



ABUSE IN SPORTS

Abuse in youth sports can take several forms, but all involve a power imbalance, usually the power of the coach, athlete guardian or a parent over the athlete. The following information should help you identify the different forms abuse or neglect can take, though it is not a complete list of behaviors that are considered abuse and neglect.

If you suspect abuse or neglect, read about what you should do here.

Emotional Abuse

Name calling
Insulting
Shouting
Belittling
Threatening

Humiliating
Scapegoating
Ignoring
Rejecting
Bullying

Taunting
Shunning
Isolating
Gaslighting

Quick oscillation between praise and criticism
Refusing to give corrections to the athlete
Promoting disordered eating



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Physical Abuse

Slapping

Hitting

Shaking

Throwing objects at/near a player

Kicking

Pulling hair or ears

Striking

Shoving

Grabbing

Hazing

Punishing “poor” play or rule violations through the use of excessive exercise

Punishing “poor” play or rule violations by denying fluids

Punishing by the denial of sustenance or food

Rough physical corrections of position/ movement

Sexual Abuse

Requesting sexual acts

Indecent exposure

Fondling genitals or breasts

Penetration

Rape

Sexual Assault

Sexual exploitation

Exposure to pornographic materials

Creation of child sexual abuse materials

Neglect in Sports

Mistreating injuries and forcing injured athletes to play

Inadequate equipment

Lack of supervision during overnight trips

Allowing bullying or hazing by teammates

Not having basic needs met such as food/water

Being emotionally unavailable or withholding praise and kindness unless an accomplishment is achieved

KEY POINTS TO REMEMBER

- Different types of abuse often occur at the same time; for example, while physically or sexually abusing a child, an adult often emotionally abuses them as well.
- All genders can be victims of abuse and neglect, including sexual abuse, and coaches of all genders can be perpetrators.
- There are no excuses for abusing or neglecting a child.
- Abuse and neglect are NEVER the child’s fault.

We urge you to discuss this information with your child in an age-appropriate way so they are aware of what counts as inappropriate treatment. Our Kids Reading List can help give you the tools to begin those conversations!

SIGNS OF ABUSE IN SPORTS

It is important to understand that athletes who have experienced long-term abuse may develop complex PTSD (C-PTSD) which presents differently than our “traditional” idea of PTSD (which can include flashbacks, nightmares, intrusive thoughts, emotional hyper-reactivity). C-PTSD presents with emotional dysregulation, but symptoms also include shame and guilt, distorted perceptions of self, relationship difficulties, dissociation, and low-level paranoia. (Please see our resource “The Basics of Trauma” for more information on PTSD vs. C-PTSD)

Some trauma responses, such as emotional hyper-reactivity or emotional dysregulation, can be misinterpreted as being disrespectful to the coach and not observing traditional hierarchical relationships that are established in athletics. For example, an athlete may yell back at the coach or refuse to participate in an activity when they are triggered. Punishing this behavior will often only escalate the trauma response. Instead, it is important for coaches to encourage the athlete to practice a grounding exercise to regulate and then have a conversation about why the incident occurred.

There will be some trauma survivors who develop symptoms that spontaneously remit, and there will be some who never become symptomatic at all. This is especially true because sports culture encourages obedience and the suppression of emotions (Sinden, 2013). Athletes may struggle in ways that don’t mimic traditional clinical features. It’s important we are educated on trauma-informed care and athlete culture to maximize the likelihood of identifying symptoms the athlete might have ambivalence about sharing.

For purposes of this resource, we have defined “athlete guardian” as anyone charged with the safety of the athlete. This could be a parental guardian, coach, athletic trainer, physical therapist, sports doctor, physician, etc.

SIGNS OF PHYSICAL ABUSE

When the Athlete:

- Has unexplained burns, bites, bruises, broken bones, or black eyes which the child may be hesitant to talk about or try to keep them covered
- Change in dress for practice to cover unexplained bumps or bruises
- Has fading bruises or other marks noticeable after a practice or travel with the team
- Seems frightened of any of the staff and protests or cries when it is time to go to practice
- Shrinks at the approach of adults
- Reports injury by a coach, teacher or any one else within the organization

When the Athlete Guardian:

- Offers conflicting, unconvincing, or no explanation for the child’s injury
- Describes the child as “evil,” or in some other very negative way
- Uses harsh physical discipline with the child
- Has a history of abuse as a child that has been used to justify treatment, for example if the athlete guardian defends corporal punishment with a justification such as, “that is how I was raised.”

SIGNS OF NEGLECT

When the Athlete:

- Begs or steals food or money
- Has injuries that are not cared for, or is forced to continue with training or competing with an injury
- Reports inadequate equipment for training or competition
- Abuses alcohol or other drugs
- States that there is no one at training or competition that is supervising the athletes
- Alludes to a pattern of hazing or bullying within the team

When the Athlete Guardian:

- Appears to be indifferent to the child
- Seems apathetic or depressed
- Behaves irrationally or in a bizarre manner
- Is abusing alcohol or other drugs

SIGNS OF SEXUAL ABUSE

When the Athlete:

- Has difficulty walking or sitting
- Suddenly refuses to change for gym or to participate in physical activities
- Reports nightmares or bed-wetting
- Experiences a sudden change in appetite
- Angry outbursts
- Withdrawn behavior
- Not wanting to be left alone with a particular individual(s)
- Demonstrates bizarre, sophisticated, or unusual sexual knowledge or behavior

When the Athlete Guardian:

- Is unduly protective of the child or severely limits the child's contact with other children
- Is secretive and isolated
- Is jealous or controlling with family members
- Is constantly watching the child and all their interactions

SIGNS OF EMOTIONAL MISTREATMENT

When the Athlete:

- Shows extremes in behavior, such as overly compliant or demanding behavior, extreme passivity, or aggression
- Is delayed in physical or emotional development
- Is either inappropriately adult (parenting other children, for example) or inappropriately infantile (frequently rocking or head-banging, for example)

When the Athlete Guardian:

- Constantly blames, belittles, or berates the child
- Is unconcerned about the child and refuses to consider offers of help for the child's problems
- Overtly rejects or dismisses the child

EFFECTS OF ABUSE IN SPORTS

Health and Physical Effects

Bruises that may be odd to the specific sports activity

Burns, cuts, broken bones

Longer-term effects of brain damage and permanent disabilities

Impaired physical development

Sexually transmitted infections (sexual abuse specifically)

Effects on Intellectual and Mental Development

Lower academic achievement and poorer school performance

Behavior consequences:

- An increased risk of violent behavior
- Antisocial behavior
- Juvenile delinquency
- Involvement in crime in adulthood
- Substance use

Emotional and psychological consequences:

- Low self-esteem
- Depression
- Anxiety
- Post-traumatic stress disorder
- Impaired attachment
- Eating disorders
- Poor body image
- Mistrust of others
- Poor peer relationships
- Difficulty regulating emotions
- Self-harming behavior including cutting and suicide attempts
- Suicide

Effects on Sports Performance

Impaired focus

Difficulties with gaining new skills

Diminished performance

Feeling obligated to continue with the sport

Looking forward to the end of the season (counting down days)