
MANAGING BULLYING BETWEEN ATHLETES

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SAFETY CHAMPION SERIES #3

SHELBA WALDRON, DIRECTOR OF MEMBER CLUB EDUCATION AND OUTREACH

CINDY SCHARNS, BRANCH GYMNASTICS, OWNER



USA Gymnastics



ATHLETE RIGHTS

A child has the right to attend school, sports, religious services and social activities free from harassment and fear.

DEFINING BULLYING

Bullying is an intentional behavior that hurts, harms, or humiliates another person or a specific group of people either physically or emotionally, and can occur anywhere including the club, online, or at school.

- There is an existing power imbalance between the person or persons bullying and the target of the bullying
- The one that bullies is either physically, socially, or intellectually stronger than the target
- Bullying can be perpetrated by one person or by a group
- Actions are intended to humiliate and degrade the target
- Unsolicited and unwelcome

BULLYING....THE BASICS.

- All 50 states have a version of a bullying law meant to protect children at school.
- Bullying does not usually stay within the confines of one environment.
- Bullying can occur with any age group, even adults.
 - Bullying is most prevalent and peaks in middle school between the ages of 11 and 14.
 - If bullying occurs in the high school years, it has a higher propensity to involve criminal activity such as assault, stalking, or cyber crime.
- Any person can be bullied in sport. However, those who are LGBTQA+, special needs, or a different body shape for the sport have a higher likelihood of becoming a target.
- Those who bully in sport usually have more social power and longer length of time on team.

IN SPORT, BULLYING MAY LOOK LIKE THE FOLLOWING:

- Making fun of another athlete who may have a hidden disability
- Taunting an athlete who has a different body shape or build that is not traditional to the sport
- Name calling by using identifying traits such as race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, and ethnicity
- Athletes having a party and deliberately leaving out an athlete, while inviting all other athletes on the team
- Spreading rumors with the intent to bring social isolation upon the athlete targeted
- Hiding, harming or destroying property of an athlete such as grips, team jackets, or personal property
- Using social media to spread rumors, humiliate or demean an athlete
- Cornering the athlete in the locker room and threatening violence

The goal:

- To humiliate
- To isolate
- To force a person to quit

BULLYING POWER AND CONTROL

ENTRENCHED IN THE CORE PRINCIPLES OF EMOTIONAL ABUSE

Social Status

- Impacting social status with peers
- utilizing the target to inflict harm on others

Humiliation

- Name calling, discriminatory language
- Forcing the target to debase themselves in public
- Divulge personal information to the masses

Social Isolation

- Deliberately excluding and using it as a way to humiliate

Technology

- Cyber, texting, altering photos

Minimizing, Denying, Blaming

- Shifting responsibility to the victim

Physical Abuse

- Stealing or vandalizing personal items
- Shoving
- Locking a person in or out of rooms

BULLYING VS. AGE-APPROPRIATE CONFLICT

Conflict	Bullying
Equal Power between the athletes	Imbalance of Power
Stories between the two are often similar, with the differences based in the resolution and who started it	Stories between the two are vastly different with one claiming complete innocence or ignorance
Occasional	Ongoing
Friendships remain intact or end without hard feelings	Friendships never existed or long-time friendships ended
Usually not emotionally damaging	Can have serious emotional consequences such as depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation
No desire to quit the sport or change gyms or the desire to quit is short lived.	Behaviors such as wanting to quit, not attend practice, or physical illness are expressed

BULLYING BY AGE

6-8 years

- May begin as “name calling” or teasing by someone who is “not a friend.”
- Difficulty walking away if the group is participating in “group teasing”
- Those targeted most often based solely on identifiable differences
- Usually, short term and doesn’t classify as bullying
- Friendships change rapidly
- Adults often misconstrue conflict for bullying

8-10 years

- Want to please friends or be more like their peers.
- Will have difficulty stepping away.
- Is easily influenced by peer pressure
- Bullying lacks sophistication and coordinated efforts
- Parents are alerted by phrases such as, “They don’t like me,” or “No one talks to me anymore.”
- Quitting is explored

11-13 years

- Cell phones and social media are explored
- Bullying becomes more sophisticated and subtle.
- Efforts within cliques are coordinated
- Power imbalances become more apparent
- Parents and coaches don’t often find out until the bullying has reached peak levels
- Indirect statements harassing in nature present. “This is gay.” “I was only singing the lyrics of the song,”

14-18 years

- Cyberbullying is common
- Will often involve criminal activity such as stalking, stealing, and physical violence
- Sexual, gender or racial harassment are common

CYBERBULLYING

STOPBULLYING.GOV

- Cyberbullying is bullying that takes place over digital devices like cell phones, computers, and tablets.
- Cyberbullying can occur through SMS, Text, and apps, or online in social media, forums, or gaming where people can view, participate in, or share content.
- Cyberbullying includes sending, posting, or sharing negative, harmful, false, or mean content about someone else.
- It can include sharing personal or private information about someone else causing embarrassment or humiliation.
- Some cyberbullying crosses the line into unlawful or criminal behavior.
 - Sexting, cyberstalking, sharing sexually explicit photos, threats, extortion

THE SIGNS OF OF AN ATHLETE BEING BULLIED IN A SPORTS ENVIRONMENT

Not having friends on the team

Reports of cruelty from teammates

Afraid to attend practice or games

Diminishing Team Productivity

A sudden loss of interest

Unexplained injuries that are non sports related

Lost equipment (grips, team jacket, etc.)

Aggressive behavior or temper tantrums at home

Physical symptoms, such as headaches or stomach-aches, trouble sleeping, or a loss of appetite

Signs of anxiety depression, or low self-esteem, like a player saying she's no good at her sport

Athletes appear to be frequently grouped together w/one on the outside

PREVENTING BULLYING ON YOUR TEAM

- Promote expected behaviors among athletes and their parents, and by addressing code of conduct and sportsmanship frequently
- Establish rules of conduct that include:
 - Zero tolerance for cruelty, physical violence, and theft;
 - Expected social media and online behaviors;
 - Bathroom and locker room rules;
 - Rules that govern personal property; and
 - Inclusion policies.
- Ensure that everyone has a copy of the team's code of conduct and anti-bullying policies.
- Promote the club's philosophies regularly through handbooks, newsletters, emails, etc.
- Discuss bullying openly and constructively in team, parent, and staff meetings.
- Ensure that all athletes know they can talk to someone if they are feeling targeted.
- Develop an ethos that encourages everyone to report bullying if they experience or witness it.
- Publicize a safe and confidential procedure for reporting incidents.
- Assure everyone that all incidents will be dealt with promptly and with discretion.

MANAGING BULLYING

- Listen
- Believe
- Contact the parents involved
- Investigate
- Give consequences if necessary
- Be Consistent and fair
- Respond
- Document

Do not use the word “bullying” for every negative action that takes place. Oftentimes it’s age appropriate peer conflict.

INTERVIEW PROCESS...STICK TO THE FACTS

The Target

- Fear of speaking up
- Bewilderment
- Emotional
- Lack Trust
- Shame/Embarrassment
- Fear of being labeled a snitch
- Often give vague or misinformation

The Bully

- Extremely manipulative, will gaslight the interviewer
- Lies
- Will often blame the target/victim
- Bullies use “never” and “always”
- Bullies have a sense of superiority
- Often lacks empathy

EFFECTIVE QUESTIONING

- **What and How...Not Why**
 - "What" and "How" questions are good for a discovery of information. "Why" shuts people down and elicits a response of defensiveness. It implies they did something wrong.
 - "What can you tell me about the events of last Tuesday night?"
- **Avoid Yes/No Questions**
 - Yes and no questions lead to incomplete information and gives a person a reason to say, "I've already answered your question."
- **Use Who, what, where, when, and how questions**
 - "When did you realize your grips were missing?"
 - "How would you like things to be different on the team?"
 - "What do think should happen next?"
 - "How do you feel when you come to practice?"

EFFECTIVE QUESTIONING

- **Ask follow-up questions**
 - What do you mean? Could you explain further?
 - Can you describe to me how your actions will change in the future?
 - What do you think is the best way to fix this problem?
- **Use “Reflective Listening” techniques**
 - Repeating or rephrasing: Listener repeats or substitutes synonyms or phrases and stays close to what the speaker has said.
 - Paraphrasing: Listener makes a restatement in which the speaker’s meaning is inferred
 - Reflection of feeling: Listener emphasizes emotional aspects of communication through feeling statements.
 - “You’re wondering if you can still come back to the team after your suspension.”
 - “It sounds like you are scared of Susie.”

OTHER INTERVIEWING TECHNIQUES

- Avoid making assumptions
- Suspend judgment
- Wait for the answers.
 - Do not lead!
 - Use the power of silence to your benefit
- Always ask follow up questions
 - “I don’t understand. Could you better help me understand?”
- Have water available
 - Water allows for silence and will calm down an anxious child
- Show that you care and listen with empathy
 - Lean in, sit on their level, and make eye contact

Promise discretion and fairness to those involved. Don’t promise freedom from consequences for those involved. You can’t guarantee that.

TALKING WITH THE PARENTS

Document Everything. If it isn't written down it didn't happen.

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- Involve all necessary parties as soon as possible.
 - Direct evidence helps with both sets of parents.
 - “We saw...” “we heard...” “We have been made aware...”
“We have been made aware that your child sent the original text message.”
 - Avoid bringing the parents of the child targeted and the parents of the child bullying together to find a resolution.
 - Suspend judgment
 - Review the Code of Conduct and Anti-Bullying Policy as a part of meetings
 - Keep the conversation focused on the parent’s child and their role in the situation.
“Who said something? How do you know they aren’t lying?”
“What are you going to do to Bobby?”
 - Interview all parties separately and in the same day if possible.
 - Review the possible consequences of coordinating stories.
 - Use “We” to show that you are working as a team

SETTING POLICY

A good policy will have the following elements:

- Prohibiting Statement
- Definition
- Reporting procedures
- Investigation/Inquiries
- Disciplinary actions
- Staff Training requirements
- Parent and athlete training requirements
- Cyberbullying as a separate component

DISCIPLINARY STAGES AND MEASURES

Low

- Signs
 - Possible team “drama” beginning to be talked about
 - Young children more likely to participate in low level bullying
 - Practices are often disrupted with infighting and low productivity
- Response
 - Can be handled by coach through review of code of conduct, lesson on sportsmanship or teambuilding activities
 - Limited negative impact to overall team dynamics

Moderate

- Signs
 - First time brought to the attention of adults
 - Coach or parents start to notice changes in team dynamics
 - Cliques are formed
 - Coach will find they are saying “stop talking” more often
- Response
 - Parents contacted and club management alerted
 - Meeting held with child and parents of those bullying
 - Future expectations discussed
 - Possible limited suspension
 - Cliques disbanded
 - Incident report filed with club

Severe

- Signs
 - More than once, warnings previously given
 - Older kids involved
 - Bullying carried to other environments
 - Negative impact on team dynamics. Fear among teammates evident and athletes considering quitting
 - Obvious signs exhibited such as lost equipment or bruises.
- Response
 - Parents of all parties contacted, and club management directly involved
 - Behavior contract implemented
 - Immediate suspension or termination
 - Mandatory team parent meeting
 - Report to USAG Safe Sport, local authorities or schools
 - Incident report filed with club

RESPONSE GUIDE

Verbal/Emotional	Severity/First Offense	Physical	Severity/First Offense
Poking fun	Low severity	Hitting and slapping during horseplay	Low severity
Casual gossiping	Low severity	Obscene gestures	Moderate
Deliberate exclusion	Low severity	Throwing objects to induce fear	Moderate
Name calling	Low to moderate severity	Using technology with intent to alter photos, spread rumors, lie, or deliberately humiliate	Moderate to High severity
Inappropriate language toward others w/out personal attack	Moderate severity	Throwing object with intent to make contact	High severity
Jokes, innuendos that target race, disability, ethnicity or sexual orientation w/out direct focus	Moderate severity	Locker room bullying that involves harassment in the shower or while changing clothes	High severity
Ethnic or racial slurs	High severity	Hitting and slapping w/intent to hurt	High severity
Comments that target a disability	High severity	Locking in a room, locker, or deliberate isolation	High severity
Comments that target sexual orientation/preference	High severity	Cyber threat	High severity
Verbal threats of violence	High severity	Stalking or cyberstalking	High severity

Contact USAG for High Severity Offenses

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PREVENTION IS THE BEST INTERVENTION

- Regular teambuilding activities that place the children with different partners and in different scenarios help mitigate “clique building” on teams
- Discuss the code of conduct and principles of sportsmanship as a part of the club culture and the beginning of each new year
- Create an athlete buddy program
- Break up cliques
- Give athletes leadership opportunities to lead teambuilding activities, plan parties, celebrate holidays, etc.
- Intervene immediately if you witness or hear name calling, derogatory language, or witness isolation.
- Stop athletes from using phrases that don’t target, but meant to hurt such as, “This is gay” or “That’s retarded.”
- Involve the parents as soon as possible upon learning of a possible bullying situation
- Participate in Bullying Awareness Month in October

FINAL TIPS

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- Bullying prevention measures should be discussed and reviewed on a regular basis with staff, parents, and athletes.
 - Do not allow those who bully to make excuses such as:
 - “They need to lighten up.”
 - “We weren’t being serious.”
 - “I was only joking.”
 - “We were only messing around.”
 - Ensure that everyone understands the seriousness and consequences of bullying.
 - Do not accept bullying as a fact of life. It is not a normal part of growing up.
 - Be aware of individuals that may be vulnerable to bullying such as children with disabilities, athletes who are new to the team, LGBTQIA+ or those perceived as LGBTQIA+.
 - Bullying can happen in the club setting, out of the club setting, or online. Clubs need to set expected behaviors both in and out of the club as it relates to athlete-to-athlete interactions.
 - When bullying is sufficiently serious and based on race/ethnicity, national origin, or religion, it may be considered discriminatory harassment. Please reach out to USA Gymnastics Safe Sport immediately in such cases.



THANK YOU!

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION:

SWALDRON@USAGYM.ORG