



Focus on Youth Sports

More than half of school children over the age of 8 participate in organized sports. Most of the time, they enjoy learning new skills and spending time with their friends. But sometimes, something awful happens: a coach or even another youth sexually abuses them. Read these three cases to learn how this happens and what you can do to prevent it.

In the News

Fourth grade baseball players were thrilled when the brother of one of the players volunteered to be an assistant coach. The young man was a star baseball player in college and since most everyone knew him, the coach didn't require him to complete the club's screening process. Toward the end of the season, he was arrested for molesting a 10-year-old boy, and the police reported that he had been convicted of a similar crime in college.

The coach at an elite private school school often scheduled extra practice sessions for his star athlete and frequently accompanied her to overnight competitions. She abruptly stopped competing after her junior year, switched to a local public school, and cut off communication with her former teammates. When the principal visited her and her mother to find out why, the girl broke down and said that her coach had sexually molested her.

Four high school football players sexually assaulted two new teammates during summer training camp in what started out as locker room hazing. The police investigation revealed that hazing was common practice for this team and that others had complained in previous years, but school administrators did nothing to stop the tradition.

Following basic abuse risk management practices would have prevented these tragedies. Learn how in the next brief paragraphs.

Fourth grade baseball players. In this case, the coach assumed that, because everyone knew the volunteer, background screening wasn't necessary. He was wrong. Had the volunteer molested one of the players, a child would have suffered for many years, and the club could be charged with gross negligence. Because many states prohibit insurance carriers from paying gross negligence costs, the club itself would be responsible.

No one should be exempt from standard screening practices. A criminal background check is simple to complete and well worth the \$10.00 you'll spend; some clubs ask volunteers to pay for the check themselves. Aside from demonstrating due diligence, the practice may also help keep your kids safe.

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Criminal background checks, however, are not enough. Urge **parents to attend practice sessions**. That way, you'll have other sets of eyes on-the-job. And **supervisors should drop in on practices** to observe and unobtrusively ask the players how they're doing. **Listen for comments** that may indicate someone is being mistreated or singled out for special attention. [Contact us for Praesidium's "Monitoring Checklist for Youth Sports"](#).

Coach at an elite private school. In this case, the coach used extra practices to spend private time with the star athlete and manipulated her with attention and promises of a college scholarship. He also manipulated her mother and arranged opportunities to be alone with her overnight for away competitions. More than 2,000 emails and text messages were recovered showing that he professed his love for her and promised he'd get her into an Ivy League college.

During litigation, several warning signs emerged that administrators ignored. First, many of the girl's teammates complained that they were uncomfortable around her and the coach when they were together; that he paid too much attention to her by giving her private training sessions; and, that he even drove her to competitions instead of allowing her to ride with the team.

The court ruled that the school "knew or should have known" that the coach was molesting the student because of repeated complaints from teammates about the coach's conduct. **Complaints about interactions between students and coaches can't be ignored**, particularly when they suggest preferential treatment or policy violations. [Contact us for a sample "Code of Conduct for Coaches"](#).

The school was also charged with negligence for allowing the coach to accompany a student on overnight trips with no written guidelines for sleeping arrangements and supervision. **Overnight trips require special planning, strict supervision protocols, and administrative approval.**

Finally, the school was faulted for having no policy governing electronic communication between students and teachers. You can avoid this exposure by **regulating and monitoring private electronic communications between students and teachers**. [Contact us for a "Model Electronic Communication Policy"](#).

Four high school football players. Hazing occurs far too often among young athletes. Some coaches even believe that hazing builds esprit de corp. However, hazing often involves humiliation, physical domination, and psychological control and can quickly turn sexual, especially among teenage boys. In this case, kids complained for years, but nothing was done. You can stop hazing by establishing a zero tolerance policy; educating coaches about the dangers of hazing and how to identify warning signs; educating athletes about the consequences for violating the zero tolerance policy; establishing an easy way for athletes to anonymously report hazing; and responding seriously to any complaints. [Contact us for teaching points to include in your "Hazing Prevention Training"](#).

Ask the Expert

Question:

We want to use high school athletes as "assistant coaches" for our after school child care program for elementary students. What guidelines should we follow?



About Praesidium:
With over two decades of experience, Praesidium is the national leader in abuse risk management. We offer a full range of risk management and loss control products and services to help you protect those in your care from abuse and to preserve trust in your organization.



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Answer:

You can do this safely, but consider these recommendations:

- Require youths to complete an application
- Check three references
- Complete a face to face interview
- Prohibit youths from one-on-one interactions
- Prohibit outside contact between the youths and the children
- Train the youths in proper interactions with children
- Make sure a supervisor is always on duty

[Contact us if you're starting a new program and have abuse risk management questions!](#)

**Expert: Britt Darwin-Looney, J.D., Praesidium Account Manager**

Britt specializes in the study and prevention of sexual abuse in YMCAs and other youth-serving organizations, including Water Parks and parks and recreation programs. Britt is a graduate of Texas Christian University and the Southern Methodist University Dedman School of Law. She is licensed to practice law in the state of Texas and has been with Praesidium for more than two years.

Got a question about preventing abuse in your programs? Email us at Experts@PraesidiumInc.com and watch for an answer in the next Safety Bulletin!

Spotlight: Criminal Background Checks

Not all criminal background checks are equal! Did you know, for example, that some advertised "national checks" aren't national at all? Contact us to learn more about our criminal background checks: we can help you decide what checks are right for you, run them quickly and economically and even help you decide what steps to take when you get a disturbing result.

News Flash

Facebook recently changed its default settings to "public." Users must now actively designate their messages as "friends only." Please pass this information along to your staff, your coaches, and your athletes!

<http://www.nytimes.com/external/readwriteweb/2009/06/24/24readwriteweb-the-day-facebook-changed-messages-to-become-18772.html>.