



# EMOTIONAL & PHYSICAL ABUSE & MISCONDUCT TOOLKIT

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



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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 (“the Movement”). Certain terms are purposefully capitalized throughout the document and have a specific definition in the Code. The **Terminology** section includes definitions of Movement-specific terms referenced in the toolkit. 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.

If you have reasonable suspicion of abuse or misconduct inflicted on, or by, someone in the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Movement, report it at [uscenterforsafesport.org/report-a-concern](https://uscenterforsafesport.org/report-a-concern). If the abuse or misconduct involves Child Abuse, including sexual abuse, Adult Participants must immediately make a report to both law enforcement and the Center, and comply with any other applicable reporting requirements under state and federal law. Those outside the Movement must also comply with applicable reporting requirements under state and federal law.

This resource is for educational purposes only and does not constitute legal advice. It does not replace or override the Center's legal documents and policies (e.g., the SafeSport Code). Every Participant in the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Movement is responsible for knowing the information outlined in the **SafeSport Code**.

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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 gain countless physical, emotional, educational, and social benefits.<sup>1</sup>

Yet athletes' sport experience is not uniformly or universally positive. The 2024 U.S. Center for SafeSport Athlete Culture & Climate Survey found that approximately 80% of athletes indicated experiencing at least one indicator of psychological harm or neglect in sport. Nearly 22% indicated being intentionally physically harmed in their sport participation. Additionally, athletes from marginalized communities (e.g., athletes with disabilities) experienced high rates of abuse and misconduct.<sup>2</sup>

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. Accountability and Safety
- Bullying Behavior 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, Bullying Behavior, Harassment, and Hazing. Some of the words and examples used may be distressing.

To talk with someone about abuse you or someone you know has experienced, contact RAINN at [rainn.org](https://www.rainn.org) or 1-800-656-4673.

## 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>3</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.

Research shows that abuse and misconduct in sport often has roots in power differences.<sup>3</sup> While these power dynamics may be most noticeable in coach-athlete relationships, they are also present in relationships among athletes. For example, team captains have more positional power than rookies. Athletes without disabilities often have more social power than athletes with disabilities. 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.<sup>4</sup> They may also feel guilty or blame themselves. By knowing what to look for, you can help athletes recognize harmful situations and get help.

### Outlining Five Categories of Misconduct

In the following pages, we outline five categories of abuse and misconduct: **Emotional Misconduct**, **Physical Misconduct**, **Bullying Behavior**, **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 repeatedly and excessively mocking an athlete who cannot compete because of an injury may be engaging in Emotional Misconduct; that same coach may be engaging in Physical Misconduct by forcing the athlete back into competition before they are medically cleared.
- Interactions may first meet the criteria of one form of misconduct (such as Physical Misconduct) and evolve to also meet the criteria of others (such as Bullying Behavior).

Even if you are unsure how to categorize a behavior: Always report any behavior that concerns you so that someone can follow up (with trained investigators, if necessary) to assess whether a behavior

violates a policy. Reporting responsibilities are covered in more detail in the [Responding to Abuse and Misconduct](#) section.

## Emotional Misconduct

Emotional Misconduct includes:

- **Verbal acts:** repeated and excessive verbal attacks, such as name-calling, body-shaming, or ridiculing someone
- **Physical acts:** being repeatedly or severely physically aggressive, such as throwing equipment at someone or punching walls near them
- **Acts that deny attention or support:** such as ignoring or isolating someone for long time periods, or routinely excluding them from activities or coaching guidance for no productive reason
- **Stalking:** intentional and repeated behaviors (in person or using technology) that would reasonably make someone feel scared (for themselves or others) or very upset, such as following, monitoring, observing, threatening, or excessively messaging them
- **Criminal conduct:** any behavior described as emotional abuse or misconduct under federal or state law, such as child abuse or child neglect

Someone's conduct may be considered Emotional Misconduct even if they did not cause (or mean to cause) harm.

Emotional Misconduct does not include conduct reasonably accepted as part of sport. For example, a coach may talk with a wrestler about strategies for making weight but must not ridicule or fat-shame them.

### What are examples of Emotional Misconduct?

- A coach punches a hole in the wall in front of the team after a tough loss
- An athlete, after a breakup, sends multiple threatening texts to their ex-partner and repeatedly shows up to their practices after being asked to stop
- A coach arbitrarily isolates one player from the rest of the team during multiple practices

### Motivation and Support: A healthier way to respond

- Behaviors involving Emotional Misconduct are often used to control, intimidate, demean, or harm another person. This can damage their self-esteem.<sup>3</sup>
- Behaviors based on motivation and support can increase athlete self-esteem, build trust and camaraderie, and encourage them to reach their fullest potential.<sup>5</sup>
- Motivation and support help athletes improve their performance and enjoy sport without fear of harm.<sup>5</sup> Emotional Misconduct can make athletes want to leave their sport.<sup>6</sup>

### Scenarios

*C.J. is a middle-distance runner who has recently broken multiple records. An article and photo about C.J.'s athletic success is posted to a track and field social media platform.*

- **Emotional Misconduct:** The coach repeatedly mocks C.J.'s expression in the photo in front of the team.

- **Motivation and Support:** The coach congratulates C.J. during a team meeting and sends the article to the athletic director.

*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 then excludes her from all team activities, including practices and the end-of-season party.
- **Motivation and Support:** Her coach encourages her to travel with the team and gives her a shout-out at the end-of-season party for staying engaged.

## Physical Misconduct

Physical Misconduct is any behavior done on purpose that causes (or could reasonably cause) physical harm to another person.

Physical Misconduct includes:

- **Contact acts:** punching, beating, slapping, or strangling someone; knowingly letting someone return to play without medical clearance after a serious injury
- **Non-contact acts:** not letting someone have water or food; illegally giving them alcohol or drugs (including prescription medications not prescribed to them); forcing someone to assume a painful stance or position for no athletic purpose; risking injury to others by knowingly participating in sport while impaired
- **Criminal conduct:** any behavior described as physical abuse or misconduct under federal or state law, such as assault or child abuse

Physical Misconduct does not include conduct reasonably accepted as part of sport. For example, athletes may kick and hit each other during a karate tournament, but not during a swim meet.

### What are examples of Physical Misconduct?

- A coach kicks an athlete in their prosthetic leg and causes them to fall after the athlete had a poor practice
- A coach gives an 11-year-old athlete someone else's prescription pain medication when the team is on a road trip
- An athlete loses their temper and punches an opposing player in the face after the game

### Accountability and Safety: A healthier way to respond

- Coaching that involves Physical Misconduct could physically harm or injure someone, even if that was not the intent.
- Coaching practices based on accountability focus on respect and discipline, not punishment. This helps athletes associate behaviors with reasonable consequences so they can learn from their mistakes.<sup>7</sup>
- Safe coaching practices have recognizable positive effects on athlete performance. Coaches know how much and how far to push athletes to maximize results while maintaining safety. They do not let a seriously injured athlete return to play without medical clearance, even if the athlete wants to play through the pain.

## Scenarios

*Caleb falls 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.
- **Accountability and Safety:** After the whistle, Rohan helps Caleb up and walks away.

*Liam falls after a practice vault at a U-12 competition and breaks his ankle.*

- **Physical Misconduct:** His coach refuses to let the athletic trainer examine his ankle and makes him practice the vault several more times, even as his injury noticeably worsens.
- **Accountability and Safety:** His coach helps him sit down, then calls an athletic trainer to check out his ankle.

## Bullying Behavior

Bullying Behavior is repeated behavior or a single, severe incident directed at or about someone under age 18. The behavior is intended or likely to hurt, control, or tear down that person emotionally, physically, or sexually. It can be:

- **Physical:** hitting, beating up, spitting at, or throwing objects at someone; stealing, hiding, destroying, or interfering with someone's property
- **Verbal, written, or visual:** ridiculing, name-calling, taunting, or threatening to harm someone; using gestures to threaten or intimidate
- **Social** (including cyberbullying): spreading rumors or lies to harm someone's reputation, socially excluding them and asking others to do the same, or using technology to harass, frighten, intimidate, or humiliate them; posting real or manipulated harmful content online
- **Discriminatory:** Bullying Behavior directed at someone because of their age, race, ethnicity, culture, religion, national origin, or disability
- **Criminal conduct:** any conduct described as bullying under federal or state law

When done to Adults, these behaviors could qualify as other violations of the SafeSport Code, such as Hazing or Harassment.

Bullying Behavior does not include petty slights, minor inconveniences, or lack of good manners, unless these behaviors are repeated or very aggressive.

Coaches who observe rude, mean, or conflict-based behaviors should monitor them to see if they 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 they may cause, coaches can foster positive team environments and prevent behaviors from escalating into bullying.

### What are examples of Bullying Behavior?

- A competitor posts hurtful and inaccurate rumors about a 14-year-old athlete on multiple social media platforms
- Athletes aggressively ridicule a heavy 12-year-old teammate before and after most practices

### **Inclusion: A healthier way to respond**

- When someone engages in bullying, they often use physical or social power to exclude and make someone feel less than others. This also makes it harder for targets to stop the behavior.<sup>4</sup>
- When someone exhibits inclusive behavior, they use social power to include and build up others, bringing them into a group and making them feel welcome.<sup>4</sup>
- Bullying and inclusion are behaviors based on a specific context: someone can engage in bullying in one context yet be a target of bullying in another.<sup>4</sup>

### **Scenarios**

*Devon is new to his youth travel team and earns a starting position over a returning player.*

- **Bullying Behavior:** Some of Devon's teammates call him a freak and shove him around the locker room after most practices, threatening to make his life miserable if he doesn't quit the team.
- **Inclusion:** Team captains make sure Devon is included in all team activities and help him get to know his new teammates.

*Carly and Keira, rugby players for the same U-17 team, are fighting.*

- **Bullying Behavior:** Keira encourages other players to gang up on Carly. They text Carly over 50 times that night, telling her that everyone hates her and that she doesn't belong on the field.
- **Inclusion:** Instead of taking sides, other players help them work out their disagreements.

## **Harassment**

Harassment is repeated or severe conduct that is directed at or about another person. It is intended or likely to:

- **Cause fear, humiliation, or annoyance:** such as threatening to harm someone or repeatedly ridiculing them
- **Offend or degrade:** such as repeatedly using slurs or making offensive jokes to or about someone
- **Create a hostile environment:** such as repeated or severe actions that affect someone in a way that limits their ability to participate in programs or activities
- **Attempt to establish dominance, superiority, or power because of prejudice** against a person or group's age, race, ethnicity, culture, religion, national origin, or disability

It also includes any conduct described as harassment under federal or state law.

Harassment does not include petty slights, minor inconveniences, or lack of good manners, unless they are repeated or severe.

Coaches should still address any inappropriate behaviors, even if they are not considered Harassment, to promote a positive team environment and prevent problematic behavior from escalating.

Note: Harassment based on a person's sex or sexual orientation is classified as a type of Sexual Misconduct in the SafeSport Code.

### What are examples of Harassment?

- An athlete routinely humiliates and threatens a teammate until the teammate stops coming to practice
- A coach sends messages to the team group chat that single out an athlete as fat, as well as pictures of them with certain body parts circled and criticized

### Respect: A healthier way to respond

- Being harassed can make people feel bad about themselves and cause them to leave their sport.<sup>3</sup>
- Sometimes people choose to harass others because of differences in age, race, ethnicity, culture, religion, national origin, or disability.<sup>3</sup>
- Being treated with respect can help people feel supported.
- Respecting and valuing people's differences can make sport safer and more inclusive.

### Scenarios

*Noor, who is new to the team, wears a hijab.*

- **Harassment:** On every bad play, the coach mocks Noor's hijab: "Can you even see with that thing on?" Eventually, this makes Noor want to stop going to practice and other team activities.
- **Respect:** The coach organizes a team dinner to welcome Noor and her family.

*Sarah, an autistic climber, needs to wear headphones to reduce noise stimulation before competing.*

- **Harassment:** One of Sarah's teammates regularly tells Sarah autistic climbers shouldn't be allowed to compete and hides her headphones so she can't participate.
- **Respect:** Sarah's teammates cheer her on when she competes.

## Hazing

Hazing is any conduct—either physical, mental, emotional, or psychological—that is intended or likely to abuse, degrade, intimidate, or put a person in danger in order to join or be socially accepted by a group. No one can Consent to Hazing even if they appear willing to participate.

Hazing may include:

- **Contact acts:** such as beating someone with fists or objects, or physically restraining them
- **Non-contact acts:** such as making someone play drinking games, do humiliating acts, or keeping them from sleep, food, or water
- **Criminal conduct:** any conduct described as hazing under federal or state law

### What are examples of Hazing?

- At a party, returning athletes tell new teammates to get drunk or else they won't be added to the team chat
- The starters make rookies wear humiliating outfits in order to be invited to social events

### Team Bonding: A healthier way to respond

- Hazing can reduce athletes' self-confidence, misuse power dynamics between athletes, and erode trust and respect among teammates. While many coaches and parents may recall childhood hazing rituals of their own, hazing behaviors are not harmless traditions.<sup>8</sup>

- Team bonding activities build trust and cohesion among teammates.<sup>8</sup>
- Even if it seems harmless, hazing behavior is inappropriate inclusion. Team bonding is appropriate inclusion.<sup>8</sup>

### Scenarios

*Justin is captain of the baseball team.*

- **Hazing:** Justin tells new teammates they need to post videos of themselves doing dangerous social media challenges or the more senior players won't hang out with them.
- **Team Bonding:** Justin posts a video of the entire team doing a choreographed dance in their uniforms.

*Aalyiah is new to the field hockey team.*

- **Hazing:** Aalyiah and other new team members are forced to drink until they throw up in order to attend the preseason party.
- **Team Bonding:** Before the first game, the returning players organize a fun obstacle course for Aalyiah and the whole team to run.

## A Note About Sexual Bullying Behavior and Sexual Hazing

Under the SafeSport Code, harassing, bullying, and hazing behaviors that are sexual or related to sexual orientation are classified separately as types of Sexual Misconduct.

Adult Participants must report Sexual Bullying Behavior and Sexual Hazing to the Center immediately, but no later than 24 hours. They must also immediately report known or suspected Child Abuse involving a Movement Participant, including Sexual Misconduct that could be considered child sexual abuse, to law enforcement—even if they became aware of it before joining the Movement or the victim-survivor is now an Adult.

### What are examples of Sexual Bullying Behavior and Sexual Hazing?

- A player uses AI to create an image of a teammate engaged in a sex act and shares it to the team's online chat
- Team leaders make first-year athletes imitate sex acts each time they want to enter the locker room

## 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.<sup>5</sup>

The coach-athlete relationship typically entails **differences in power**, especially between adult coaches and youth athletes.<sup>3</sup> These differences 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>5,9</sup>

Motivation and Positive Discipline <sup>5,7,10</sup>	Misconduct <sup>3,10</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.*

Differences in power can also be exploited and cause unnecessary harm to athletes, such as when coaches use negative techniques (such as fear, shame, and punishment) to shape behavior.<sup>3</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>11</sup> Each person is affected by 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

**Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)** are common childhood traumas such as 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>12,13</sup>

**Almost 1 in 2 children have experienced at least one Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE).<sup>13</sup>**

You will likely work with athletes who have experienced trauma (even if they have not told you).<sup>11</sup> Trauma can impact children’s brain development and overload their stress-response systems, causing them to act in ways you may find confusing, unnecessary, or overreactive—but actually are the brain’s way of protecting the child.<sup>14, 15</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>11</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.<sup>11</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 or guardians of youth 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 asked them to do.
- **Model appropriate and respectful behavior** with athletes, parents, guardians, 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.” This implies that athletes with disabilities are not normal.
- **Create an environment that welcomes athletes of every background.** For example, ask every athlete how to correctly pronounce their name. Actively encourage athletes to respect each other's cultural practices and unique identities.
  - 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).
- **Pay attention to the safety needs of athletes from marginalized groups.** They are at a higher risk for being abused, bullied, and harassed.<sup>2</sup>
  - 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 athletes from marginalized groups and work with them to create a safety plan. Immediately address racist, homophobic, and other inappropriate language and actions from teammates, competitors, or fans.
- **Let athletes know winning is one part of sport.** Their growth and well-being are also 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 also help them grow as athletes and as people.
- **Discuss core values, expectations, and policies often.** Be consistent in holding people accountable for following them.
  - 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:** *Someone who is present when something concerning or risky happens*

**Intervention:** *Choosing to act to make it less likely abuse or misconduct will happen or continue*

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. We often 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>16</sup>:**

- **Notice** a concerning or harmful event is happening (or may happen)
  - *Is there anything about this situation that bothers 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 Ds: Distract, Delegate, Document, Delay, and Be Direct.**<sup>17</sup>

- **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.
- **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. If the situation involves potential misconduct, you may be required to report it. More information on reporting is in the [Responding to Abuse and Misconduct](#) section.
- **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.
- **Be Direct:** If you feel comfortable saying something in the moment, try telling someone to stop their harmful behavior or that their inappropriate joke is not funny. You can also ask the person being harmed if they want to leave.

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 example suggests various ways you might intervene. It 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 the third day of Diwali, an important Hindu 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."*

- **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.
- **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. Consider any reporting obligations you may have.
- **Delay:** Get support for rescheduling the meet from coaches, athletes, and parents, then bring the request back to the league administrator.

- **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 athletes were born in the U.S.

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 [Right To Be](#) for helpful talking points and scenarios. Find additional scenarios in this toolkit's [Handouts and Activities](#) section.
- Hosting a bystander intervention workshop for your athletes. Find a local organization to contact for support:
  - [National Sexual Violence Resource Center](#)
  - [National Network to End Domestic Violence](#)

## 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 lowers athletes' 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 any known or suspected abuse and misconduct according to applicable laws and policies (see [Reporting Misconduct](#) for more information). Put a stop to any Emotional or 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. 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 [RAINN 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 [988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline](#).

- Inform parents/guardians of minor athletes if you are worried about their mental health.

Use the [Resources and Reporting Contacts](#) 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

If you are an Adult Participant in the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Movement (“the Movement”), you are required to both follow applicable state or federal laws and also report information about or reasonable suspicion of:

- Child Abuse, including sexual abuse, **immediately** to law enforcement and the Center
- Sexual Misconduct regardless of age (including Sexual Harassment, Sexual Bullying Behavior, and Sexual Hazing) **immediately** (but no later than 24 hours) to the Center, and also **immediately** to law enforcement if it involves Child Abuse, including sexual abuse.
- Emotional and Physical Misconduct (including Bullying Behavior, Hazing, and Harassment) to your National Governing Body (NGB) or the Center
- Violations of proactive prevention policies (such as the Minor Athlete Abuse Prevention Policies) to your NGB

Under the Code, Adult Participants in the Movement must immediately report any known or suspected Child Abuse and child sexual abuse involving a Movement Participant—even if they became aware of it before joining the Movement. They must report to law enforcement and the Center. They must report even if the victim-survivor is now an Adult. They must also follow any other reporting requirements under state law. Those who have experienced abuse or misconduct can choose to self-report, but are not required to do so.

If you are not sure a situation needs to be reported, ask your organization or the relevant local authority—and when in doubt, report.

If you are not affiliated with the Movement, you may still be required to report known or suspected Child Abuse immediately to law enforcement. You must follow any other applicable state or federal laws.

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. Other people will take it from there.

The [Steps For 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 or 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 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 is taking (or threatening to take) any adverse action related to an allegation, a report, or an investigation into misconduct. It can happen before, during, or after someone participates in the Center's process. It can involve other relevant organizations under the Center's jurisdiction.

The SafeSport Code prohibits Retaliation. It is a form of misconduct.

Retaliation can come in different forms, including:

- Threatening, intimidating, or harassing the victim, witnesses, or those that support them
- Coercing someone to drop a complaint or to refuse to cooperate with an investigation

### What are examples of Retaliation?

- An administrator demotes a coach for participating in an investigation of a Hazing incident
- When an athlete confronts a teammate about Bullying Behavior, the teammate threatens to ruin their reputation if they report what happened
- The day after an athlete reports Physical Misconduct by a coach, the coach drops them from the team, saying, "We don't need any snitches around here"

### Retaliation is prohibited because it can:

- Further harm people who have experienced abuse or misconduct
- Deter witnesses or third parties with information important to a misconduct investigation
- Erode trust within the team and the larger organization
- Discourage others from reporting future misconduct
- Send the message that the behavior in question is acceptable
- Contribute 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 everyone on the team knows 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 people 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,** report the situation to the Center if you are an Adult Participant in the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Movement. If you are outside of the Movement, follow your organization's reporting policies.

## Notes and Reflections on Responding to Abuse and 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**

**Steps for Reporting for Adult Participants in the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Movement**

**Responding to Abuse or Misconduct Disclosures**

## Organizational Resources

### For Information

- [National Network to End Domestic Violence](#)
- [National Sexual Violence Resource Center](#)
- [Bloom 365](#)
- [Child Welfare Information Gateway](#)
- [Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline](#)
- [PACER's National Bullying Prevention Center](#)
- [Stop Hazing](#)
- [Athlete Ally](#)
- [Move United](#)
- [National Center for Missing & Exploited Children](#)
- [Stalking Prevention, Awareness, and Resource Center](#)

### For Help/Support

- [National Domestic Violence Hotline](#)
- [Regional Children's Advocacy Centers](#)
- [RAINN \(National Sexual Assault Hotline\)](#)
- [988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline](#)
- [The Trevor Project](#)
- [LGBT National Help Center](#)
- [Crisis Text Line](#)
- [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: Online 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](#)

# U.S. Center for SafeSport Terminology

## Local Affiliated Organization (LAO)

A regional, state, or local club or organization that is directly affiliated with an NGB or that is affiliated with an NGB by its direct affiliation with a regional or state affiliate of said NGB. LAO does not include a regional, state, or local club or organization that is only a member of a National Member Organization of an NGB.

## National Governing Body (NGB)

A U.S. Olympic National Governing Body, Pan American Sport Organization, or recognized by the U.S. Olympic & Paralympic Committee pursuant to the Ted Stevens Olympic and Amateur Sports Act, 36 U.S.C. §§ 220501, et seq. This definition shall also apply to the USOPC, or other sports entity approved by the USOPC, when they have assumed responsibility for the management or governance of a sport included on the program of the Olympic, Paralympic, or Pan-American Games.

## Participant

Any individual who is, or is seeking to be:

- A member or license-holder of an NGB, LAO, or the USOPC;
- An employee or board member of an NGB, LAO, or the USOPC;
- Within the governance or disciplinary jurisdiction of an NGB, LAO, or the USOPC;
- Authorized, approved, or appointed by an NGB, LAO, or the USOPC to have regular contact with or authority over Minor Athletes.

An Adult Participant is an individual age 18 or older who meets these criteria.

## SafeSport Code

A policy that defines the U.S. Center for SafeSport's authority and jurisdiction, prohibited categories of abuse and misconduct, and the Center's process for responding to and resolving abuse and misconduct claims affecting the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Movement.

## Sexual Misconduct

A wide range of sexual actions that are done without Consent, such as Sexual Harassment Nonconsensual Sexual Contact or Intercourse (or attempts to commit it), Sexual Exploitation Exposing a Minor to Sexual Content/Imagery, Sexual Bullying Behavior, Sexual Hazing, or other inappropriate conduct of a sexual nature. For full definition, see page 13 of the [SafeSport Code](#).

## U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Committee (USOPC)

A federally chartered nonprofit corporation that serves as the National Olympic Committee and National Paralympic Committee for the United States.

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