Abuse:

Awareness of sexual abuse has increased because of high profile cases that have been in the news. It is worth repeating that most coaches and affiliated adults have the best interests of the athletes in mind but unfortunately there are sexual predators that get involved with youth sports. These predators can be the coach or other adult associated with the team, including the doctor or other medical provider. One of the most important ideas to help prevent this problem is simply understanding that it is possible, even if a coach or other adult working with the team seems “nice” and friendly.

Who is Vulnerable to Sexual Abuse?:

Both boys and girls can be victims of sexual abuse, although girls are more commonly abused. The victim may have some emotional vulnerabilities, such as a difficult home situation, however, anyone can be susceptible, even elite athletes.

What are the Signs of Sexual Abuse?:

A sexual predator often “grooms” their victim before actually abusing them. The adult may show unusual interest in the victim, such as attempted communication outside of games and practices. These communications may include phone calls or texts. The adult may grant special favors to the victim, give gifts, or spend extra time sometimes in activities outside of the playing field. Other inappropriate adult behaviors that may presage the path to abuse include inappropriate touching, telling inappropriate sexual jokes, discussing sexual or adult matters or showing pornographic materials, inappropriate comments on the child’s body or physicality and telling the victim to keep their conversations secret from others.

A child may not communicate sexual abuse for several reasons. They may be unable to verbalize confusing behavior from an adult that they have been taught to trust. The predator may have specifically warned or threatened the victim not to reveal these interactions. The following are signs that may suggest the possibility of sexual abuse:

1. Change in a child’s behavior such as angry outbursts, anxiety/depression, withdrawn behavior, or sleeping difficulty.
2. Decreased self-esteem and avoidance of certain people or situations.
3. Difficulty walking or sitting.
4. Inappropriate jokes or stories of a crude or sexual nature.



5. Decreased enthusiasm or motivation for sport, decreased concentration or performance.
6. Increased injury complaints or more difficulty recovering from injuries.
7. Unusual gifts that the child is vague about explaining.

How to Prevent Sexual Abuse:

1. Be aware that even though sexual abuse is rare, it is possible.
2. Maintain a rule that there should always be 2 adults present at every youth practice and game. If a parent drops off their child and notices that there is only one coach present, that parent should stay until at least one other adult shows up.
3. All sports leagues should require background checks and mandatory training for all adults working with the athletes (including coaches, medical personnel, and parent volunteers).
4. Parents should be engaged. Discuss your child with the coach and make sure the coach knows that you are paying attention. Don't be afraid to discuss issues that may not seem quite right. It is better to engage in an uncomfortable conversation than to allow abuse to occur.
5. Be open with your child and have a discussion about appropriate adult behavior. Discuss that although adults should generally be respected and obeyed, there are certain behaviors that adults may do that are not acceptable, especially inappropriate touching. Help children with appropriate language to express their concerns and encourage them to speak up. Discuss proper healthy boundaries with your child. It is extremely important that children are praised for speaking up and are not shamed for doing so. Explain to children that there should be no secrets between the coach and the child.
6. Be cognizant of some of the subtle warning signs as discussed in the previous section such as changes in behavior or motivation.
7. If an adult is concerned that there might be a possibility of sexual abuse, do not stay silent out of fear of embarrassment or discomfort. First bring up the issue with league officials, and if necessary, law enforcement. It is generally not recommended to bring up the issue with the coach directly but if a parent decides to speak to the coach, it is important that the conversation is done calmly and in private.
8. Monitor your child's social medial activities

Inappropriate Medical Care:

This can be a difficult subject since it is not always clear to people who are not trained in medicine what is and is not appropriate. Larry Nasser, for example, was a physician and was accused of abusing primarily gymnasts for years and many people did not report his abuse. Here are some suggestions for avoiding abuse from medical providers:



1. There should always be a second adult present when a child is being examined or treated.
2. For athletic injuries, it is extremely rare for sensitive areas, such as genitalia to be examined or touched.
3. If an athlete feels uncomfortable, he or she should speak up and express concerns.
4. It is perfectly appropriate for an athlete or parent to check on the credentials of the physician or other medical provider. For example, Larry Nasser was treating complex and difficult musculoskeletal injuries and was not actually an orthopaedic surgeon.

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