

Athlete and Coach Relationships

Introduction

There are situations in coaching that you probably will never have to deal with, but you should still be prepared for any situation. These include, but are not limited to, transportation of athletes, abuse of athletes, and sexual harassment. In each situation the safety of the athlete is your most important responsibility.

Transportation

When you need to transport athletes, it is best to use licensed commercial carriers, such as a chartered bus, because those companies will have the necessary liability insurance to cover the passengers in the event of an accident. However, this mode of transportation is also the most expensive choice. Your next choice might be to use the vehicles owned by your agency or organization and find qualified drivers. These vehicles should be in good repair and properly insured. The worst choice is to transport athletes in personal vehicles. The organization as well as you and other volunteers run the greatest risk of liability in this situation. Make sure there is a written policy on transportation for your organization; you should review the policy every year.

Avoid giving athletes rides home after games or practices. Not only could giving rides show favoritism to particular athletes, but it could also cause speculation among the other athletes and parents about inappropriate relationships between you and the athletes.

Abuse

Abuse covers a variety of situations. You may encounter nonaccidental physical injury, neglect, sexual molestation, or emotional abuse in your athletes. There should be a policy and guidelines of conduct for all coaches to follow, and you need to understand the procedures for reporting these types of abuse.

The most common type of abuse in the sport setting is verbal abuse, a form of emotional abuse. The two most common types of abuse in the sport setting are verbal abuse and emotional abuse. This includes making negative comments about a child's performance and setting unrealistic goals and expectations for a youngster. Physical abuse and sexual abuse are less common, but coaches should be aware of the signs and symptoms.

Emotional and Psychological Abuse

- Speech problems
- Antisocial behavior
- Habit of sucking, biting, or rocking
- Loss of appetite
- Learning difficulties
- Self-destructive behavior

Physical Abuse

- Unexplained bruises
- Unexplained cuts or scrapes
- Unexplained abdominal injuries
- Fear of adults
- Withdrawn behavior
- Fear of parents
- Fear of going home

Physical Neglect

- Malnourishment or constant hunger
- Unattended medical needs
- Chronic tiredness
- Chronic uncleanliness

Sexual Abuse

- Difficulty in walking or sitting
- Poor relationships with peers
- Stomachaches
- Sudden onset of behavior problems

As a coach, you must be aware of behaviors that would constitute abuse, and you must understand what is and is not appropriate. You should have a written code of conduct to guide you in your relationships with children. The following are some important elements to include:

1. Treat all children with equal respect.
2. Keep the reason for the competition in perspective.
3. Use appropriate discipline.
4. Take injuries seriously.
5. Replace put-downs with instruction.
6. Motivate with praise, not name-calling.
7. Do not accept abusive behavior from children's peers, parents, guardians, or teachers.

Sexual Harassment

It is unethical and often illegal for coaches to have sexual relations with their athletes. However, this is not the only sexual issue that you need to consider. Another important issue is sexual harassment. First, you must understand what qualifies as sexual harassment. Any unwelcome sexual advance, request for sexual favors, and unwelcome verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature is considered sexual harassment. Behaviors that constitute sexual harassment include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Remarks, jokes, and comments about a person's body, appearance, sex, or sexual orientation
- Inquiries or comments about a person's sexual activities
- Obscene or suggestive gestures
- Use of inappropriate or derogatory sexual language
- Inappropriate physical contact, including inappropriate touching, kissing, patting, and pinching
- Promises or threats contingent on the performance of sexual favors

Avoid any behavior that could be considered sexual harassment, and monitor the actions of the other coaches and the players. Here are a few suggestions to help reduce your risk of being falsely accused of sexual harassment.

- Always have other people present when you're interacting with a player.
- Be especially careful about any physical contact with athletes. When teaching a skill in which you need to touch an athlete, make sure other athletes, coaches, or adults are present.
- A pat on the back or a high five is a much better choice than a pat on the buttocks.
- If you accidentally touch a private body part during your coaching, don't just ignore it. Apologize and make it clear that the action was unintentional.
- If you are accused of sexual harassment, listen carefully to the complaint and don't try to make light of the accusation. Respect the other person's viewpoint, identify the offending behavior, and stop it immediately.

It is best to be prepared for any situation that might occur. Written policies and guidelines for coaches to follow are the best place to start. If you are unclear about your league policies or need further clarification on any of the issues addressed in this handout, please contact your league administrator or director for further information.