

Combating Sexual Abuse in Youth Sports

Protecting young athletes from sexual predators

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If there's anything that gives parents sleepless nights, it's the thought that their child might experience some form of abuse. The long-term emotional and psychological problems resulting from sexual abuse can be devastating and almost always require psychological treatment to undo the damage. What can you do if you suspect your child is being abused? And better yet, what can be done to prevent it from happening? These questions are addressed below.

What is child sexual abuse?

Child sexual abuse involves any sexual activity with a child where consent is not or cannot be given. This includes (a) sexual contact that is accomplished by force or threat of force, regardless of the age of the participants, and (b) all sexual contact between an adult and a child, regardless of whether or not the child understands the sexual nature of the activity. The sexually abusive acts may include sexual penetration, sexual touching, or noncontact sexual acts such as exposure or voyeurism (for example, ogling the child's body or showing a child pornography).

How common is child sexual abuse?

Many people, including psychologists and psychiatrists, used to think that sexual abuse of children was quite rare. We now know that is not the case. Research summarized by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention indicates the following:

- Approximately one in four girls and one in six boys are sexually abused before the age of 18.
- Most victims suffer the abuse at the hands of someone they know, often a trusted adult.
- Sexual abuse can occur inside or outside the home. Ironically, the same factors that create a nurturing environment and foster positive personal growth can also open the door to sexually abusive behaviors. Pedophiles are often drawn to positive youth settings, such as schools, scouting, or sports, because such environments bring them into contact with so many potential targets.

What about sexual abuse in youth sports?

As well-publicized events involving coaches suggest, parents and sport administrators must be vigilant because the tiny minority of abusers who find their way into youth sport positions can do untold damage.

- Contact between coaches and children should be regulated so as to minimize the chances that any child can be victimized. For example, many organizations prohibit coaches from being alone with children, being in the shower room with them after events, or driving children home without the parents' permission.
- Youth sport organizations should require more than one coach to be present on road trips or other events away from home.
- To avoid any signs of impropriety, many coaches who felt perfectly natural patting children on the behind or hugging them are now limiting themselves to high fives, fist bumps, and verbal praise.

What are some guidelines for parents?

1. *Parents can reduce the likelihood of abuse by educating their children about what is and is not permissible adult behavior.* Even young children can understand the “swim suit rule” that it’s never OK for an adult to touch the child in the areas covered by a swim suit.

- Parents should tell their child: “If someone tries to touch your body and do things that make you feel funny, say NO to that person and tell me right away.”
- They should also tell their child that respect for authority does not mean doing everything a teacher, babysitter, or coach tells you to do if it seems wrong.
- Above all, keep the lines of communication open with your child so that if the worst should ever happen, the child will tell you about it. In a variety of ways, child sexual abusers can make victims fearful of telling anyone about what’s happening, and only when a special effort is made to help the child to feel safe can he or she talk freely.

2. *Parents should be attentive to sudden changes in their child’s behavior that may reflect a traumatic event.* This may include one or more of the following red flags:

- An increase in nightmares or other sleeping difficulties.
- Angry outbursts or aggressive behavior.
- Anxiety.
- Depression.
- Withdrawn behavior.
- Difficulty walking or sitting.

- A desire to avoid certain people or situations, which could include wanting to quit sports.
- Decrease in self-esteem.

3. *If you suspect that abuse has occurred, or if your child tells you he or she has been sexually abused, take immediate action.* How parents react is critical to resolving the problem and helping to heal the trauma of sexual abuse. The American Psychological Association provides the following guidelines:

- Encourage the child to talk freely, and don't make judgmental comments. Find out specifically what happened and when.
- Show that you understand and take seriously what the child is saying. Children who are listened to and understood have a much better outcome than those who are not.
- Assure the child that they did the right thing in telling. A child who is close to the abuser may feel guilty about revealing the secret or frightened if the abuser has threatened to harm the child or other family members as punishment for telling the secret.
- Tell the child that he or she is not to blame for the sexual abuse. In attempting to make sense out of the abuse, many victims believe that somehow they caused it. Some may even view it as a form of punishment for imagined or real wrongdoings.
- Offer the child emotional support and protection and promise that you will promptly take steps to see that the abuse stops.

4. *Parents should consult with their family doctor or pediatrician.* Your doctor may refer the child to a medical specialist in evaluating and treating sexual abuse. The specialist will conduct a physical examination and treat any physical damage from the abuse, gather evidence concerning the abuse, and provide reassurance to the child.

5. *Parents should not take vengeance on the perpetrator.* Instead, you should immediately report the situation to the local police or district attorney's office. Reports (and the identity of those making them) are confidential and people who report possible or actual abuse in good faith are immune from prosecution. The agency will investigate the abuse and take action to protect your child and, given evidence of abuse, prosecute the offender.

Source: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/coaching-and-parenting-young-athletes/201801/combating-sexual-abuse-in-youth-sports>