

Youth soccer coaching and child welfare – the risks, responsibilities and rewards

According to US Soccer, 18 million children play league football in the USA.¹ The FA believes that about 4 million children play "the beautiful game" in the UK, of which 1.1m are girls.² Even if we multiply this figure by just five (that's very conservative, considering that there 196 countries in the world) there could more than 100m children playing organised soccer across the globe.

That's 100m opportunities for a youth soccer coach to make a lasting, positive impact on a young person's life. It also means that 100m children need to be safeguarded and protected from harm while they're in the care of their soccer coach.

Whichever way you look at it, it's a big responsibility for the coaches and administrators who run the game – and we all need to be on the ball.

What is "child welfare"?

For more than 150 years, soccer has been perceived as character building, as healthy, wholesome and a source of discipline and commitment – an ideal sport for children.³

For the vast majority of children that is still the case. Soccer can help them to learn how to be a good team player, take instructions, be self-disciplined and to always try their best. For these children, soccer is a very rewarding pastime.

But organised soccer can, for a small number of children, be damaging in a variety of ways.

Physical harm

Young soccer players can come to physical harm as a result of:

- too much coaching.
- using poorly maintained equipment.
- playing soccer in an unsuitable place.
- being sexually or physically abused.
- playing against much younger/older children or adults.
- Being exposed to extremes of weather.

Emotional harm

- Your players can be harmed emotionally if they are unfairly criticised or shouted/sworn at.
- They can also be bullied by a coach or team mates who focus on their physical appearance – "come on fatty... get a move on!"

How to safeguard your players

As coaches, we have a moral and legal "duty of care" towards our players. Our main responsibility is not to teach them how to play soccer or win matches... it is to ensure their safety and well-being.

There is a simple three-part check list for making sure all our children have a great time playing soccer.⁴

1. Get the right people involved - by seeking references and carrying out criminal record checks.
2. Create a safe environment by ensuring adherence to codes of conduct, educating parents and adopting best practice.
3. Having a clear and easily accessible way for adults and children to report their concerns and know they are being taken seriously.

More information on these three points can be found in the "Resources" section at the bottom of this article.

What you have to do – some simple guidelines for youth soccer coaches

DO NOT:

- Train children on your own. Meet with parents before the season starts and tell them that there has to be at least one parent present for each player at every training session. NO PARENT, NO PRACTICE.
- Take young players in your car to matches or training.
- Allow young players to leave practice sessions on their own.
- Coach your players too often or for too long. A ratio of 2:1 (training time to match play) is plenty.

- Leave your players unsupervised, even for a minute.
- Criticise or shout at players in front of their friends
- Encourage a child to play soccer if he or she says they are injured.
- Train or play matches in very hot or very cold weather.
- Put pressure on children to perform to an unrealistically high standard.
- Allow young children to play soccer against adults or older children.
- Make a sexually suggestive comment to a child.
- Allow players to come to your home.
- Help them do personal things like get changed or administer first aid if they can do it themselves.

DO:

- Treat your players with respect, even if they are behaving badly!
- Check equipment for damage and discard faulty items.
- Check your playing areas for stones, glass or anything else that could hurt your players.
- Take a pro-active stance to bullying. Talk to your players about bullying, it's effects and how to report it.
- Listen to your players' concerns and act on them.
- Be a role model. Don't say one thing and do another!

How you can tell that something is wrong

There are many signs of physical and emotional abuse. They range from sudden speech disorders to poor personal hygiene.

Be alert to them at all times.

[A full list of signs of abuse](#)

But sometimes there may not be any signs of abuse. You may just feel that something is wrong. If you are even slightly worried, it is your responsibility to act on your concerns and do something about it.

What to do if you are worried about anything

Different clubs, leagues and governing bodies have different ways that concerned coaches can report their concerns and you should be aware of the reporting routes that are available to you. But whatever you do, do something. Never ignore a child who tells you they have a problem and if you see or hear something you don't like, never turn a blind eye.

If a child comes to you with a concern:

- Stop what you are doing and listen.
- Don't cross examine the child or ask leading questions.
- Reassure the child that they are right to tell you about it.

If you suspect the child may have been abused, contact the police without delay. [More](#)

Conclusion

This article might seem intimidating and even worrying to some of you. There is so much you need to be aware of!

But I make no apology for drawing your attention to some of the issues around the protection of our most valuable asset – our children.

If only one child is saved from being abused as a result of this newsletter I would be very happy. Now that really would be a result!

Resources

Safeguarding Children and Young People in Football

<http://bit.ly/i5JBbO>

Educate your parents

<http://bit.ly/yMC2q>

<http://bit.ly/gKUN7H>

Codes of conduct (download)

<http://bit.ly/gq1e8P>

Best practice

<http://bit.ly/e4Hz4Z>

Bullying

For children: <http://bit.ly/hMZQz5>

For everyone: <http://bit.ly/dUJfnS>

References

[1] <http://usa.usembassy.de/sports-soccer.htm>

[2] <http://www.thefa.com/womens/>

[3] C Brackenridge et al, *Child Welfare in Football*, Routledge, 2006, p.10

[4] <http://www.thefa.com/Footballsafes>