

Child Sexual Abuse: *Awareness, Recognition, and Action*

By Karen Terry Perreault, Ph.D

Child sexual abuse is a serious problem that can lead to extensive, irreparable harm to victims. Victims of sexual abuse may suffer from high rates of depression and anxiety; low self-esteem, shame, and self-blame; an inability to trust others, particularly those in positions of authority; and other serious psychological problems. Victims are at an increased risk of developing alcohol and substance abuse problems, eating disorders, self-harming behaviors, and suicidal thoughts. Relationship problems and confusion over sexual identity and orientation are also common effects amongst victims. These psychological, emotional, physical, and behavioral effects can be debilitating to some victims and permeate all aspects of their lives in both the short and long term. For these reasons, it is critical to prevent sexual abuse whenever possible, or respond to it quickly once it is recognized.

SafeSport guidelines provide information about types of abuse, signs that someone is being abused, signs that an adult is behaving inappropriately with a minor, and what to do if you suspect abuse. Here are some key facts to consider.

Who are sexual abusers?

Sexual abusers constitute a heterogeneous group of individuals, meaning that they offend for a variety of reasons. Some are sexual predators with a strong attraction to children. These offenders tend to seek out employment around minors, surround themselves almost exclusively with minors, and employ highly manipulative “grooming” techniques in order to get children to comply with the abuse. Other abusers are primarily attracted to adults, but “regress” to the abuse of minors because of the situation or opportunity to do so.

All sexual abusers, even those who are not sexual predators, may employ grooming techniques to get the child to comply with the abuse. Examples of grooming techniques include:

- Providing the child with gifts and attention, such as tickets to a concert
- Permitting the child to participate in inappropriate behavior, such as drinking alcohol, using drugs or looking at pornography
- Emotional manipulation, such as making the child

feel responsible for the inappropriate behavior and inducing feelings of guilt or shame

- Using language that would be appropriate for an adult relationship, such as the coach loves the child and wants to spend time alone
- Threats, such as suggesting the child will not receive high marks in competition if he/she tells anyone about the abuse or even threatening to harm his or her family

Abusive coaches may be male or female, and may abuse a skater of the same or a different gender. The skater being abused may be young (prepubescent) or may be a teenager. No matter the age, gender, or sexual orientation of the coach or student, it is never acceptable for a coach in a position of authority to begin a sexual relationship with a minor skater.

What to look for: Is there a coach who is spending time alone with a minor? Is there a coach who behaves more like a friend to his or her students than a person of authority? Is the coach texting, emailing, or otherwise communicating with the minor without the oversight of other adults? Does the coach exhibit “boundary violating” behaviors, such as excessive hugging, allowing students to sit on his/her lap, patting the students on the rear end, etc.?

Who may become a victim?

Rates of child sexual abuse are high; approximately one in three girls and one in six boys will be victims of sexual abuse, many before the age of 18. Any person may become the victim of a sexual offense—an adult or a child, male or female, of any race or socioeconomic status. Victimization occurs within families; among friends, acquaintances, and neighbors; within organizations; and, less frequently, between strangers. Sexual abuse is particularly prevalent within institutions where adults hold a position of authority over children, such as in school or sports. What’s important to understand is that abuse usually occurs in private. When an adult is alone with a child, there is an opportunity for abuse to occur.

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A key component of SafeSport guidelines is two-deep leadership, a concept that is encouraged in all youth-oriented organizations these days. It means to minimize the amount of one-on-one interactions between adults and children by ensuring that at least two adults are present at all times with individual minors when off the ice. Though this may not always be possible, it is important to understand that abusers seek out situations in which they are alone with a child. Our goal is to prevent the situations in which abuse can occur.

What to look for:

Children who have been abused may begin to exhibit unusual behaviors or different personality patterns. For example, are they spending less time with their peers, and more time alone or with their coach? Are they suddenly acting out, angry, frustrated, or showing other types of unusual emotions (this is called externalizing their emotions)? Alternatively, are they suddenly quiet, introspective, hesitant to be around others, or committing self-harming behaviors (this is called internalizing their emotions)?

Reporting abuse

Many victims do not report that they are being abused, or they report the abuse years after it occurred. Several factors are commonly associated with the delay in reporting abuse, including the relationship between the victim and the perpetrator; the severity of abuse; the likely consequences of the disclosure; age, developmental, and cognitive variables; and the threats and emotional manipulation made by the perpetrator. Also, boys are less likely to report being abused than girls.

Because of these low levels of reporting, it is absolutely critical that an adult take immediate action and report abuse if it is observed, or even suspected. Do not attempt to evaluate the credibility or validity of abuse allegations as a condition for reporting to U.S. Figure Skating or to appropriate law enforcement. Depending on the type of abuse or misconduct, the behavior should be reported as follows:

1. If there is a violation of Club Code of Conduct—file a complaint at the Club level.
 - A. Follow procedures set forth in club conflict resolution policy
 - B. Report the incident to Club SafeSport Compliance Chair, if appropriate

2. If there is a violation of SafeSport Policies—Report the incident to U.S. Figure Skating by sending a detailed description to safesport@usfigureskating.org and U.S. Figure Skating will take appropriate action by engaging the appropriate committee and process.
3. If observed or suspected physical or sexual abuse may be occurring, contact your local child protective services office or law enforcement agency so the proper professionals can make an assessment—visit www.childwelfare.gov to find out where to call.
4. State laws differ who is a mandatory reporter. Please look up your state laws. Mandatory reporter occupations include health practitioners, teachers, social workers, psychologists, clergy, firefighters, police officers, day camp administrators and youth organization and youth recreation program employees and coaches, among others, as prescribed by state law.

U.S. Figure Skating has zero tolerance for abuse and misconduct. Everyone involved in the sport of figure skating plays a role in creating a healthy environment for our skaters. The SafeSport guidelines we have implemented raise awareness about misconduct, provide tools for education and training, provide guidelines for athlete protection, and outline the reporting process. We encourage all members to be familiar with the SafeSport guidelines and help protect our athletes from harm. ❖

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