



## Protecting Our Children in Organized Sports

Although it may not seem like it, the fact that we're now talking about abuse of kids in sports is good. For too long, we've denied that every year some children are emotionally, physically and occasionally sexually abused by coaches, parents and other adults who are supposed to be helping build athletic skill, self esteem and sportsman-like behaviour.

### Putting It In Perspective

Statistics on sexual abuse are that 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 6 to 8 boys are victims of sexual abuse by the time they reach 18 years of age. Most of this happens in families.

Incidents occurring in sports are very small by comparison, but currently have caught the media's attention.

Far more often children's physical health is neglected or put at risk when parents and/or coaches force kids to play with injuries or risk life and limb driving long distances in stormy weather to make games. It is an abuse of power when winning championships is allowed to take priority over child safety and well-being.

Without question, emotional assaults on a child's self esteem are the most prevalent form of abuse seen in sports. This happens when over zealous coaches and/or parents scream at the child who's having a bad game and ridicule and threaten rejection of the ones who can't live up to the adult's dreams.

### What Can You Do About Abuse?

If you're a parent - you are the goalie - you should be your child's best defense.

1. Don't give away responsibility for your child.
2. Ask questions about the safe guards within the sports organizations you and your children join:
  - a. Are the adults (coaches, referees, etc.) involved screened?
  - b. Does the staff and volunteers training include discussions about physical, sexual and emotional trauma?
  - c. What are the driving, accommodation and supervision guidelines and practices for out-of-town travel?
  - d. Does the organization value in policy and in practice sportsmanship with championship?

- e. Does the organization demand and do the coaches and parents display respect for all players, opponents and officials?

If you answer "I don't know" or "No" to most of the above questions, you are being irresponsible and your child is at risk.

3. Be an "Askable Parent". Let your child know that you know about, and you can talk about, sexual matters including issues like abuse and homosexuality. If you aren't an "Askable Parent", work at becoming one. The Health Unit has helpful resources and staff.
4. Check your own behaviour and, if you're an offender, practice biting your tongue (literally, if necessary). The old adage, "if you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all," would go a long way in decreasing emotional hurts for us all.

On a final note, abusive behaviour is learned and thus it can be changed. If we ever hope to put an end to the problem of abuse, we must face ourselves and our children and acknowledge that we're all "guilty" in some situations and times.

It's essential that we set standards for self control with regard to abusive behaviour towards others. In this, as in all matters, our actions speak louder than our words.

**Be aware . The children are watching.**

Roccie Pagnelo, Family and Children Services  
Denise Gaulin, Leeds, Grenville & Lanark District Health Unit  
on behalf of the Child Abuse Prevention Committee of Leeds and Grenville