



PROTECTING AGAINST ABUSE OVERVIEW

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 to be with friends and learn 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. 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.



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. Every one of us has a responsibility to prevent abusive situations and protect all children. In order to do this, we must 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 the five 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.

The five major types of abuse in youth sports include:

Physical Abuse can occur as non-accidental injuries caused by a coach, official or other adult involved. 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

Child Neglect is a form of abuse that includes the failure to provide a player 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

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:

- Fondling a child's genitals
- Intercourse, incest or rape
- Sodomy
- Exhibitionism
- Commercial exploitation through prostitution or the production of pornographic materials.

Emotional Abuse (psychological/verbal abuse/mental injury) is the most common form of maltreatment 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 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

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



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.

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](#).

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.



Related documents from the National Alliance for Youth Sports:

[Changing Times](#) (Article in the Fall 2012 issue of SportingKid Magazine)

[NYSCA Code of Ethics](#) (Official Code of Ethics that all NYSCA coaches must sign)

For additional information please visit our child abuse prevention partners:

[National Center for Missing & Exploited Children](#)

[Darkness to Light](#)