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Experts' Recommendations For Coaches To Enhance Youth Sports Safety

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Estimates suggest that 45 million (61%) U.S. children and teens participate in community-based youth sports each year (Noble & Vermillion, 2014; U.S. Census Bureau, 2009). Participation in sports has been associated with a broad array of benefits for children including enhanced self-esteem, educational achievement, and improved physical, social, and emotional health (Sabo & Veliz, 2008; Vella, Cliff, Magee & Okely, 2014). At the same time, involvement in youth sports carries a variety of risks. Research suggests that between 2% and 22% of youth athletes are exposed to some form of abuse as a result of sports participation (Brackenridge, Bishopp, Moussalli, & Tapp, 2008). The U.S. Olympic Committee defines “misconduct in sport” as including bullying, hazing, and harassment, as well as emotional, physical, and sexual forms of harm (Safe Sport, 2018). Additionally, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2017) estimate that more than 2.6 million children are treated in emergency departments each year for sported related injuries. Despite the huge number of children who participate in youth sports each year, there is a paucity of research on this topic and most studies focus on “elite” athletes, rather than children and teens involved in community-based sports.

In community-based sports, parents rely on coaches to ensure the safety of their children from a myriad of concerns (e.g., child sexual abuse, emotional abuse, accidental injury, hazing). While many coaches meet this critical expectation, others fall short, placing children at risk for harm and/or injury. Coaching related risks to youth involved in community-based sports include: inadequate screening and background checks for coaches (Brackenridge, 2002; Parent & Demers, 2011), an overreliance on parents as coaches (McPhail, 2003), poor training and safety education for coaches (Kerr & Sterling, 2008), a lack of adequate team safety policies (Donnelly, Kerr, Heron, & DiCarlo, 2016; Johnson, 2014), and a “win at all cost” team climate that can compromise youth safety (McPherson et al., 2016; Parent & Bannon, 2012).

This study was designed to advance the field’s knowledge of critical “next steps” to enhance community-based youth sports safety by focusing on what coaches could do to ensure youth safety. Phone interviews were conducted with experts who participated in the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children’s “Safe to Compete” youth sports safety summit. Ninety-one percent ($n = 32$) of the experts approached agreed to participate in the project. Respondents represented organizations that provide or coordinate youth sports (e.g., Pop Warner Football, American Youth Soccer Organization), offer support, advocacy, and training (e.g., National Alliance for Youth Sports, Positive Coaching Alliance), and youth safety experts. Findings of this investigation reflect experts’ recommendations for critical next steps in youth sports safety that could be undertaken by coaches. The vast

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majority of suggestions focused on the prevention of child sexual abuse and offered a rich array of practical strategies to enhance youth sports safety.

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Erin McConnell, M.S. works for the US Center for SafeSport, and holds an M.S. in Psychology from Portland State University. Her research has focused on sexual violence and abuse prevention within the contexts of higher education, sports organizations, and youth services. Currently, her work involves the design, implementation, and evaluation of situational prevention-based programming to improve safety outcomes within sports environments.

Miranda Sitney, M.S. is a PhD Candidate in the Applied Psychology Program at Portland State University in Portland, OR. Her research is focused on the experiences of young people who commit sex crimes. Particularly, she is interested in the impact of early parental caregiving experiences for young offenders.

Keith Kaufman, PhD. is a Professor of Psychology at Portland State University (Portland, Oregon) and a national safety consultant. Dr. Kaufman is currently completing a Department of Justice (DOJ) funding project designed to develop a version of his Situational Prevention Approach (SPA) to help prevent sexual violence and other forms of harm to students on campus. He also recently began a DOJ funded project in collaboration with the Center for SafeSport to tailor the SPA for use with U.S. Olympic, Paralympic, and younger elite athletes to enhance their safety.

Aliza Lipman, BA is a student at Portland State University, and holds an B.A. in Psychology from Central Connecticut State University. Previously, her research focused on childhood trauma competency and prevention within multiple state run foster care agencies. Her current research involves sexual violence and abuse prevention.