

# KNOW THE RULES®...

## For Child Safety in YOUTH SPORTS

**M**illions of children in the United States play in organized, youth-sports programs.<sup>1</sup> There are many benefits to children participating in these sporting activities including discipline, responsibility, respect, and good sportsmanship.

Parents and guardians may take steps to protect their children's safety, while at the same time helping to keep their experience in organized youth-sports programs positive and productive. Just like parents and guardians have expectations about their children's teachers and school, they should also have expectations about the coaches and organizers of their children's youth-sports programs. Sometimes parents and guardians lower expectations for sporting activities, especially if the coach is a volunteer or another parent or guardian. It is important for parents and guardians to be mindful of and attentive to participants in these programs who supervise and have access to the children, just as they are in the school environment, to help ensure their children's experiences in these programs remain fun and safe.

Most coaches truly care about children and pose no risk to them. Unfortunately there are a small percentage of individuals who use the coaching experience as a means to gain access to children for the purpose of victimizing them. The word "coach" conveys a sense of trust, respect, and authority to both children and their parents/guardians. Children may be reluctant to disclose incidents of victimization because of this sense of trust and authority. Additionally children may be reluctant to disclose victimization due to feelings of shame, embarrassment regarding the event, or fear of not being believed.

**Parents and guardians may assess their children's sporting activities, the organizational leadership, and those who supervise and have access to their children by asking the questions noted below.**

- **Does the sports or youth-serving organization conduct a background check on coaches and others who supervise and have access to the children?** Any background check should include a federal and state/territorial criminal-history check; a check of sex-offender registries; and reference checks. Parents and guardians should inquire whether the club or organization has a harassment/abuse policy and whether the coach is certified or a member of a coaching association with a code of ethics and/or conduct.
- **Are there other adults present, besides the coach, to assist in supervising children during team events and practices, including any off-site travel?** The coach should not be alone with children during team events, practices, sleepovers, or trips. You should know the names of the others who supervise and have access to your children and meet them in advance of any team activities.



- **Does the team use a locker room for children to dress, and, if so, is there more than one adult present in the locker room when children are using it?** The team should have at least two adult supervisors, of the same sex as the children using the locker room, present while

the locker room is in use. Parents and guardians should have access to the locker rooms. The organization should make accommodations so the children have privacy while still providing appropriate adult supervision.

- **Does the team or organization communicate with and notify parents and guardians of the activity schedule?** The organization should keep parents and guardians informed of the team's activities and send timely notification of any changes in the schedule. Practices should remain open to parents and guardians, and the organization should allow for and encourage proper communication between the team's leaders and participating families. Parents and guardians who are involved with and attend their children's sporting events not only show support for their children, but also have the opportunity to monitor those interacting with the children. If parents and guardians have a specific concern regarding the team's activities, they should first speak with the team's coach. If the issue remains unresolved after speaking with the coach, parents and guardians should discuss their concern with the organization's management or administration.
- **Does the coach pay equal attention to all children?** Parents and guardians should be cautious of a coach or others involved with the team who show excessive favoritism towards one child or repeatedly want to spend time alone with a child. Parents and guardians should watch for other potentially harmful behavior such as inappropriate physical contact, comments or jokes, or gift giving. The organization should develop and enforce appropriate boundary guidelines governing the interaction between the child participants and those who supervise and have access to the children.
- **Would my child know what to do if faced with an inappropriate or uncomfortable situation?** Parents and guardians need to assess their child to determine whether he or she has the self-confidence and judgment skills to know how to effectively handle a potential victimization situation. Open communication and interaction with your child is essential to help prevent exploitive situations from occurring. You should ask your child whether he or she likes the team and enjoys participating in the sport. Specifically ask your child how he or she feels about everyone who supervises the sport and has access to them, and carefully listen to their responses. If your child says he or she does not like someone or does not want to play the sport anymore, you should discuss it further to determine if it is a loss of interest in the activity or an indication of a more serious problem or concern. Speak to your children about personal-safety issues and reinforce the safety rules with them. Parents and guardians should reassure and encourage their children to express their feelings and teach them it is OK to say "no" to anyone who makes them feel sad, scared, or confused.



<sup>1</sup>According to the National Council of Youth Sports' *Report on Trends and Participation In Organized Youth Sports*, in 2008 more than 44 million boys and girls played in an organized, youth-sports program per page 7 as accessed on March 21, 2011, at [www.ncys.org/pdf/2008/2008-market-research.pdf](http://www.ncys.org/pdf/2008/2008-market-research.pdf).

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