

7 ACTIONS SPORTS ORGANIZATIONS

CAN TAKE

to Prevent Abuse



Positive Coaching Alliance works to ensure that every coach is a positive coach, and that every athlete has a positive sports experience. Unfortunately, despite our best efforts, far too many athletes are abused. Thus, we are partnering with [Spot a Spider](#) to provide our member organizations with specific recommendations for protecting your athletes from emotional, physical and sexual abuse.

Taking the actions below will empower everyone in your organization to recognize and report the subtle behaviors of grooming and the obvious behaviors of overt abuse; protect athletes from a lifetime of suffering; potentially limit your organization's liability; and create a safe, healthy, positive sport environment.



1. Screen and Train Coaches and Staff

- Require background checks, [SafeSport certification](#), and references from previous employers and athletes as part of the hiring process for all staff.
- [Screen](#) potential hires for attitudes and personality traits which indicate potential for abuse.
- Train all staff regarding types of prohibited conduct and offer additional [trainings to ensure positive, athlete-centered coaching](#).
- Develop an [athlete focused program philosophy](#) and consistently reinforce it with staff [i.e., we want all athletes to feel safe, seen, heard, and valued in our program].



2. Understand the Signs

- Teach everyone in your organization (athletes, parents, coaches and staff) the signs of sneaky emotional abuse (aka grooming) and obvious abuse
- Be aware that grooming is usually almost invisible
- Remember that abusers seek to gain the trust of their victims, families, staff and the community
- Look for coaches and staff who demonstrate the following behavior patterns:
 - Make athletes feel special; this behavior is targeted at individual athletes, and is distinct from encouraging and supporting all athletes. It often has an over-the-top or secretive feel - giving excessive, non-specific praise, giving gifts, communicating privately/secretly with an athlete
 - Are extremely charming
 - Sneakily bully athletes by alternating making them feel special, and making them feel afraid/ashamed
 - Attempt to separate athletes from their families, teammates, supportive coaches and others
 - Lie, deny and defend inconsistent behavior
- Keep in mind, the higher the number of behavioral patterns a coach displays, the more likely it is that the coach is abusive
- Learn more about the 7 patterns of sneaky emotional abuse [here](#)



3. Prioritize Relationships

- Establish empathetic, trusting relationships with your athletes
- Consistently listen to understand the perspectives of your athletes, validate what they are saying, and follow up when necessary
- Cultivate positive, trusting relationships with athletes in your program so that they know they have someone who they can share their experiences with and trust to advocate for them
- Know that how an athlete feels when around a specific coach, staff member or teammate can be an early sign of problematic behavior.
- Educate coaches on what positive relationships look like and provide them the tools to create such a relationship (i.e., focusing on empathetic connection, collaborating with athletes, and participating in self-reflection)



4. Observe the Adults Participating in Your Program

- Establish a precedent for staff or third parties to observe coaches during practices or games
- Develop a feedback tool so coaches can expect to receive both positive and constructive feedback from observers



5. Establish a System of Accountability for all Coaches and Staff

- Establish an Athlete Safety Committee that ideally includes a trauma-sensitive professional (or an adult with a background in public safety/health who is a mandated reporter) and at least two athletes (or parents, if athletes are under 18)
- **Survey athletes** at least once a year about what they see and how they feel in their sporting environment
- Create a simple, clear, well-publicized, anonymous safe reporting system for victims and whistleblowers



6. Promptly Investigate all Complaints of Abuse

- Respond compassionately and comprehensively to every report of abuse within one month
- Ensure that truly independent, trauma-sensitive investigations are performed by people with expertise in grooming, sneaky emotional abuse, coercive control, as well as obvious emotional, physical and sexual abuse
- When an investigation determines that abuse has occurred, hold your program accountable to a standard of timely personal and institutional transparency, responsibility, public apologies, and all-inclusive amends



7. Heal Athletes

- Promote a trauma-informed, healing centered sports environments for all athletes by having coaches:
 - Honor athletes' lived experiences
 - Create opportunities for positive connection amongst peers and with coaches
 - Establish predictable routines and allow for athletes' control over their experiences
- Skillfully and compassionately support victims throughout their healing process
- Provide resources for, and ideally fund, trauma-sensitive therapy for all victims of abuse

As a member of PCA, you have demonstrated exceptional commitment to providing your athletes with a positive sport experience. By taking the essential actions above, you can demonstrate that you are willing to go above and beyond to protect your athletes from abuse. You can find a comprehensive list of preventive policies and procedures [here](#).

