

PLAYERS HEALTH ABUSE PREVENTION TRAINING



COACHES GUIDEBOOK

TO ABUSE PREVENTION

A GUIDE FOR COACHES AND CLUB LEADERS



INTRODUCTION

Dear Coaches and Club Leaders,

At Players Health, our mission is to create the safest environment possible for an athlete to play the sport that they love. Over the years we've seen a number of incidents that have painted a bad picture of what amateur sports represents. We want to make sure every athlete has a positive, safe experience.

This guidebook is drawn directly from the Players Health Abuse Prevention Training Course for Coaches. It covers the most important things you need to know as a coach or club leader to recognize abuse, set appropriate boundaries, respond correctly when something is reported, and build the kind of positive team culture that prevents these situations from arising in the first place.

We have sifted through the complex information currently available on abuse prevention and reporting and distilled the most important pieces to help you make a real difference. Thank you for taking the time to get informed — and welcome to the Players Health movement.

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“Our mission is to create the safest environment possible for an athlete to play the sport that they love.”

TYRRE BURKS

CEO, Players Health

Sincerely,

The Players Health Team



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RECOGNIZING GROOMING

WHAT IS GROOMING?

Grooming is when someone builds a trusting relationship and an emotional connection with a child or young person so they can manipulate them, with the intention of sexual abuse. Children and young people who are groomed can be sexually abused, exploited, or trafficked.

The reality: over 90% of victims of child sexual abuse know their abuser personally. Grooming is hard to spot because we want to believe that all adults who get involved in sport do so because they genuinely care about children. An abuser who preys on an athlete on a sports team will rely on coaches, volunteers, and parents to overlook the signs. If you're paying enough attention, you'll often be able to see red flags when they arise.

THE FOUR STAGES OF GROOMING

1

Targeting

- Predator picks out a vulnerable athlete — usually someone who is trusting, admires the coach, and respects authority without question.
- Tests the athlete's receptivity to secrecy: e.g., sharing details about other team members and asking them to keep it quiet.
- Strikes up a friendship outside of team activities through phone calls, texts, or seemingly accidental meetings.

2

Building Trust & Friendship

- Makes the athlete feel special: spending more time with them, listening to personal stories, singling them out via private texts ("hope you have a good day," "you did great at practice").
- Has consistent, regular private interactions — adults, especially coaches, should not be socializing individually with athletes.
- Establishes conditions for private meetings and asks the athlete not to tell anyone, framing it as avoiding jealousy from other players or parents.
- Begins bargaining: "You have to do this because I've done that" or "I told you something personal, now you need to tell me."



3

Isolation, Loyalty & Control

- Demeans others the athlete depends on — friends, family, parents who "don't understand them."
- Discourages the athlete from accessing friends or other trusted adults for support.
- Encourages doubt and fragility: builds the athlete up, then punishes or shuns them, making the athlete desperate for a return to warmth.
- Consistently checks on the athlete's commitment to secrecy, questioning their loyalty.

4

Initiation & Securing

- Gradual physical intrusion: accidental touching, hugs, escalating to more serious contact.
- Invokes guilt: "After everything I've done for you, you owe me."
- Threatens: "If you tell anyone I'll hurt you," "I'll drop you from the team," "Nobody will believe you."
- Discredits the athlete to maintain secrecy: "They won't understand" or "Nobody will believe you."

→ KEY TAKEAWAYS

Predators target specific children and are often unassuming to everyone in the organization. They are very good at making children feel comfortable and convincing them to keep quiet. It is never the child's fault — victims have been set up and exploited.

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“For a sexual offender to be successful in a youth-serving organization, that person is depending on us to believe myths around child abuse — the myth that victims tell, the myth that you can recognize a predator by the way they look, the myth that a background check would stop them.”

MICHELLE PETERSON

President, Michelle Peterson Consulting | Former social worker investigating crimes against children



RESPONDING TO GROOMING

Grooming is never the athlete's fault. It is the adult's responsibility to ensure they are not using their power or status to take advantage of young athletes. The affection and care these athletes have been shown is not real — they have been set up to be victims of abuse. It is never too late to ask for help.

WHAT COACHES MUST DO

As a coach, you set the standard for safe relationships in your program. Here is how:

- Provide every athlete equal attention. Favoritism creates the exact dynamic predators exploit.
- Schedule any individual player meetings after practice — with either the athlete's parent or another coach present. You should **never** be alone with a minor athlete.
- All feedback you provide can generally be given during practices or games. If additional time is needed, be intentional about scheduling it and confirming another adult is present.
- Remind athletes that while coaches can teach life skills, most of those lessons can and should happen on the field of play — not in private.
- Cultivate an atmosphere of caring, kindness, and personal growth. Safety policies don't prevent strong coach-athlete relationships — they protect them.

IF A CHILD DISCLOSES ABUSE TO YOU

- **Stay calm.** Big reactions can scare young athletes into silence and make them feel they shouldn't have said anything.
- **Believe them.** Let them know you hear them, you believe them, and you will help them.
- **Do not investigate.** Do not ask probing questions or try to get more information. Simply receive what they tell you.
- **Report immediately.** Take the information to the appropriate authorities — law enforcement and your organization's leadership — according to your state's mandatory reporting laws.
- **Never promise secrecy** to a child who discloses abuse. You are legally and ethically required to act.

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“Speaking your truth will begin to heal you. The impact will be much greater than you ever realize — for yourself, for those that love you, and for others you may never meet but could impact and potentially save.”

CANDICE FABRY

Coach, Instructor, Soccer Player, and Abuse Survivor



SETTING BOUNDARIES

Boundaries are the guardrails that prevent predators from being able to operate. As coaches we all need to protect our athletes *and* ourselves. You never know when your actions may be misinterpreted, so ensuring athletes are never put in situations where they might feel uncomfortable protects everyone and promotes a safe, welcoming environment.

COMMUNICATIONS

THE RULE

A child should NEVER receive any electronic message individually from someone who isn't their guardian — and that includes coaches. All texts, calls, emails, and messages on any platform must be sent to the entire team.

- If you need to reach an athlete individually for any reason, copy the parent or guardian on the message.
- Athletes and coaches should not be connected on social media platforms that have direct messaging features.
- Make sure your athletes know: if they ever receive a private message from a coach, they should not respond and should notify a parent or guardian immediately.
- Singling out an athlete via private text — even something as innocent as "you did well at practice today" — is not appropriate coaching behavior.

PRACTICES & INDIVIDUAL TRAINING SESSIONS

OBSERVABLE & INTERRUPTIBLE

Every one-on-one interaction between an adult and a minor athlete must be OBSERVABLE and INTERRUPTIBLE — meaning at least one other adult can easily see what is happening and step in at any time.

- Any individual training or coaching session must be open-door with either a parent/guardian or another coach present.
- Never be alone, one-on-one, with a minor athlete in a private space. If circumstances change and you find yourself alone with an athlete, move to an open area immediately.
- Schedule player meetings after practice — never privately or away from the facility.

LOCKER ROOMS

- Coaches should not be present in locker rooms alone with athletes.



- Athletes should always change in locker rooms or designated private areas — never in open or unsupervised spaces.
- Implement a no-phones policy in locker rooms to prevent photos or video being taken, and to reduce the risk of bullying or hazing.



SETTING BOUNDARIES

MEDICAL & ATHLETIC TRAINING

- Coaches often also serve as athletic trainers for their teams. Always make parents aware of what treatments their athletes are receiving.
- All athletic treatments must be conducted with two adults present and in an open location.
- If a second adult cannot be present, find the athlete's parent or guardian and ask them to be present before proceeding.
- Athletes should always remain as fully clothed as possible during treatment.
- Your organization's pre-season paperwork should include written parent/guardian permission for athletes to receive treatment from athletic trainers.
- It is the parent's right to ask questions during treatment — support this, never discourage it.

TRAVEL

- When possible, parents and guardians should transport their own children to sporting events. If they cannot, it should fall to another trusted adult — and at least one other athlete or adult should accompany the child.
- Your program must have a policy requiring written parental consent for a child to ride in a vehicle with anyone other than their parent. This applies to games, practices, and trips.
- Athletes must never stay in a hotel room with an adult who is not their parent or guardian.
- No meetings in hotel rooms — ever. All meetings must be in open locations such as a hotel lobby, the field, or a restaurant.
- Parents and guardians must always receive a detailed itinerary of where their children will be for the entire trip, whether or not they are attending.
- Coaches should actively encourage parents to check in with their children regularly when they are not present.

All team communication must go to the entire team. Never message an athlete privately.

Every individual coaching session must be open-door with a parent or another coach present.

Athletes change in locker rooms or private spaces. No phones in locker rooms.

Athletes must never travel or stay in a hotel room alone with one adult other than a parent.

Medical treatment requires two adults, an open location, and written parental permission.



HAZING

→ DEFINITION

Hazing is any activity expected of someone joining or participating in a group that humiliates, degrades, abuses, or endangers them — regardless of the person's willingness to participate. Your program must have a zero-tolerance policy.

As a coach, you are responsible for setting the tone. The best way to avoid hazing in your program is to **talk directly about it with your team** — making certain that every athlete understands the zero-tolerance policy and why it exists.

WHAT COACHES MUST DO

- Address hazing explicitly and directly with your team in an age-appropriate way at the start of each season. Do not assume athletes already know it is unacceptable.
- Communicate and enforce your organization's zero-tolerance policy clearly and consistently.
- Model respectful behavior with athletes, parents, officials, and opposing teams. Athletes are watching how you treat others.
- Take note of cliques forming and make sure every athlete is genuinely included in team activities.
- Be especially attentive to the dynamics between veteran players and new or younger athletes — this is where hazing most commonly begins.
- Address conflicts and disrespectful behavior promptly. Silence signals tolerance.
- A child's sport is not a place for parents to drop their kids off and leave the coach to manage poor behavior. Your job is to create a positive, encouraging team culture for every single athlete on the team.



CYBERBULLYING

Off-field behavior is just as important as on-field behavior. The culture you build in your program extends to everything your athletes do — including their online activity.

Cyberbullying is bullying that takes place over digital devices — phones, computers, tablets — through texts, social media, gaming platforms, forums, and apps. It includes sending, posting, or sharing negative, harmful, false, or mean content about someone. As social media has become more prevalent, cyberbullying among young athletes has increased dramatically.

WHAT COACHES MUST DO

- Be clear with your athletes: just because it feels easy to say hurtful things online doesn't make it acceptable. Online behavior has real consequences for real people — especially young people.
- Set the expectation at the start of the season: athletes in this program only comment and post with positive, respectful content.
- Implement a no-phones policy in locker rooms. This is your single most effective prevention tool against digital harassment within the team environment.
- If you become aware of cyberbullying within your team, address it immediately and involve parents and organization leadership.
- Model positive digital behavior. Athletes observe how their coaches communicate online too.
- Where appropriate, encourage parents to monitor their children's online activity — sometimes parents understand a situation better once they've seen an example of inappropriate behavior firsthand.



MANDATORY REPORTING

→ YOUR LEGAL OBLIGATION

Any adult working with minor athletes is a mandatory reporter. If you know of or suspect a child in your program is being abused, you are legally required to report it to law enforcement within 24 hours of learning about it.

You do not need to be 100% certain abuse is occurring. It is not your job to investigate — that is what law enforcement is trained for. Your job is to report. The 24-hour window exists so that law enforcement agencies have as much time as possible to protect that child from further harm. The clock starts the moment *you* hear about it — regardless of when the incident actually occurred.

HOW TO REPORT CORRECTLY

- **Report within 24 hours** of learning about a suspected incident — regardless of when it happened.
- **Do not investigate.** Do not ask probing questions or seek out more information. Take what you have and report it. Let trained investigators ask the questions.
- **Do not promise confidentiality** to a child who discloses. You are required by law to act.
- **Report to law enforcement** (the appropriate authorities for your state) AND notify your organization's leadership.
- **If a child reports directly to you:** stay calm, keep a neutral expression, let them know you hear them and believe them, and tell them you will help them. Making it a big deal in front of the child can make them feel worse or withdraw.
- **Each state has its own mandatory reporter laws.** Know the specific requirements in your state.

MYTHS THAT ENABLE ABUSERS

According to Michelle Peterson — former social worker who has forensically interviewed approximately 4,000 child victims — predators succeed because adults believe these myths:

MYTH Victims always tell someone.	FACT Most victims don't disclose. They've been manipulated into silence.
MYTH You can recognize a predator by how they look.	FACT Predators are often trusted, well-liked adults who have built credibility in your organization.
MYTH You'd never hire a predator — you know them.	FACT Personal familiarity is exactly what predators exploit. They build trust deliberately.



MYTH A background check will stop a predator.

FACT Many first-time offenders have no prior record. Background checks are one layer — not a complete solution.

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“When kids disclose, they need someone to listen, they need to be believed, and then they need action. They need an adult to do something about it. Sexual abuse is a known risk in youth-serving organizations — it needs to be addressed and prevented.”

MICHELLE PETERSON

President, Michelle Peterson Consulting | Former child forensic interviewer, ~4,000 cases



CREATING A POSITIVE TEAM CULTURE

We've covered a lot of what not to do. Here is what you can actively do to make sure your athletes are safe, improving, and having fun. Many sports teams don't have a negative culture — but they also don't have a particularly positive one. The difference is intentionality.

COACHING BEHAVIORS THAT MAKE A DIFFERENCE

GIVE EQUAL ATTENTION

Provide every athlete equal time and attention. Favoritism — even when well-intentioned — is the single easiest entry point for grooming behavior. Every athlete should feel seen and valued.

POSITIVE & SPECIFIC FEEDBACK

Positive feedback encourages improvement and builds confidence. Make it specific: instead of "great job today," try "I really liked the hustle you showed in the second half when you had to recover on defense." Where improvement is needed, stay calm and tell them what to work on next time.

EFFORT OVER OUTCOMES

Focus on effort and improvement, not just results. Ask athletes where they feel they have improved and how the team is working to get better. Praise things they do well — athletes who feel positive about their performance have a much better overall sports experience.

KEEP IT FRESH

Incorporate new drills into practices so athletes don't get bored or lose motivation. Create new plays or in-game strategies to spark creativity and keep athletes invested in learning.

WATCH TEAM DYNAMICS

Take note of cliques forming and make sure every athlete is included. It's normal for some athletes to click better with certain teammates — but be mindful of anyone who is consistently left out or spending time alone. A positive experience with teammates can create life-long friendships.



SET THE STANDARD

Your athletes are learning from how you interact with players, other coaches, officials, and parents. The way you behave and treat others is your most powerful teaching tool — more powerful than any sport-specific Xs and Os.



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

FOR COACHES & ORGANIZATIONS

Bullying Resources	stopbullying.gov
National Sexual Abuse Hotline	rainn.org 1-800-656-4673
US Center for Safe Sport	uscenterforsafesport.org
Child Welfare Information Gateway	childwelfare.gov
Players Health	playershealth.com/contact

Learn more and request the full online training course:

PLAYERSHEALTH.COM



LEGAL DISCLAIMER

For Informational Purposes Only

This guidebook is intended for general informational and educational purposes only. The content herein is drawn from the Players Health Abuse Prevention Training Course and is designed to raise awareness of abuse prevention best practices in youth sports settings. It does not constitute legal advice, clinical guidance, or a comprehensive compliance program.

Not a Substitute for Legal Counsel. Nothing in this guidebook should be construed as legal advice. Mandatory reporting laws, child protection statutes, and organizational liability obligations vary by state and jurisdiction. Coaches, club leaders, and organizations should consult qualified legal counsel to understand their specific obligations under applicable law.

Mandatory Reporting Laws Vary by State. While this guidebook provides general guidance on mandatory reporting obligations, the specific requirements — including who qualifies as a mandatory reporter, what must be reported, to whom, and within what timeframe — differ across states and localities. It is the responsibility of each coach and organization to know and comply with the laws of their specific jurisdiction.

No Guarantee of Outcomes. Following the guidance in this document does not guarantee the prevention of abuse or the elimination of organizational liability. Players Health makes no representations or warranties, express or implied, regarding the completeness, accuracy, or suitability of this information for any particular purpose.

Professional Help. If you have reason to believe a child is in immediate danger, contact emergency services (911) immediately. For non-emergency disclosures or suspicions of abuse, contact your local law enforcement and follow your organization's established reporting protocols.

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