

Keeping Youth Safe in Sports

By Angelo P. Giardino, MD, PhD

Preview:

Parents and professionals alike have long recognized youth participation in sports as a positive experience—especially regarding physical, social and emotional development. However, in addition to the many potential positives that come from sports participation, we are increasingly aware of potential associated risks, which negatively impact children's vulnerability. These factors increase our responsibility to decrease children's vulnerability in sports environments.

Article:

Introduction:

Positive experiences promote development and wellness among children and adolescents. Parents and professionals alike have long recognized youth participation in sports as just such a potentially positive experience—especially regarding physical, social and emotional development. However, in addition to the many potential positives that come from sports participation, we are increasingly aware of some potential associated risks and negatives, which increases our responsibility to decrease children's vulnerability in sports environments. Certainly, as persons interested in the health and wellbeing of children, we want to increase the positives, striving to mitigate, and ultimately eliminate, the negatives.

In 2019, The United States Department of Health and Human Services launched the National Youth Sports Strategy with the explicit vision, "...that one day, all youth will have the opportunity, motivation, and access to play sports..."¹ This national strategy goes on to issue a call to action that speaks to promoting the positives for the youth and being clear about our responsibilities as caring adults in the children's and adolescent's environment:

"...we all have the opportunity and responsibility to make youth sports a positive experience. This includes positive sideline behavior and role modeling, supporting and respecting coaches and sporting officials, celebrating effort over achievement, and keeping the emphasis on fun and enjoyment. Organizations and communities can embrace a sports-for-all mentality and offer programs that are safe, fun, inclusive, developmentally appropriate, and accessible to all youth. They can also support coaches by providing training and consider partnerships to share resources and funding. Policies can be enacted to help ensure the safety of youth and to increase access, such as by authorizing background checks...."²

¹ Giroir BP. Message from the Assistant Secretary of Health. National Youth Sports Strategy. Washington, DC: Department of Health and Human Services, 2019. URL: https://health.gov/sites/default/files/2019-10/National_Youth_Sports_Strategy.pdf.

² Ibid.

According to current data, approximately 54% of youth participated in a sports team. This is an enormous number of children and reinforces the need for an intentional approach for every adult to live up to the responsibility mentioned above to not only “make youth sports a positive experience,”³ but a safe one as well.” In the content shared below, we will explore how best to promote the positive and reduce the negatives related to youth sports participation.

The benefits and risks associated with youth sports:

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) identified a number of potential positives for children who participate in sport activities which include: sportsmanship, goal setting, emotional control, and lessons on personal responsibility.⁴ The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP) builds on this list and adds the development of physical skills, increased exercise, friendships, recreation, learning teamwork, a sense of fairness, and self-esteem.⁵ The National Youth Sports Strategy also adds the benefit of developing “physical literacy” by engaging in multiple types of physical activity.

In contrast to this impressive list of positives, these same organizations and others have also found sports environments have specific characteristics that may put youth at particular risk. These include:

- The risk for overtraining, physical injury, peer abuse (bullying) and hazing as well as various forms of maltreatment and exploitation such as physical abuse, sexual harassment, sexual abuse and emotional abuse.
- Inherent trust placed in coaching staff, recruitment practices, media attention, distant competitions away from home, training camps, and a competitive atmosphere that may see yelling at and humiliating players as a way to toughen and motivate young athletes.⁶

Further factors that increase a child’s vulnerability include the fact that much of the coach’s interaction is outside of the normal “hours” of regular business or school, which means there is diminished monitoring and safety checks/balances that one would normally have in a school setting with other adults. There’s also a phenomenon in sports where children understandably seek the approval of their coach for external validation, which becomes entangled in how they see and seek their worth, how they see their skillset, where and how they seek that validation, etc. There are economic systems, such as scholarship access, funding and other financial reasons that can encourage prioritizing the game and access to those financials (whether individually or for the team, school, etc.), which ultimately deters children from seeking help or reporting abuse, or even an adult’s ability to communicate concerns. Cultural dynamics

³ Giroir BP. Message from the Assistant Secretary of Health. National Youth Sports Strategy. Washington, DC: Department of Health and Human Services, 2019. URL: https://health.gov/sites/default/files/2019-10/National_Youth_Sports_Strategy.pdf.

⁴ Logan K, Cuff S; Council on Sports Medicine and Fitness. Organized sports for children, preadolescents, and adolescents. May, 2019. Pediatrics. doi: 10.1542/peds.2019-0997

⁵ American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP). Sports and children, 2019. https://www.aacap.org/aacap/families_and_youth/facts_for_families/fff-guide/Children-And-Sports-061.aspx.

⁶ Canty KW, Giardino AP. Confronting Child Maltreatment in Youth Sports. Pediatrics. 2022;150(1):e2021055816

and power imbalances include various subcultures in sports that prioritize the game over the physical and emotional welfare of the child. Among these is also a subculture where players, parents and the audience can give a type of God-like transference onto the coach, where they become “the authority,” which compels students to submit to that authority despite their own intuition, feelings or misgivings. Another subculture in sports characterizes the abundance of trust and adoration a community bestows upon coaches—especially when they are successful—which thereby gives them more access to children. All of these factors increase a child’s vulnerability, and can contribute to a negative experience.

These types of negative experiences appear to be even more prevalent the more elite the level of play becomes. As an example, in a Canadian study among their national team’s players, 25% of athletes (one in four) reported experiencing various forms of emotional/psychological abuse, 7% experienced sexual maltreatment, and 5% physical abuse.⁷ Our collective, evolving awareness of these risks, spurred on by media coverage of abuse scandals involving harm to Olympic athletes, have prompted a number of initiatives captured under the term “safe sport” activities.

Approach to youth protection in sports:

As organized sports teams are fundamentally “youth serving organizations,” all of the basics regarding child abuse prevention in such out-of-home settings would apply.⁸ Namely, parents and caregivers should ensure that the team or organization has initial and ongoing screening for coaches and volunteers who will be interacting with the youth. There should be training for staff and athletes on maintaining a safe environment free of abuse and exploitation, how to report a concern about possible inappropriate behaviors or maltreatment, and ongoing risk assessments to ensure prevention measures are in place. Specific to sports teams, safe sport best practices include:⁹

- a code of conduct by which coaches, volunteers and athletes agree to abide, which include rules against bullying among peers,
- policies about travel, away competitions, and sleeping arrangements that prioritize safety for the athlete and prevention of abuse, which includes separate sleeping environments for adults (especially if parents are not present),
- clear guidance around safe locker room practices
- safe approaches to social media use (e.g., coaches and volunteers should not privately text athletes),
- rules around private lessons, and
- defined reporting and disciplinary processes.

⁷ Kerr G, Kidd B, Donnelly P. One step forward, two steps back: the struggle for child protection in Canadian sport. *Soc Sci.* 2020;9(5):68

⁸ Saul J, Audage NC. Preventing Child Sexual Abuse Within Youth-serving Organizations: Getting Started on Policies and Procedures. Atlanta (GA): Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control; 2007. <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/preventingchildsexualabuse-a.pdf>

⁹ Cauty KW, Giardino AP. Confronting Child Maltreatment in Youth Sports. *Pediatrics.* 2022;150(1):e2021055816



Parents, caregivers and other safe adults should be, as a matter of routine, allowed to appropriately observe practices. If, for training reasons, the coach uses “closed practices,” then there should be an allowance for a designated person separate from the coaching and volunteer staff who is singly permitted to observe the practice on behalf of the parents. Regardless, observations should be permitted (and encouraged), even if unannounced. Additionally, parents and caregivers should be mindful of the risks of leaving or “dropping off” children at practices or sports events, as this can increase their vulnerability.

Parents and caregivers should be aware that the most common form of misconduct related to sports teams is “peer abuse,” or bullying by other athletes upon younger or less capable teammates. As such, it is important for the team to have adequate adult supervision and ongoing training to identify and intervene in these situations.¹⁰

Looking toward the future:

Participation in sports can be a valuable positive experience in the lives of youth. As discussed above, important developmental milestones in the physical, social and emotional realms can be promoted and achieved via the interactions with adult coaches and volunteers on sports team. However, like so many other potentially positive experiences, there must also be an intentional effort to incorporate prevention principles that avoid the risk for victimization by those who could harm youth while they are in their care.

Safes sport best practices are emerging and resources include free online trainings offered by the relatively newly established US Center for SafeSport (which is the Congressionally-mandated organization working to prevent and respond to the risk for abuse among competitive athletes in the Olympics).¹¹ Ultimately, prevention of maltreatment will rest upon well-informed safe adults who remain vigilant about risks, and who work to decrease the youths’ vulnerabilities while fortifying the potential positives through informed action.

¹⁰ Lipman A, McConnell E, Kaufman K, Giardino AP. Preventing Athlete Harm in Youth Sports. In: Palusci VJ, Vandervort FE (eds.) Preventing Child Abuse: Critical Roles and Multiple Perspectives. pp. 286-299. Nova Science Pub Inc. 2021. Accessible online at: <https://www.virtusonline.org/upload/Preventing-Child-Abuse-Critical-Roles-and-Multiple-Perspectives-Ch18.pdf>

¹¹ Lipman A, McConnell E, Kaufman K, Giardino AP. Preventing Athlete Harm in Youth Sports. In: Palusci VJ, Vandervort FE (eds.) Preventing Child Abuse: Critical Roles and Multiple Perspectives. pp. 286-299. Nova Science Pub Inc. 2021. Accessible online at : <https://www.virtusonline.org/upload/Preventing-Child-Abuse-Critical-Roles-and-Multiple-Perspectives-Ch18.pdf>