

Managing the Ultimate Risk...

Parents should expect that participation in youth sports will help their children develop emotionally, socially and physically. These benefits occasionally are overshadowed by the damaging behavior of adults. This brochure helps parents, coaches and club administrators think through and manage the risk of sexual exploitation of children, thereby minimizing risk and maximizing the benefits of youth sports.

Parents are the Primary Advocates for their Children

In most instances of child exploitation, parents suspect a problem but hesitate to act. No rule, law or policy can replace a proactive parent.

- Parents must speak up when they have concerns. Too often, parents second guess themselves or fear that speaking up will have a negative impact on their child's participation.
- Bring the problem to someone who can act – the coach, club administrator or local officials. “Sideline suspicions” and gossip are destructive and do not address the issue.
- Formal risk management, such as criminal record checks, offer a SECOND line of protection. This does not replace an observant parent.

What Everyone Should Know about Risk to Children In Youth Sports

- Criminal record checks are important, but they are not enough to keep kids safe. Most sexual predators have no criminal history.
- Offenders see opportunity where sports success is considered all-important. Sexual offenders take advantage of the needs and desires of parents and children. They know that by offering success, they will have access to children.

The Different Types of Risk:

To protect children, understanding the variety of risks they face is important. Monitoring and addressing these risks may require different approaches.

The Molester/Abductor/Sexual Psychopath:

Perhaps every parent's worst nightmare is the kidnapping or violent assault of a child. Because this type of victimization occurs in an environment of trickery and surprise, diligence and prevention is essential.

Who is their target?

- Vulnerable, exposed, unsupervised, or easily manipulated children, often very young
- Unsupervised children (male and female)
- Children upon whom they have become fixated or obsessed, generally from a distance

What is the risk?

- Manipulating children to touch an adult
- Surreptitious sexual contact
- Assault
- Abduction
- Homicide

Prevention:

- Never leave young children unsupervised, even in a “safe” place.
- Teach children to check with a parent before going anywhere with another adult.
- Give children permission to run away from adults who make them uncomfortable.
- Develop a family “code word” that can be used by an adult who may be asked to transport or care for a child. The child should know that if someone does not know the “code word,” that they are not safe.
- Avoid garments imprinted with children’s names.
- Children should never be allowed to go unescorted to public restrooms.
- Never leave a child alone awaiting transportation after a practice or game.
- Approach adults who appear to be observing children at

play or practice and strike up a conversation. Engaged, caring adults are a deterrent to someone seeking vulnerable children

Pedophile/Fixated/Seductive Sexual Offender

Who is the target?

Pedophiles may “lock in” to an attraction to certain characteristics such as appearance or age. In addition, their targets are:

- Typically, but not exclusively male
- Predominantly preadolescent or adolescent
- Vulnerable or needy, i.e. have experienced recent loss
- From families with poor support systems

What is the risk?

- Creates/seeks opportunities for access to children
- Has tremendous aptitude for identifying children’s needs and vulnerabilities
- Highly manipulative and seductive
- May initially attain gratification by proximity
- Will take the time to gain child’s and parent’s trust before acting
- Creates “special” relationships
- Convinces child to distrust other adults

Red Flags:

- Coach/adult shows particular, notable, and intense interest in one or several children
- Coach/adult gravitates towards children with troubled home lives or poor social acceptance by peers
- Coach/adult gives extravagant gifts or shows extreme favoritism
- Coach/adult characterizes certain children as “outsiders”, who are chided or ostracized
- Coach/adult attempts to be isolated with one child
- Coach/adult tells players “secrets” not to be shared with parents or adults
- Coach/adult makes repeated comments about the appeal or attractiveness of a child
- Child is withdrawing from normal support network

- Child’s attitude toward activity changes, i.e., avoids or gets symptoms

Prevention

- Check references thoroughly
- Follow up on concerns and suspicions in a responsible way
- Be wary of rigid age group preferences
- In the case of non parent coaches, at least one parent should be involved in team organization/administration (e.g. team coordinator, team parent or assistant coach)
- Question expansion of the coaching relationship into other areas.
- Disallow coaching expectations that require extensive one on one time away from other players or adults
- Let players know that they will be supported for seeking help with anything that makes them uncomfortable
- Assure that there are multiple avenues of support
- Conduct exit interviews for any players that withdraw without explanation
- Get involved

Regressed Sex Offender: The Known, Trusted Adult:

Who is the target?

- Children of a variety of ages and young adults
- Generally, but not exclusively heterosexual conduct
- Young people with whom they have a relationship outside of sports, such as a familial relationship or close family ties

Identifying Issues:

The regressed offender builds pseudo-adult relationships with children by taking advantage of their trust or affection. Since they tend to appear “normal,” this type of abuse/exploitation can be hidden. Characteristics of regressive predation include:

- Sporadic conduct
- Impulsive, immature, egocentric abuser
- Possible drug or alcohol use
- Adult/Coach generally has a sexual partner available
- Mixes nurturance and sexuality
- Commonly driven by shame and compulsion

Unlike other forms of predation, most cases will emerge solely as a result of the child's symptoms. Symptoms will include:

- Depression, avoidance, nightmares, fears, acting out, simulating the conduct, precocious behavior, self-harm or withdrawal
- Children fear "telling" will mean loss of loved one, loss of affection or punishment. Often think no one will believe them.

Sexual Exploitation and Harassment:

Who is at risk?

- Older adolescents and young adults

What is the risk?

- Sexual behavior, sexual advances or romantic involvement become part of the terms and conditions of participation
- Coach/adult suggests that play time, team membership, recommendations, or other benefits will be affected based upon an intimate or sexual relationship
- A "consensual" relationship begins between coach and player. Adult/youth sexual relationships cannot be consensual within youth sports.

Indicators:

- Coach/adult discloses intimate or personal feelings or emotions to the player
- Coach/adult seeks personal intimacy with the player
- Coach/adult "courts" the player
- Coach/adult responds in kind to seductive behavior
- Coach/adult makes physical contact excessively or disproportionately with one player
- Coach/adult openly states appropriateness of "dating" players

Protecting Kids:

- Strictly prohibit any sexual or romantic relationship between adults and youth
- Do not tolerate flirtation, banter, teasing or other conduct between coach/adult and players. This conduct blurs the boundaries between adult and youth, and creates confusion and risk for improprieties

If You Suspect a Child is Being Harmed:

- Talk to the child or have another respected adult talk to the child. It may be helpful to normalize your question by saying,

"sometimes, kids feel uncomfortable..." and then asking them if this is the case with them.

- Talk to the parents if you have concerns about another child. Be specific in describing things you have observed and express concern for the child's well being.
- If you are reasonably convinced that there is a problem, report your concerns to your club administrator.
- If you feel your concerns are not addressed, it is appropriate to contact your State Youth Sports Organization.
- If you are concerned that a child is being sexually abused, you may be able to bring an anonymous complaint to your local Child Protective organization.
- You may be mandated to report suspected child abuse and neglect. Check your local and state laws.

As a rule:

- Monitor situations closely
- Document concerns carefully
- Ask questions of others to see if they have similar concerns
- If you observe behavior that raises flags, it may be appropriate to let the individual know that you have concerns. Be sure to address it from the perspective of concern for THEM.
- Be present. Observe practices. Insist on accompanying the team to tournaments. Urge others to do the same.
- Involvement of healthy, caring adults is the best form of risk management.

Do Not:

- Jump to conclusions
- Gossip or speculate
- Use intuition as more than an incentive to investigate further.
- Be conclusive or careless in expressing concerns to others.
- Summarily pull a child or a coach from an unclear situation!
- Confuse sexual orientation with sexual aggression
- Attempt to act on impressions gained by stereotypes