



# EMOTIONAL & PHYSICAL ABUSE & MISCONDUCT TOOLKIT

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For coaches,  
volunteers,  
and others  
who work  
directly with  
young athletes



# Table of Contents

How to Use this Toolkit.....	2
Recognizing Abuse and Misconduct .....	3
Preventing Abuse and Misconduct.....	11
Responding to Abuse and Misconduct .....	18
Organizational Resources .....	24
References .....	25

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The **U.S. Center for SafeSport** is an independent nonprofit organization responsible for responding to and preventing emotional, physical, and sexual misconduct and abuse in the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Movement. The Center also serves as an educational resource for sports organizations at all levels, from recreational sports organizations to professional leagues.

This toolkit references types of conduct prohibited by the **SafeSport Code**, which applies to all participants in the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Movement. If you or your organization are not under U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Movement auspices, be aware of your organization’s policies, procedures, and penalties related to abuse and misconduct, as well as relevant federal and state law.

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## How to Use this Toolkit

Sports are a cornerstone of American life, and the 58% of children ages 6 to 17 who participate<sup>1</sup> gain countless physical, emotional, educational, and social benefits.

Yet athletes' sport experience is not uniformly or universally positive. A recent U.S. Center for SafeSport Athlete Culture & Climate Survey found that 80% of athletes indicated experiencing at least one of 18 indicators of psychological harm or neglect<sup>2</sup>. Nearly 22 percent of athletes indicated being physically harmed in their sport participation<sup>3</sup>. LGBTQ+ athletes, athletes with disabilities, and elite athletes are at added risk of abuse and harassment, which can cause short- and long-term harm to athletes and worsen team performance.

But for every form of abuse and misconduct, we can choose counteracting healthy behaviors that build athletes up rather than tear them down—fostering positive and successful experiences, free of abuse, for young athletes everywhere.

### Misconduct vs. Healthy Behavior

- Emotional Misconduct vs. Motivation and Support
- Physical Misconduct vs. Appropriate Safeguards
- Bullying vs. Inclusion
- Harassment vs. Respect
- Hazing vs. Team Bonding

This toolkit will help you recognize, prevent, and respond to emotional and physical abuse and misconduct in your sport activities and environments. It includes three primary sections:

- The **Recognize** section introduces five major types of emotional and physical abuse and misconduct. You will learn how to identify them in your sport settings, and how to recognize when common behaviors escalate into misconduct.
- The **Prevent** section outlines preventing emotional and physical abuse and misconduct in your sport. You will learn about trauma-sensitive coaching, creating positive team environments, and stopping problematic behaviors from becoming abuse and misconduct.
- As much as we wish to, we cannot prevent all instances of abuse and misconduct. The **Respond** section guides you on responding to athletes who disclose abuse or misconduct to you, recognizing and addressing retaliation, and appropriately reporting abuse and misconduct.

### Content warning

This guide contains detailed information about trauma and abuse, including emotional misconduct, physical misconduct, harassment, bullying, and hazing. Some of the words and examples used may be triggering or cause anxiety.

To talk with someone about abuse you or someone you know has experienced, contact the SafeSport Helpline at 866-200-0796 or [safesporthelpline.org](https://safesporthelpline.org). Report any abuse or misconduct occurring under authority of the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Movement at [uscenterforsafesport.org/report-a-concern](https://uscenterforsafesport.org/report-a-concern).

## Recognizing Abuse and Misconduct

You set the tone for your team’s culture through your actions and expectations. Recognizing emotional and physical abuse and misconduct is the first step—a foundational step—to responding to and preventing it. And because your own actions and expectations set the tone for your team’s culture, you must be aware of your own behavior as well as the behaviors of athletes and other coaches.

It is critical to deal with unhealthy behaviors before they develop into abuse and cause sustained damage. **You do not have to allow inappropriate behaviors to continue just because they do not violate a policy.**

Athletes and coaches may make comments that hurt someone either intentionally or unintentionally. By immediately addressing such behaviors, you can help athletes understand that the impact of their words and actions (and not merely their intent) can leave impressions that stick with athletes for the rest of their lives.

Note that while this toolkit focuses on emotional and physical abuse and misconduct, these motivations and behaviors may also be accompanied by sexual misconduct and abuse, or can create an environment in which it is more likely to occur.<sup>2</sup> We encourage you to explore other U.S. Center for SafeSport resources and policies (at [uscenterforsafesport.org](https://www.uscenterforsafesport.org)) to learn more about sexual misconduct and abuse in relation to sport.

Many episodes of abuse and misconduct in sport have a common underlying element: An imbalance of power. When the person harmed has less power than the person who harmed them, they can have trouble recognizing what is going on and getting help. They may also feel guilty or blame themselves. By knowing what to look for, you can help athletes recognize harmful situations and get help.

In addition to coach/athlete relationships, many sport interactions reflect one person having more positional, social, or physical power than another. Team captains have more positional power than rookies. Athletes without disabilities often have more social power than athletes with disabilities.

### Outlining five categories of misconduct

In the following pages, we outline five categories of abuse and misconduct: **Emotional Misconduct**, **Physical Misconduct**, **Bullying**, **Harassment**, and **Hazing**. But it is far more important to attentively *recognize* an inappropriate and harmful behavior than it is to strictly *categorize* it. Misconduct often overlaps or represents multiple categories:

- A coach mocking an athlete who cannot compete because of an injury is engaging in emotional misconduct; that same coach may engage in physical misconduct by forcing the athlete back into competition before they are medically cleared.
- An alcohol-fueled ritual with underage athletes may seem “inclusive”—but it is inappropriate, and therefore considered hazing. This same activity may also be an instance of bullying, if certain athletes are excluded or if athletes are intimidated into participating.

- Distinctions between bullying (which generally involves power differences) and harassment (which may occur without power differences) can be fine-grained. The presence of discrimination is a key factor that can lead a bullying behavior to be considered harassment.
- Behaviors may escalate from one form of misconduct (such as emotional misconduct) to another (such as physical misconduct).

Even if you are unsure how to categorize a behavior: Always report any behavior that concerns to appropriate parties, who can follow up (with trained investigators, if necessary) to assess whether a behavior violates a policy.

## Emotional Misconduct

Emotional misconduct entails behaviors and actions that cause emotional harm to another person. It may occur when one person has power over another person (a coach/athlete relationship), or between teammates or peers.

### What are common types of emotional misconduct?

- **Verbal acts:** repeated and excessive instances of belittling, ridiculing, scapegoating, name-calling, body-shaming, or criticism unrelated to performance
- **Physical acts:** repeated or severe physically aggressive behaviors such as throwing equipment at someone, punching walls in the presence of others, or breaking adaptive equipment
- **Acts that deny attention or support,** such as routinely or arbitrarily excluding an athlete from activities, or ignoring, isolating, or threatening to withhold coaching from an athlete
- **Stalking:** repeated conduct that makes an athlete feel unsafe or threatened, such as sending numerous (unreturned) text messages or following someone who has asked to be left alone

### What can emotional misconduct look like?

A coach shaming an injured male athlete by saying, “If you can’t cut it here, go over there and play on the girls’ team”

- An athlete, after a breakup, repeatedly showing up to their ex-partner’s practices without a reason and after being asked to stop
- A coach consistently singling out a specific athlete with tasks that remove them from the rest of the team

### Emotional Misconduct vs. Motivation and Support

- The goal of emotional misconduct is to control, intimidate, demean, or harm another person, thereby damaging their self-esteem.
- The goals of motivation and support behaviors are to increase an individual’s self-esteem, build trust and camaraderie, and encourage them to reach their fullest potential.
- Motivation and support help athletes improve performance<sup>3</sup> and enjoy their sport without lasting harm. Emotional misconduct makes athletes want to leave their sport.<sup>4</sup>

### Examples:

*C.J. is a middle-distance runner who is a transgender girl. An article about C.J.'s athletic success is posted to a track and field social media platform.*

- **Emotional Misconduct:** Several of C.J.'s teammates post mean and offensive comments and say that C.J. isn't a "real" girl and should be competing on the boys team.
- **Motivation and Support:** Several of C.J.'s teammates ask to train with her as they prepare for the next meet.

*Olivia is a para snowboarder. When she tears a ligament in her shoulder, her doctor says she cannot compete for at least eight weeks.*

- **Emotional Misconduct:** Her coach yells at her in front of the team, saying that she exaggerated her injury and is just too weak to compete at this level.
- **Motivation and Support:** Her coach supports the doctor's decision, explaining that it is better to sit out now than to risk further injury and prolonged absence from competition.

### Physical Misconduct

Physical misconduct includes any intentional contact or non-contact behavior that causes or reasonably threatens to cause physical harm to another person (excluding professionally accepted coaching techniques and contact allowed by sport rules).

#### What are common types of physical misconduct?

- **Contact acts:** intentional actions or behaviors involving contact with another person, including punching, beating, slapping, strangling, or knowingly permitting an injured athlete to return to play or training following a serious injury without medical clearance
- **Noncontact acts:** intentional actions or behaviors that are physical in nature but do not involve contact with another person, including withholding water or nutrition, illegally providing alcohol or drugs (including nonprescribed medications), or damaging or misusing an athlete's adaptive equipment

#### What can physical misconduct look like?

- A coach takes an athlete's assistive device away after the athlete had a poor practice
- A coach gives a minor athlete medication without proper parental consent
- An athlete beats up another athlete after practice

#### Physical Misconduct vs. Appropriate Safeguards

- Physical misconduct involves intentional behavior that causes physical harm or places someone in physical danger, regardless of reason or motivation behind the behavior.
- Appropriate safeguards are physical actions with recognizable positive effects on athlete performance. Coaches who use appropriate safeguards know how much and how far to push athletes to maximize results while increasing safety.
- Coaches who respect appropriate safeguards do not train athletes to intentionally hurt competitors or work around the rules. They do not let injured athletes return to play without medical clearance, even if an athlete wants to play through the pain. Athletes who respect appropriate safeguards do not intentionally injure others within or beyond competition.

### Examples:

*Caleb falls down after colliding with Rohan when they both go for the ball during their soccer game.*

- **Physical Misconduct:** After the whistle, Rohan intentionally kicks Caleb in the stomach and walks away.
- **Appropriate Safeguards:** After the whistle, Rohan helps Caleb up and walks away.

*Liam falls after a vault and cannot put weight on his ankle.*

- **Physical Misconduct:** His coach tells him to “man up” and walk it off, and does not call a trainer or his parents.
- **Appropriate Safeguards:** His coach helps him sit down, then calls a trainer to check out his ankle.

## Bullying

Bullying entails repeated or severe aggressive behaviors directed at a minor and intended or likely to hurt, control, or diminish the minor emotionally, physically, or sexually. (When directed at adults, these behaviors are considered hazing or harassment.) People who engage in bullying often have more social or physical power than their targets, which makes it harder for the targets to stop the behavior.

When someone uses electronic technology to bully another person, it is considered cyberbullying—a category that includes sending or posting hurtful, embarrassing, or threatening messages by text, email, or social media.

Bullying behavior may differ from rude, mean, teasing, or conflict-based behaviors. Rude and mean behavior is often situation-specific and not part of an ongoing pattern. Teasing is often playful behavior between friends that goes farther than one individual might appreciate. A conflict reflects two people disagreeing, with both equally able to express their thoughts and feelings. In contrast, bullying behavior entails using power differences to harm and exclude someone.<sup>5</sup>

Coaches who observe any of these behaviors should monitor them to see if the conflicts are dealt with in a healthy manner, and not reflective of a deeper pattern of bullying and exclusion. By holding individuals accountable for any harm their words may cause, they can foster positive team environments and prevent behaviors from escalating into bullying.

### What are common types of bullying?

- **Physical:** repeated or severe hitting, punching, physical intimidation, and destruction of property
- **Verbal:** repeated or severe name-calling, ridiculing, taunting, and threats
- **Social (including cyberbullying):** repeatedly or severely spreading rumors, socially excluding someone and asking others to do so, using technology to harass, frighten, intimidate, or humiliate
- **Sexual:** repeatedly or severely ridiculing or taunting someone about their gender identity, sexual orientation, or sexual activities

### What can bullying look like?

- Parents post insults and taunts online that accuse a para athlete of misrepresenting their ability level in order to compete against athletes with more severe impairments
- A group of athletes spread sexual rumors on social media about a teammate
- Teammates ridicule and taunt the heaviest athlete on a team

### Bullying vs. Inclusion

- When someone engages in bullying behaviors, they use physical or social power to exclude and make someone feel less than others. Though usually a pattern of behaviors, a single, severe incident can be considered bullying.
- When someone exhibits inclusive behaviors, they use social power to include and build up others, bringing them into a group and making them feel welcome.
- Bullying and inclusion are behaviors based in a specific context: someone can engage in bullying in one context yet be a target of bullying in another.

### Examples:

*Devon identifies as gender nonbinary and uses they/them pronouns.*

- **Bullying:** Some of their teammates call them a freak and shove them around the locker room after most practices.
- **Inclusion:** The entire team chooses to be inclusive by introducing themselves using their own pronouns whenever they meet new people.

*Carly and Keira, equestrian riders at the same barn, are fighting.*

- **Bullying:** Keira encourages other riders to gang up on Carly. They text to Carly that everyone hates her and that she doesn't belong at the barn.
- **Inclusion:** Instead of taking sides, other riders help them work out their disagreements.

### Harassment

Harassment is repeated or severe conduct that causes fear, humiliation, or annoyance; offends or degrades; creates a hostile environment; or attempts to establish dominance, superiority, or power over someone because of bias against an aspect of their identity (such as age, race, sexual orientation, gender identity, ethnicity, culture, religion, national origin, or disability).

Though bullying and harassing behaviors each use power and control to hurt the target, behaviors that are based on discrimination are generally considered harassment, as are bullying behaviors directed at adults. Remember, **you do not need to correctly label a behavior to respond to it.**

Harassment, like bullying, differs from teasing, rude, mean, or conflict-based behaviors.<sup>5</sup> Coaches should still address any inappropriate behaviors, even if they are not considered harassment, to promote a positive team environment and prevent problem behaviors from escalating.



### What are common types of harassment?

- Repeated or severe threats to physically harm someone
- Repeated or severe ridicule or humiliation of someone
- Using slurs, derogatory comments, insults, and/or threats against someone based on an aspect of their identity
- Using technology to engage in any of these behaviors

Note: Harassment based on a person's gender, gender identity, or sexual orientation is defined as sexual harassment.

### What can harassment look like?

- A group of athletes post and rate pictures of female athletes' breasts and butts online
- Players on one team yell racial slurs at players on another team during a game
- Athletes insult and taunt a peer who wears a hijab

### Harassment vs. Respect

- Harassment is intended to degrade others and make them feel bad or scared.
- People who choose to harass others who are different believe that the differences make them superior.
- Respect is intended to lift people up and support them.
- People who act with respect value differences among teammates and know those differences make the team better.

### Examples:

*The league notifies Kaheed that his hairstyle violates league regulations.*

- **Harassment:** Kaheed's coach tells him he must cut his hair, adding that while his hair might be fine for his neighborhood, it makes the team look bad.
- **Respect:** Kaheed's coach works to change the league's hair regulations to ensure they are not discriminatory.

*Sarah, an autistic climber, wears headphones to reduce noise stimulation when she is not climbing.*

- **Harassment:** One of Sarah's teammates often hides her headphones to watch her reaction.
- **Respect:** Sarah's teammates help her find her headphones when she misplaces them.

### Hazing

Hazing is conduct that may endanger, abuse, humiliate, degrade, or intimidate a person—and that is stated or implied as a condition of group or team acceptance. The conduct can be physical, mental, emotional, or psychological in nature, and often involves age-old traditions or rites of passage. Not all hazing happens in secret: coaches and parents may know about and support these behaviors.

While many coaches and parents may recall childhood hazing rituals of their own, hazing behaviors are not harmless traditions. Hazing is damaging to individuals and teams. Hazing is also a crime in many states, based on explicit hazing laws or criminal statutes based on related behaviors.

### What are some common types of hazing?

- **Endangering acts:** requiring drinking games or depriving someone of sleep, food, or water
- **Physical conduct:** having someone run a gantlet or be confined to a small space
- **Emotional conduct:** public humiliation or social isolation
- **Sexual conduct:** being required to perform sexual acts or made to watch pornography

### What can hazing look like?

- Athletes force new team members to drink until they pass out or throw up
- Veteran players steal the clothes and towels of rookies while they are showering
- Team leaders make first-year athletes watch pornography in front of the rest of the team

### Hazing vs. Team Bonding

- Hazing reduces athletes' self-confidence, misuses power differences between athletes, and erodes trust and respect among teammates.<sup>6</sup>
- Team bonding activities build trust and cohesion among teammates.
- Hazing is inappropriate inclusion; team bonding is appropriate inclusion.
- Even if behavior seems harmless or if athletes willingly participate, it is still hazing if it meets above criteria.

### Examples:

*Justin is captain of the baseball team.*

- **Hazing:** Justin tells new teammates to post videos of themselves doing dangerous social media challenges.
- **Team Bonding:** Justin posts a video of the entire team doing a choreographed dance in their uniforms.

*Aalyiah is captain of the field hockey team.*

- **Hazing:** Aalyiah and fellow senior players make rookies run a stick gantlet.
- **Team Bonding:** Aalyiah and fellow senior players organize a fun obstacle course for the whole team to run.

Notes and reflections on recognizing abuse and misconduct

## Preventing Abuse and Misconduct

You play a key role in shaping sport environments in which all athletes feel safe, supported, and strengthened. By modeling and teaching appropriate behaviors and boundaries, and by sharing the importance of abuse-prevention principles far and wide, you can reduce the possibility of abuse and misconduct in your sport settings.

### The Coach-Athlete Relationship

Coaches are influential adults in the lives of young athletes. A healthy, professional, and positive coach-athlete relationship can improve an athlete's self-esteem, performance, satisfaction with sport, and overall well-being.

The coach-athlete relationship typically entails **power imbalances**, especially between adult coaches and youth athletes. These imbalances can be constructive—as coaches use their knowledge and experience to help athletes stay safe, develop skills, and perform at a higher level. Effective coaches use **respect**, **support**, **positive discipline**, and **motivation** to encourage high levels of performance, focus, and sportsmanship from athletes.<sup>3,7</sup>

<b>Motivation and Positive Discipline</b> <sup>3,9,10</sup>	<b>Misconduct</b> <sup>8,9</sup>
Based in respect	Exploits power differences
Builds self-esteem	Emotionally and/or physical harms athletes
Supports athletes in reaching their goals	Tears down self-esteem
Enhances team performance	Can lead to athletes leaving sport
Helps athletes understand consequences of actions	Causes changes through fear, not learning
Shows how to correct harmful or unproductive behavior	Suggests winning is more important than athlete well-being

*Example: You are coaching RJ, who has been involved in judo for two years. He has trouble focusing during training and competitions, which puts him and others in danger. You meet with RJ and his parents to clearly state your expectations for his behavior in class and the changes you need to see before he can continue to compete. You, RJ, and his parents work together to create an action plan.*

Power imbalances can also be exploited. When coaches use negative techniques (such as fear, shame, and punishment) to shape behavior, they cause unnecessary harm to athletes.<sup>8</sup> Behaviors that some coaches and parents tolerated in the past, like denying athletes water breaks or repeatedly belittling them, are abusive and considered forms of physical and emotional misconduct.

*Example: You are a league director. Dylan, a coach in your league, has a reputation as a tough coach who will do anything to win. He is known to scream at athletes and put them down. You have also heard reports that he denies athletes water breaks when he thinks they are being lazy. You have noticed that many athletes Dylan has coached decide to stop playing the sport altogether, more so than athletes on other teams. You decide to talk with Dylan about the harm his abusive coaching style is causing.*

## Trauma-Sensitive Coaching

Though this guide focuses on sport-related emotional and physical abuse and misconduct, many children encounter trauma and abuse in other areas of their lives—which can affect how they behave and react in their sport activities.<sup>5,6,8</sup> Each person experiences the emotional and physical impacts of abuse and misconduct differently: be alert for unexplained emotional, behavioral, and physical changes so you can respond to them with sensitivity.

### **Some potential effects of trauma:**

**Emotional/Psychological:** Depression and anxiety, anger, low self-esteem, feelings of self-blame, shame, and embarrassment

**Physical:** Stomachaches, unexplained illnesses, headaches or dizziness, unexplained exhaustion

**Behavioral:** Self-harm and suicidal thoughts, changes in relationships, changes in physical appearance, loss of interest in sports

A common form of childhood trauma is **Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)**, which include abuse, neglect, loss of a parent (through divorce, death, or abandonment), household challenges (such as a family member incarcerated or struggling with substance abuse), community violence, and racism.<sup>11,12</sup>

You will likely work with athletes who have experienced trauma (even if they have not told you<sup>13</sup>). Trauma can impact children’s brain development and overload their stress-response systems<sup>11</sup>, causing them to act in ways you may find confusing, unnecessary, or overreactive—but actually are the brain’s way of protecting the child.

Almost 1 in 2 children have experienced at least one trauma.<sup>12</sup>

Trauma-sensitive coaching means being sensitive to the needs of athletes who have experienced trauma. Trauma-sensitive coaches always assume they are working with people (athletes, parents, or other coaches) who have experienced trauma.<sup>13</sup> When coaches prioritize relationship-building, have a consistent structure, and care about athletes’ well-being—hallmarks of trauma-sensitive coaching—all athletes perform better, not only those who have experienced trauma.

*Example: Eva is new to your fencing program after recently coming to live with her grandmother. You notice that she freezes up and mentally shuts down whenever anyone raises their voice during practice. Instead of yelling at her to focus, you and your assistant coach talk privately with her to find out what is going on in her life. You learn that Eva grew up in a home with domestic violence, past experiences that cause her to react strongly to yelling.*

Sport's positive benefits are especially helpful for young athletes who have experienced trauma. Having a safe, caring, supportive, and consistent relationship with an adult can significantly help children heal from trauma.<sup>13</sup>

Learn more about trauma-sensitive coaching in the **Resources** section.

## Ways to Create a Positive Sport Environment

You help set the tone and culture of safety in your sport activities. Whether you work with teams or individual athletes, your words, behaviors, and expectations establish an environment that can either promote or discourage misconduct.

These principles will help you establish a positive sport environment:

- **Set behavioral expectations with athletes** (and parents/guardians of minor athletes) up front. Be sure your expectations are age and developmentally appropriate.
  - Tip: If you tell athletes that you do not tolerate back talk, also let them know how and when to express questions or concerns about something you have asked them to do.
- **Model appropriate and respectful behavior** with athletes, parents, officials, and other coaches. Do not use slurs or other demeaning language when talking to or about others.
  - Tip: Do not refer to athletes without disabilities as “normal,” which implies that athletes with disabilities are not normal.
- **Call people by the name they want to be called.** Learn to pronounce names that you find difficult; do not shorten names solely to make them easier to pronounce. Call transgender and nonbinary athletes by the name and pronouns they use.
  - Tip: Be sure that nicknames of athletes you coach are not offensive or hurtful.
- **Keep the age and developmental level of athletes in mind** when talking to them.
  - Tip: Teenage athletes may understand that a raised voice is not always the same as yelling in anger, but younger athletes may not. You may need to simplify language (though when communicating with athletes with cognitive disabilities, be sure to choose language that is not condescending).
- Recognize that **athletes from marginalized groups are at high risk** for being abused, bullied, and harassed. Pay particular attention to circumstances and safety needs of athletes with disabilities, LGBTQ+ athletes, and athletes of color.
  - Tip: Be sure practice and competitions are accessible or that advance plans are made for spaces with access problems or inequities. When you travel, learn about local laws and attitudes that may be dangerous for LGBTQ+ athletes and work with them to create a safety plan. Immediately address racist language and actions from teammates, competitors, or fans.

- Reinforce to athletes that while winning matters, their **growth and well-being are more important**.
  - Tip: Help athletes turn mistakes and losses into learning opportunities. Remind them that no one wins every game, match, or competition and that your goal is to help them grow as athletes and as people.
- **Be consistent** in communicating and holding people accountable to core values, expectations, and policies.
  - Tip: If a star athlete violates team policies or engages in misconduct, treat them as you would any other athlete, even if it makes you less competitive.
- **Respond to misconduct** immediately and consistently.
  - Tip: Address all forms of misconduct you learn about. If you address a bullying incident but ignore a hazing ritual, you send mixed messages about acceptable behavior.
- **Talk to athletes about positive bystander intervention**. Model bystander intervention by saying or doing something when you see abusive behaviors.
  - Tip: If someone tells an offensive or degrading joke, tell them the joke is not funny and you do not want that type of conversation around yourself or your team.

## Bystander Intervention

**Bystander:** *A person present in a situation that is (or could become) abusive*

**Intervention:** *Saying or doing something to make it less likely abuse will happen or recur*

Bystander intervention can prevent acts of abuse from occurring and can stop inappropriate behaviors from escalating or recurring. It also can consistently reinforce what behaviors are acceptable and can be particularly powerful when friends intervene with friends who are doing harm. For example, if you talk to a friend after they tell one hurtful joke, they may change their behavior before they develop a pattern of hurtful comments.

When faced with a concerning situation, we all make decisions about *if* and *how* to intervene. Often we move through important steps of the intervention process without much thought—but we are more likely to intervene when we understand and intentionally think through them.

**The five bystander intervention process steps are<sup>14</sup>:**

- **Notice** a concerning or harmful event is happening (or may happen)
  - *Is there anything about this situation that concerns me?*
- **Decide** whether action is needed in the situation
  - *This is a gut-check moment. Does something need to be done?*
- **Assume responsibility** for acting or delegating
  - *Is it my responsibility to do something? If I don't, who will?*

- **Figure out** your options for intervening and identify risks and barriers to acting
  - *What actions can I take comfortably and safely? What might make it hard to do something? What power do I have in this situation?*
- **Understand** how to carry out the action safely
  - *How will I keep myself safe while taking this action? What might help the person being harmed feel safer in this situation?*

In working with athletes, you may sometimes need to intervene even when the person being harmed does not want you to get involved. If this happens, try to balance their needs with your responsibilities.

Also consider power differences when you decide how to intervene. What kind of social or physical power does each person have in the situation? It may not be realistic to expect a first-year player to directly confront a team captain about homophobic comments, but the player could talk with a coach or other players with influence.

In deciding how to respond, it can be helpful to think of **5 D's: Direct, Distract, Delegate, Delay, and Document**<sup>15</sup>.

- Be **Direct**: Say something in the moment, such as telling someone to stop their harmful behavior or that their inappropriate joke is not funny, or asking someone being harmed if they want to leave.
- **Distract**: Create a diversion, like asking what time it is, changing the subject, or asking one of them to help you with a task.
- **Delegate**: Get someone else to address the concern, such as a supervisor, a friend of the individual acting inappropriately, or relevant authorities (like a building manager or security guard) if warranted.
- **Delay**: Buy time until it is safer to intervene or wait until you can have a private conversation with the individual acting inappropriately about your concerns.
- **Document**: Record the date, time, location, information about people involved, and a summary of what happened; give the information to someone with more power to act.

There is no one best way to intervene in a situation: sometimes a combination of several responses is appropriate. But doing *something* is more helpful than ignoring the situation. If you choose not to directly intervene in the moment, think about ways you can address the behavior later. No matter what you choose to do, remember that **no one can do everything, but everyone can do something**.

The following examples suggest various ways you might intervene; they may prompt ideas of other actions you might take. Be sure to follow your organization's rules for reporting misconduct when applicable.



## Scenario

*An athlete on your team mentions that an upcoming meet is scheduled on Eid-Al-Fitr, an important Muslim holiday. You contact the league administrator to request the meet be rescheduled so it does not interfere with any athlete's religious observances. The administrator says, "No. If they want to celebrate their holidays so badly, they should go back to their own country."*

- **Be Direct:** Tell the administrator that since the league does not schedule meets on major Christian holidays, it should do the same for other religions. Remind the administrator that the U.S. *is* their country and that many of the Muslim athletes were born in the U.S.
- **Distract:** Ask the administrator to think about the schedule change, then change the subject without addressing the comment.
- **Delegate:** Ask someone else in league leadership to request the change.
- **Delay:** Get support for rescheduling the meet from coaches, athletes, and parents, then bring the request back to the league administrator.
- **Document:** Log the date and time of your request and the administrator's response. Keep a record of other meets that are scheduled over religious holidays.

One of the most important ways you can help athletes learn about bystander intervention is to model that behavior for them. When they see you positively intervene in situations, it gives them confidence to do the same.

You can help athletes become positive bystanders by:

- Talking about what motivates you to say or do something when you see a potentially abusive or dangerous situation. Be honest about the challenges and how you overcame them.
- Using free online resources such as [That's Not Cool](#) and [NoMore.org](#) for helpful talking points and scenarios. Find additional scenarios in this toolkit's **Activities** section.
- Hosting a bystander intervention workshop for your athletes; contact your local [sexual](#) and [domestic violence](#) organization for support.

Notes and reflections on preventing abuse and misconduct

# Responding to Abuse and Misconduct

## Responding to Disclosures

In responding to misconduct and abuse, advance preparation is important. These five considerations are important to keep at front of mind as you develop your abuse and misconduct response plan:

- **Knowledge:** Be well versed in your organization's policies: know what behavior to look for, how you are expected to respond, and where to report.
- **Preparation:** Discuss acceptable and unacceptable behavior with athletes at the start of each season, and periodically throughout, to hold athletes accountable for their behavior.
- **Time:** Respond quickly to prevent behaviors from escalating and harm from continuing.
- **Consistency:** Respond consistently to misconduct you learn about, because responding to some situations but not others erodes athlete confidence in the process and fosters further inappropriate behavior.
- **Appropriateness:** Consider the age and developmental level of those involved: acceptable behaviors, and appropriate responses to those behaviors, may vary.

**Do not ignore abuse and misconduct or assume someone else is taking care of it. You must do something.** Report child abuse and sexual misconduct immediately, and other types of misconduct according to your organization's policies. Put a stop to any emotional and physical misconduct or other harmful behavior you notice. If you learn about such behaviors after the fact, be sure it has stopped or take action to stop it.

It can be hard to know what to say when someone tells you they have experienced misconduct or abuse. Listening with empathy and being supportive are the two most important principles to keep in mind as you respond, and our Responding to Abuse or Misconduct Disclosures handout includes some specific words and phrases you can use to respond to a disclosure. If you are a mandatory reporter, you must follow reporting requirements *even if* the survivor does not want the incident reported.

If the incident involved the team, revisit previously agreed-upon behavior expectations. Discuss the importance of bystander intervention. Be sure not to share details about any specific situation in these conversations.

### **Athlete Mental Health**

Abuse and misconduct impact athlete mental health in short- and long-term ways. Everyone deals differently with experiences of abuse or misconduct, and everyone heals on their own timeline. Factors that affect how people respond include age, support system, cultural norms, other life events, and prior mental health and trauma experiences.

Check in with athletes if you know they have experienced abuse or misconduct, whether within or beyond their sport activity.

- Remind them of 24/7 support services such as the [National Sexual Assault Hotline](#) and the [National Domestic Violence Hotline](#).

- If they seem depressed or suicidal, talk with them about how they are feeling and refer them to the [National Suicide Prevention Lifeline](#).
- Inform parents/guardians of minor athletes if you are worried about their mental health.

Use the Resources and Reporting handout to record resources in your community that can help you respond to situations, and share these resources with athletes who may have experienced abuse or misconduct.

## Reporting Misconduct

Federal law identifies coaches, adult NGB members and other categories of adults (including those at certain amateur sports organizations outside the Center's Olympic and Paralympic Movement jurisdiction) as mandatory reporters of child abuse, including child sexual abuse.

Your reporting requirements may depend on the type of abuse or misconduct you are reporting, your state, and your organization. You are responsible for knowing those reporting requirements. If you are not sure a situation needs to be reported, ask your organization or the relevant local authority--and when in doubt, report.

The Center encourages everyone who works with athletes, even those not designated as mandatory reporters, to report known or suspected child abuse immediately to law enforcement and the Center.

Regardless of your reporting requirements: *you should never investigate reports* or try to determine if someone is telling the truth. Your role is to report what you observed or was told to you. Trained investigators will take it from there.

This **Steps to Reporting** handout outlines general reporting requirements and guidelines. Use the Resources and Reporting Contacts handout to record contact information for your locality's reporting agencies.

## Retaliation

Athletes (and their parents/guardians) are often afraid to report misconduct because they fear retaliation from a coach, organization leaders, or peer athletes. Coaches may also fear retaliation for reporting misconduct, especially if the report involves someone with power over them.

If you are a coach affiliated with the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Movement, you should know that retaliation is prohibited by the SafeSport Code. Regardless of affiliation, your organization's policies may also prohibit retaliation.

### What is retaliation?

Retaliation occurs when someone tries to punish or hurt another person for reporting misconduct or participating in an investigation about potential misconduct. Retaliation can take many forms including:

- Threatening, intimidating, or harassing a victim, witnesses, or those that support them
- Coercing someone to drop a complaint or refuse to cooperate with an investigation
- Punishing or withholding opportunities from those who report misconduct

### What can retaliation look like?

- After an athlete reports misconduct, that athlete is not selected for an elite team, though ranked at the top of their sport
- Friends of an athlete who was reported for misconduct spread online rumors about the person who made the claim
- An administrator demotes a coach who reported another coach for misconduct

Retaliation is prohibited because it negatively impacts the targets, team, and organization by:

- Harming further those who have experienced abuse or misconduct
- Deterring witnesses or third parties with information important to a misconduct investigation
- Eroding trust within the team and the larger organization
- Discouraging others from reporting future misconduct
- Sending the message that the behavior in question is acceptable
- Contributing to a culture that tolerates abuse and misconduct

Not all negative consequences of retaliation come from within an organization. When reports become public, negative comments aimed at those who reported abuse or misconduct can be overwhelming and hurtful, reducing people's willingness to report misconduct in the future.

### Dealing with retaliation

- When you cover team behavioral expectations, **be sure all athletes know that retaliation is unacceptable** (and, if you're in the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Movement, prohibited by the SafeSport Code). By reinforcing that retaliation will not be tolerated, you increase athlete trust in abuse and misconduct claim resolution processes.
- If you know someone has reported misconduct, **be alert to potential retaliation from the individual reported, or their supporters.**
- **Consider your own behavior toward athletes reporting misconduct or participating in investigations.** Be sure you do not treat them worse than you had before, or differently from other athletes in similar scenarios.
- If you learn about or suspect retaliation at any level of your organization, **report the situation according to your organization's policy**—which, for U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Movement affiliates, means to the U.S. Center for SafeSport.

Notes and reflections on responding to misconduct

## Handouts and Activities

Tips for Creating a Positive Team Environment

Understanding Team Climate

Creating Positive Team Bonding Rituals

Talking with Athletes about Bystander Intervention

Creating Inclusive Sport Environments

Resource and Reporting Contacts

Reporting Steps

Responding to Disclosures

## Organizational Resources

### For information

- [National Network to End Domestic Violence](#)
- [National Sexual Violence Resource Center](#)
- [Bloom 365](#)
- [Child Welfare Information Gateway](#)
- [PACER's National Bullying Prevention Center](#)
- [StopBullying.gov](#)
- [HazingPrevention.org](#)
- [Athlete Ally](#)
- [Move United](#)
- [National Center for Missing and Exploited Children](#)

### For help/support

- [SafeSport Helpline](#)
- [National Domestic Violence Hotline](#)
- [National Children's Advocacy Center](#)
- [National Sexual Assault Hotline](#)
- [Suicide Prevention Lifeline](#)
- [Stalking Prevention, Awareness, and Resource Center](#)
- [The Trevor Project](#)
- [LGBT National Help Center](#)
- [Crisis Text Line](#)
- [Trans Lifeline](#)
- [USOPC Athlete Ombuds Office](#)

### For coaches

- [Coaching with Courage](#)
- [Positive Coaching Alliance: Resources for Coaches](#)
- [Play Like A Champion Today: Trauma Resources](#)
- [Athletes as Leaders](#)
- [Coaching Boys into Men](#)
- [Aspen Institute: Project Play Resources for Coaches](#)
- [Athlete Ally](#)
- [American Association of Adapted Sports Programs](#)



### For parents

- [U.S. Center for SafeSport: Parent Toolkit](#)
- [U.S. Center for SafeSport: Parent and Youth Trainings](#)
- [Aspen Institute: Project Play Resources for Parents](#)
- [Positive Coaching Alliance: Resources for Parents](#)

### For administrators

- [Positive Coaching Alliance: Resources for Leaders](#)
- [Athlete Ally](#)
- [American Association of Adapted Sports Programs](#)
- [Move United](#)

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