



Safeguarding Young Athletes: A Coach's Mandate

Sport participation offers significant physical, psychological, and social benefits for child athletes ages 3-18. The goal should be that it is pleasurable and fulfilling. However, sport can also carry inherent threats within an unhealthy culture where abuse and harassment occur.

Given their central role and position, coaches are instrumental in creating safe sport environments, especially in preventing sexual violence.

Safeguarding encompasses all actions ensuring the safety of all children in sport, protecting them from harm, abuse, violence, exploitation, and neglect.

Recognizing Threats to Child Athletes

Defining Violence in Sport

Violence can take many forms - physical, sexual, and emotional. It is defined as the intentional use of physical force or power (threatened or actual) against a person that results in, or has a high likelihood of resulting in, their being harmed.



Emotional/Psychological Abuse

A pattern of deliberate, prolonged, repeated non-contact behaviors within a power-differentiated relationship. This is arguably the most prevalent safeguarding concern in youth sport.



Sexual Violence/Abuse

Any conduct of a sexual nature—non-contact, or non-contact, where consent is coerced, manipulated, or cannot be given because of age. This includes verbal and non-verbal sexual harassment and abuse.



Physical Abuse

Infliction of physical injury, including contact (e.g., hitting) or non-contact (e.g., forced physical exertion).

Acts of Omission

Instances where NOT doing something can be considered abuse

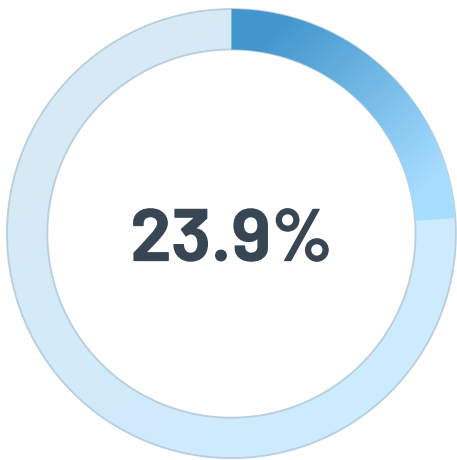
Neglect involves acts of omission, such as failing to meet a child's physical, educational, psychological, or social developmental needs.

Negligence refers to acts of omission regarding athlete safety, such as insufficient rest, recovery, or failure to provide a safe training environment.

📌 **Key Insight:** Perpetrators of violence in sport can include coaches, parents, and peers.

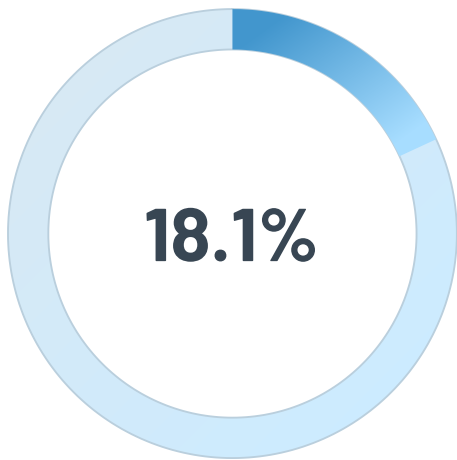
What Children Experience: Lifetime Prevalence Rates

A nationally representative survey of U.S. adolescents (ages 14–17) asked them to report abuse experienced throughout their childhood. These findings reveal what many children in your programs may have already faced:



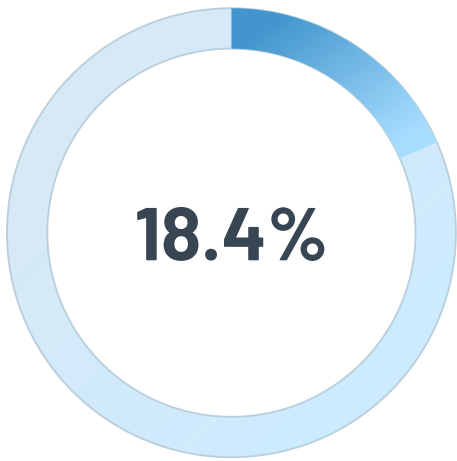
Emotional Abuse

Nearly 1 in 4 teens report experiencing emotional abuse during childhood



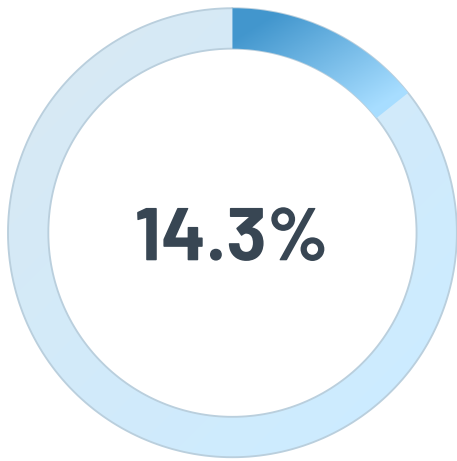
Physical Abuse

Nearly 1 in 5 teens report physical abuse at some point in childhood



Neglect

Nearly 1 in 5 teens report experiencing neglect during their younger years



Sexual Abuse (Girls)

Girls face higher rates of sexual abuse compared to boys (6.0%)

These adolescents were reporting abuse that occurred earlier in childhood, including during the critical 5–13 age range when many are participating in youth sports programs.

The Reality Behind the Numbers

Child maltreatment is more common than many volunteers realize. National child protective services (CPS) data reveal that approximately **600,000 U.S. children** (ages 0–17) are confirmed as victims of maltreatment each year. However, this represents only a fraction of the true scope.

In 2012, CPS received about **3.4 million reports** involving an estimated 6.3 million children, with nearly 700,000 confirmed as maltreatment victims. These confirmed cases are just the tip of the iceberg—many instances of abuse and neglect never reach formal reporting systems.

Taking Action: The Four Target Behaviors

Coaches must be proactive in safeguarding their athletes and respond quickly if they suspect problems. Four essential target behaviors were identified for coaches in preventing sexual violence:

Be Vigilant for Signs of Sexual Violence

This requires continuous attention to subtle signals and identifying problem situations.

Set Firm Boundaries

This action is required for mild or slightly inappropriate behavior.

Report the Incident or Suspected Incident

Report to your organization's safeguarding officer. This is necessary for more profound intervention or severe contact sexual behavior.



The Will to Act

Attitude is a key determinant in successful bystander intervention programs. Interventions should focus on two aspects of attitude. If you suspect a problem, you must report the problem. It is always better to err on the side of protecting children. Your organization will support you. That is why you have been asked to complete this training. None of us want to believe this is happening to the children we are working with, but look again at the statistics above - it is all too common.

 **Key Finding:** The belief that vigilance is important (instrumental attitude belief evaluation) was found to be the only determinant relevant for the behavior of being vigilant for signs of sexual violence.

Legal Responsibilities

Laws vary from state to state. But adults in positions of responsibility always have some legal duties. Here are a few relevant examples.

Mandatory Reporting

Every state has a law that requires mandatory reporting. WHO is covered by the law depends on which state you are in. Know what laws apply to you.

Duty to Supervise

Coaches have a duty to supervise children closely. This includes creating a supportive atmosphere and enforcing policies that prevent harassment and bullying.

Failure to Follow Organizational Policies

All organizations that work with children have their own policies that are put in place to protect those children. You must know and follow Your organization's policies applicable to you.

What This Means for Your Coaching



Create Safe Environments

In any group of 5–13-year-olds, it is statistically likely that some children have experienced physical, emotional, or sexual abuse or neglect—even if they've never disclosed it. Your program may be their safest space.



Recognize the Signs

Understanding prevalence helps you stay alert to behavioral changes, withdrawal, or concerning patterns. Children from families experiencing economic stress or from minoritized communities face elevated risk, though resilience is also common.



Respond Appropriately

Know your organization's reporting protocols. CPS-confirmed cases represent only a small fraction of actual maltreatment. Many children need support that begins with a trusted adult who notices and cares.

By creating respectful, trauma-informed coaching environments, you provide essential support and safety for all children in your care—including those carrying hidden burdens you may never fully know about.