

PROTECTING COACHES AND ATHLETES

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The environment in which coaches operate has changed significantly in recent years. What we did and said several years ago - then considered acceptable, common or effective action and behaviour - may now raise concerns or result in rumours, allegations or even litigation. Recent media coverage and hype about alleged inappropriate behaviour has also put coaches under more intense scrutiny.

What can you, the coach, do to provide safe and supportive environments in sport for both coaches and athletes? One powerful strategy is to increase your knowledge of what constitutes harassment and other inappropriate behaviour, and the impact that this behaviour can have on others. Without this knowledge, you make yourself, your athletes and your organisation more vulnerable to problems related to, and possible allegations of, inappropriate behaviour.

Behaviour and legal obligations

The following guidelines on behaviour and information on legal obligations may help to reduce the risk of allegations against coaches. If you are a coach working with children or young people, as a minimum requirement you should ensure that:

- your actions are at all times unambiguously professional. Give a verbal explanation, in front of all athletes (and preferably parents as well) of how, where, when and why you may need to touch athletes

- you remember that the welfare of the children is always of paramount importance
- you know the policies, complaints processes and codes of conduct that your sport has in place at state and national level, and how they apply to you
- you understand and have signed your sport's coaches' code of ethics (a requirement for all National Coaching Accreditation Scheme accredited coaches)
- you understand how the New South Wales and Queensland child protection legislation may affect you

The joy and satisfaction that coaches and parents receive from seeing children improve and enjoying the game is a prime motivator for coaches. Good behaviour by coaches and their better understanding of the kinds of behaviour that people expect from them can help coaches maintain a positive involvement in sport.

The following points can help coaches maintain and even improve their standing in the eyes of athletes, parents and sporting organisations by

demonstrating 'best practice' behaviour in the care of athletes. (Some of these points have been taken from material produced by the New South Wales Department of Sport and Recreation.)

- As a large percentage of good coaching is about effective communication, be aware of your communication style. Not all children will understand an action, request or behaviour in the same way. One child may see an action as usual or acceptable behaviour, while another may find it unacceptable. A child's interpretation of an action may also be influenced by cultural and religious differences, gender and prior experiences.

- Ensure that any physical contact with children is appropriate to the development of the skills required for the sport.

- Be careful about which part of your body and how much of it is in contact with a child's body.

- Avoid unaccompanied and unobserved activities with children. Try not to separate yourself and a child from the line of sight of other people.

If you need to have a private talk to a child about their ability or behaviour, do this in an open place near others. Invite another coach or support person to join the conversation or talk to more than one child at a time.

- Use positive and age-appropriate language when talking to, and in the presence of, children.
- Before entering changing rooms, knock or announce that you will be coming in, and try to have at least one other adult with you. Do not isolate yourself and a child from others in the changing room.
- Have a club policy that, at the end of a training session or game, the second to last child to leave, and their parent or guardian, will wait with you and the last child. This will also enable you to concentrate on contacting the parent of the last child if that person is late.
- Avoid the risk of being left alone with a child by having a parent, guardian or support person help you with training. Ask that person to wait with you until all children have left.

The above strategies can also apply to older athletes, as there is still likely to be a disparity between you and your athletes in terms of authority, maturity, status and dependence, even if the athletes have reached the legal age of consent

Applying common sense

But does this mean you cannot show any emotion or provide emotional support? What if children want to give you a hug because they are happy with their performances? What if you spontaneously hug all the players in your junior team which has just won its first game? What if you want to comfort an athlete who is

distressed and crying? It is important that policies, guidelines and legislative requirements are applied with a large dose of common sense. There is a difference between an occasional, spontaneous, congratulatory hug instigated by coach or athlete in front of everyone and frequent hugs that linger and are given out of the sight of others. There is a difference between providing constructive criticism on poor performance and yelling abuse and insults. Although most coaches understand this, some have expressed concerns about what they can do and whether they can still touch an athlete.

Behaviour management is really about applying common sense, and understanding what is appropriate behaviour in today's society. If you treat athletes with respect and avoid situations where you could be accused of inappropriate behaviour, you will continue to provide a safe and enjoyable sporting environment and will be in a much better position to protect yourself and the athletes in your care.

Anti-discrimination legislation and state child protection legislation

Child protection legislation currently operating in New South Wales and Queensland makes it mandatory for sporting organisations and individuals involved in sport - as paid employees or volunteers - to meet certain requirements. These requirements also apply to individuals and organisations from outside New South Wales and Queensland. For example, if a sporting organisation sends junior players to New South Wales or Queensland for training camps, competition or other

activities, those travelling with the teams must comply with the New South Wales or Queensland legislative requirements (for example, on police checks).

New South Wales

The New South Wales child protection legislation says that people working with children should:

- sign a prohibited employment declaration to indicate their prohibited employment status
- sign a Working with Children check consent form if they are preferred applicants for paid coaching positions (otherwise they cannot be considered for the position). This allows their organisation to undertake employment screening, including a police check.

A prohibited person is a person convicted of a serious sex offence (an offence involving sexual activity or acts of indecency that is punishable by a prison sentence of 12 months or more if it is committed in New South Wales).

Please note that police checks are not yet mandatory for people in voluntary positions who work with children, although there are plans for this in the near future.

Queensland

If you are a volunteer or a paid employee commencing work after 1 May 2002 and you coach within a 12-month period:

- at least once a week over the course of one month
- at least once a fortnight over the course of two months
- at least once a month over the course of six months you will require a criminal history check and a suitability notice, stating whether you are

suitable for child-related employment.

the policies and guidelines of their sporting organisations

A suitability notice, which states that a person is suitable for child-related employment ('regulated employment'), is valid for two years. A notice which states that a person is not suitable is valid indefinitely. The Queensland Commission for Children and Young People conducts the police checks and assessment, and issues suitability notices. Regulated employment is any paid or voluntary work in a number of areas and includes coaching.

Your obligations as a coach under anti-discrimination legislation are:

- you must not discriminate or harass others on the grounds of race, colour or nationality; sex or gender; sexual or transgender orientation; pregnancy; marital or parental status; religious or political belief; social origin; age; or physical, mental or psychological disability
- you must be sensitive to the way your behaviour is or might be received by others. In assessing whether behaviour constitutes harassment, the intention of the alleged harasser is not the determining factor. Instead, the focus is on the feelings or impressions of the person harassed (on the receiving end of the behaviour) and whether or not the behaviour could reasonably have been expected to be harassing.

Please note that some national sporting bodies have policies that surpass the requirements of statebased legislation to enable a national and consistent approach within the sport. Members should abide by the law of the land, as well as by