Do Parents Have the Information They Need to Keep Kids Safe and Prevent Sex Abuse in Youth Sports? An Analysis of Organization Websites

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Abstract

Sexual abuse is a widespread problem in community organizations, including youth sports. Parents do not always have the information they need to safeguard their children involved in sports and often turn to the internet for information. This study explored whether youth sport websites provide parents with information about how children are protected from child sexual abuse. Websites for 120 youth sport organizations were coded for presence/absence of information parents might want to know to protect their child from sexual abuse. As a basis for comparison, information about other potential harms was coded as well. Results revealed that caregivers cannot consistently obtain comprehensive information from these websites about how children will be protected from harm while in youth sports. For example, only 15% offered any information about policies to keep children safe from sexual abuse. Suggestions are made for changing social norms about how youth sport organizations communicate with parents as well as educating caregivers to safeguard their children.

Keywords: *Child sex abuse, youth sports, websites, parental help-seeking*

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Child sexual abuse (CSA) affects 1 in 5 children (Finkelhor et al., 2014) with negative short and long-term consequences for children's health and well-being. It remains a national public health concern (Hailes et al., 2019; Maniglio, 2009), given its association with adverse long-term outcomes including depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, substance misuse, and social dysfunction (Downing et al., 2021; Hillberg et al., 2011). Preventing CSA is a public health priority.

CSA occurs both in the family and in the community. One place where child sexual abuse is perpetrated is in youth sports organizations, where young children spend time away from parental monitoring. The risk of CSA in youth sports is considerable given the millions of children who participate throughout the United States (Wagner et al., 2010). Participation in youth sports can inadvertently create conditions that heighten children's risk of harm, including sexual abuse (Center for Violence Prevention Research, 2025). This is partly due to the intimate nature of the interactions between adult staff and children, long hours of contact, and absence of caregivers. Moreover, the inherent power imbalance between adults and children may inhibit children from voicing discomfort or complaints (Gaedicke et al., 2021). In fact, many aspects of the grooming process and boundary violations characteristic of child sexual abuse fit well within the coach/athlete relationship that develops within youth sport organizations (Assini-Meytin et al., 2025; Brackenridge & Fasting, 2005; Wurtele, 2012).

Over the years, child sexual abuse scandals have roiled several different youth sports organizations. For example, the USA Gymnastics sex scandal brought international attention to this issue. It involved hundreds of female gymnasts, primarily minors, who were sexually assaulted by gym owners and coaches (Barker-Ruchti & Varea, 2024). The U.S Youth Soccer Association agreed to a multi-million-dollar settlement in a case involving a 13-year-old athlete who was sexually abused by a soccer coach who had a prior domestic violence conviction that was undetected by the league, which failed to do a background search (Woolfolk, 2018).

In response to these and related scandals, the Protecting Young Victims from Sexual Abuse and Safe Sport Authorization Act of 2017 (Public Law 115–126) was passed, creating the United States Center for SafeSport. This Center investigates and resolves allegations of abuse throughout the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic movement and requires the national governing bodies of organizations that prepare athletes for the Olympics or Paralympics (for example, USA Gymnastics, USA Soccer) to adhere to specific policies supporting athlete safety. This act was strengthened by the federal Empowering Olympic, Paralympic and Amateur Athletes Act (2020), with provisions calling for increased accountability and reporting. However, only local clubs and organizations that are affiliated with these national governing bodies are obligated to comport with SafeSport standards for training and policies to prevent abuse of athletes under 18 years of age.

Some national youth-serving agencies also responded to the revelations of abuse in the early 2000's by implementing their own policies and standards. Assini-Meytin and colleagues' (2024) research suggests that these efforts seem to be working. They retrospectively examined the prevalence of boundary-violating behavior in affiliates of national organizations that had implemented new policies, compared with those that did not, and found a significantly lower rate of victimization in the organizations with such policies. Of course, all youth sport organizations can develop rules and guidelines to help protect children, such as regulations around staff-youth contact and communication, reporting policies, and ensuring that all staff and volunteers undergo background checks. These can be helpful, despite limits to their effectiveness (Finkelhor, 2009; Leclerc & Wortley, 2015). In the absence of federal mandates for all youth sports, or administrative mandates from a national office, safety practices are not universal.

The onus for protecting children from CSA in youth sports falls primarily on caregivers as they select the youth sport organization for their child (Rudolph et al., 2018). Thus, caregivers need to understand the risks for children participating in youth sports, as well as how to access relevant safety guidelines. Caregivers often rely on information online for advice and guidance (e.g., Allen & Rainie, 2002; Duggan et al., 2015; Dworkin et al., 2013; Lupton et al., 2016). However, there are real concerns about the quality and thoroughness of such information (Wainstein et al., 2006). For example, Lindhout and Reniers (2022) found in their scoping review that transparency in safety-related content is often withheld by organizations. Likewise, MacPherson et al. (2022) found that even organizations dedicated to child protection within youth sports do not always provide comprehensive and easily accessible safety information to the public.

The purpose of the current study was to determine whether youth sport organization websites provide sufficient information about how the organization protects children from CSA. The first research question, therefore, was (1) To what extent do youth sport organization websites offer information related to protecting children from child sexual abuse? As a basis of comparison, we also asked (2) Is information about CSA less common than information about other forms of harm? As a second basis of comparison, we asked (3) Is information about benefits of the activity more common than information about potential harms of the activity?

Method

The method for this study involved searching for information on a sample of websites of youth sport organizations and coding presence/absence for information about four types of potential harm (sexual abuse, physical injury, emotional harm, and infectious disease) as well as information about the potential benefits of the sport. The sample of youth sport organization websites was selected from three cities in New York State and focused on four specific youth sports: ballet, gymnastics, karate, and soccer.

Selection of New York Counties

The most populous city within each of the three most populous counties in New York State was selected. The resulting cities were Brooklyn, Buffalo, and Rochester.

Selection of Sports

Four sports were selected: ballet, gymnastics, karate, and soccer. They were selected because each enables opportunities for adults to groom children and perpetrate CSA through sanctioned physical contact (i.e., corrective touch), proximity to undressed youth (i.e., in changing rooms), and spending time with youth on overnight excursions (i.e., travel teams, competitions). We selected gymnastics because parents might be alerted to the need to protect their children from sexual abuse considering prior scandals in the sport, and the organizations, therefore, might have more information about protecting children from CSA on their websites compared to websites for other youth sports. Also, gymnastics and soccer have the potential to be affiliated with the USA Center for SafeSport. This could result in these websites having more information about CSA than websites for other sports. While some may take exception with our consideration of ballet as a sport, expert consensus exists that ballet requires athleticism comparable to that of other sports (Koutedakis & Jamurtas, 2004; Shaw et al., 2021) and could be inducive to CSA given the potential for sanctioned touch, nudity, and high degree of demand for deference and respect for authority figures.

Selection of Websites

To identify a sample of websites to include in the study, a de-identified search engine was employed. This allowed the search engine to respond to a search query and produce information unaffected by the prior searches on those computers. The template for the search was "SPORT class in CITY" (such as "Karate class in Brooklyn"). The first ten websites on the search results page were selected. Based on the page rankings, these websites represent the most likely ones that parents would find when searching for youth organizations in their city in these sports. Ten websites per city per sport were included, totaling 120 websites in all.

Coding of Websites

A data extraction form was created to code each website for presence/absence of information about protecting children from child sexual abuse in a youth sport. Four subtopics were identified based on the U.S. Center for SafeSport Parent and Guardian Handbook (n.d.). To serve as a basis for comparison with the CSA data, websites were also coded for presence/absence of information on other forms of potential harm that could come to children while engaging in youth sports. As a second basis of comparison websites, were coded for presence/absence of mention of possible benefits of participation in the sport.

Thus, each website was coded for presence/absence of information in the following five categories:

1. Protecting children from sexual abuse (specifically: following SafeSport guidelines, hiring practices involving background checks, monitoring staff/youth contact and communication, and other),
2. Protecting children from physical injury (specifically: injury prevention efforts by staff, training of youth to prevent injuries, injury management, other)
3. Protecting children from emotional harm (specifically: protecting children emotionally, preventing stress, preventing burnout, other),
4. Protecting children from infectious disease (specifically: having a Covid-19 policy, having an infectious disease policy, requiring vaccinations, other) and
5. Benefits of the activities (specifically: enhances fitness, enhances emotional development, enhances social life, is fun, other).

Each website was coded by a lead researcher and one of three research assistants who were blind to the study hypotheses. Inter-rater reliability was established for each coding pair and for each variable, with a minimum value of Cohen's kappa = .75 or higher, except for four variables that had kappas of .63 to .71. To ensure high levels of agreement throughout the coding, all websites were double-coded, and all coding differences were conferenced.

Results

Sexual Abuse Prevention

Table 1 presents the frequency of four types of website content related to protecting children from sex abuse. Only 18 (15%) of the websites mentioned any of these four types of CSA. Seven (5.8%) mentioned an affiliation with SafeSport and 16 (13.3%) mentioned that all staff must have completed a background check. For example, one ballet studio's website stated, "the safety and well-being of our dancers is our highest priority. That's why all members of our faculty and staff undergo comprehensive background checks before joining our team." And a soccer club's website noted, "The afterschool clinics are run by a group of our experienced, qualified, and background-checked coaches." Four websites mentioned having policies to monitor staff-youth communication. One was a soccer organization's website that mentioned a regulation that prohibited youth from riding alone in a car with a staff person and stated that one-on-one meetings between youth and staff must be observable by others. Likewise, one gym's website mentioned that "Gym policies prohibit staff to be alone at any time with a student."

Table 1

Frequency of Website Content Related to Sexual Abuse Prevention (n = 120)

	N	%
Mention SafeSports	07	05.8
Background Checks	16	13.3
Monitoring Staff/Youth Interactions	04	03.3
Other	02	01.7
Any	18	15.0

As a basis of comparison, Table 2 provides information about the frequency of information related to the other forms of potential harm. As can be seen, more than half (n = 71, 59.2%) of the websites provided information to let caregivers know that their children would be physically safe while participating in the sport, such as "We focus on safety, physical health, and mental well-being." Sixty-five websites (54.2%) contained statements that noted that staff were trained in proper use of the equipment, and/or that there were policies to prevent injuries such as "Baggy or stiff clothes are not safe and not allowed." About a fourth of the websites (n = 28, 23.3%) mentioned that children are trained in proper use of equipment to avoid injuries. One ballet studio's website stated that, "Students also participate in pointe seminars with our knowledgeable instructors during which we will cover topics such as pointe shoe preparation, guidance on maintenance, breaking in new shoes, safety, and other important topics to educate our dancers on safe and healthy

pointe habits." Looking at injury management, we found that only 13 (10.8%) websites mentioned this. For example, some soccer websites mentioned having concussion policies.

With respect to protecting children from emotional harm, 57 (47.5%) of the websites were coded as mentioning at least one way that the organization protected children from emotional harm. The most common type of content in this category (n = 51, 42.5%) was information pertaining to having an emotionally safe and nurturing environment. One example was, "We strive to provide a safe, comfortable and welcoming atmosphere." Another example was the following text about the organization's philosophy:

> … to teach traditional karate technique in a respectful, fun manner. Beginners are welcomed and encouraged. Your personal growth in the martials arts is at your pace; all karateka (students) learn within their own comfort zones from certified, caring Senseis.

An example of a specific anti-bullying policy comes from a ballet studio website which included the statement, "Students may be asked to leave class for various reasons including, but not limited to repeated disruption, inattention, or disrespect towards instructors or other students. Bullying or teasing of any kind will not be tolerated." Seventeen (14.2%) websites mentioned how the organizations help reduce stress from the sport on children. The following statement is an example: "Our intramural league focuses on helping players learn to play the game without the added pressure of points and standing table." Preventing youth from getting burned out from the sport was mentioned rarely (n = 3, 2.5%), as were any mentions of protecting children's emotional well-being. These were both coded in the "other" category.

As also can be seen in Table 2, only 18 (15%) of the websites had any mention of how children are protected from infectious disease at the organization. Eleven (9.2%) websites mentioned having a Covid-19 policy, seven (5.8%) either mentioned having a policy around other infectious diseases or included a statement that children should stay home if they have a fever, and only one website mentioned having a vaccination policy. None mentioned anything else related to illness of the children.

Table 2

Frequency of Variables Related to Protecting Children From Physical Harm, Emotional Harm, and Infectious Disease (n = 120)

	N	%
Physical Harm		
Injury prevention	65	54.2
Training youth to prevent injury	28	23.3
Injury management	1	11.7
Other	13	10.8
Any	71	59.2
Emotional Harm		
Protects Youth From Bullying/ Harassment	51	42.5
Stress management	17	14.2
Burnout prevention	04	03.3
Other	03	02.5
Any	57	47.5
Infectious Disease		
COVID policy and practice	11	09.2
Illnesses policy and practice	07	05.8
Vaccination policy and practice	01	00.8
Other	00	00.0
Any	18	15.0

Was Information About CSA Less Common Than Information About Other Types of Harm?

Three McNemar Chi-square tests were conducted to determine whether websites were less likely to have information about child sexual abuse than information about the other three types of harm: physical injury, emotional harm, and infection. Results revealed that content on child sexual abuse prevention was less common (15%) than information about protecting children from physical injury (59%), χ^2 (1, n = 120) = 42.91, p <001, and was less common (15%) than information about protecting children from psychological harm (48%), χ^2 (1, n = 120) = 26.26. p <001. Content on sexual abuse was as common (15%) as content on infectious disease (15%).

Were Gymnastic and Soccer Websites More Likely to Have Information About Protecting Children from CSA and from Other Harm?

Four Pearson χ^2 of independence were conducted, two of which were statistically significant. gymnastic/soccer websites were more likely to have information about protecting children from sexual abuse (28.3%) than ballet/karate websites (1.7%), χ^2 (1, n = 120) = 16.7, p <.001; and gymnastic/soccer websites were also more likely to have information on protecting children from physical injury (70%) than ballet/karate websites (48.3%), χ^2 (1, n = 120) = 5.8, p <.01 There was no statistical difference with respect to emotional harm (53.3% for gymnastic/soccer compared to 41.7% for ballet/karate), χ^2 (1, n = 120) = .20 nor for infectious disease (16.7% for gymnastic/soccer compared to 13.3% for ballet/karate), χ^2 (1, n = 120) = .20, p <.61.

Benefits

Table 3 presents results on the prevalence in websites of information on benefits of the sport for youth participants. Almost all websites (n = 116, 96.7%) promoted the benefits of the sports for children. More than three quarters (n = 92, 76.7%) mentioned that participants will improve their physical fitness through the sport, emphasizing that youth will get fit, and stay healthy. Some statements on the website made a detailed claim such as: "A total body workout, ballet will help you achieve strength, balance, and coordination." Almost all (n = 103, 85.8%) of the websites mentioned that children will benefit emotionally from participating in the sport, gaining attributes such as discipline, focus, self-confidence, and leadership. Over half (n = 72, 60%) mentioned that children will make friends from participating in the sport. An example was the text "developing social skills, making life-long friendships, enhancing teamwork skills, gaining independence and making camp magic memories that last a lifetime." The vast majority (n = 99, 82.5%) promoted the sport as fun. Many (n = 85, 70.8%) mentioned other benefits that did not fit into the existing categories, notably poise, artistry, self-defense, academic achievement, and life skills.

Table 3

Frequency of Variables Related to Benefits (n = 120)

	N	%
Physical fitness	92	76.7
Emotional growth	103	85.8
Socialization and friendships	72	60.0
Fun	99	82.5
Other	85	70.8
Any	116	96.7

A series of McNemar chi-square tests were conducted to determine whether presence of content related to benefits of the sport was more common than information about each of the potential harm types. All four of these tests were statistically significant. Content on benefits was more common (97%) than information about protecting children from physical injury (59%), χ^2 (1, n = 120) = 41.19, p <.001; more common than information about protecting children from psychological harm (97% compared to 48%), χ^2 (1, n = 120) = 55.15, p <.001; more common than information about child sexual abuse (97% compared to 15%), χ^2 (1, n = 120) = 96, p <.001; and more common than information about infectious disease prevention (97% compared to 15%), χ^2 (1, n = 120) = 96, p <.001.

Additionally, while coding the websites, we observed that in many instances the relevant information—when present—was extremely difficult to locate, requiring navigation through multiple links and pages. Often the information was in an unexpected place and would not easily have been found by searching for it. It seems likely that many caregivers would not know how to look for this information and therefore would miss it.

Discussion

This study examined 120 websites from youth sport organizations across three cities in New York State and four types of sports. Each site was assessed for the presence or absence of information related to child sexual abuse. Also coded was information about other types of potential harm as well as information about benefits of the sport. Prior to a discussion of the findings, it is important to note that the data are from only one state. Replication across the country with a broader set of sports as well as other youth activities such as summer camps, faith-based groups, and creative arts organizations would be valuable. It is also important to bear in mind that the findings are not necessarily an indication of what the youth sport organizations are doing, only a reflection of what is on their website. The data speaks to what the organizations make publicly available through their websites.

Not surprisingly, information about benefits of the sport was more common than information about any of the ways that the youth sports protected children from harm, including child sex abuse. These websites were developed from a business model perspective aiming to draw in customers with images of fit, happy, sociable, confident children. Understandably, they might be concerned that including information about potential harm could be perceived as counter to their goal of drawing in customers. The current research supports the notion that youth sport organizations seem to prioritize maintaining a positive public image over transparency around safety, possibly driven by fears that openness about child protection and safety practices might deter families. Like us, Lindhout and Reniers (2022) found that transparency in safety-related content is often withheld by organizations, possibly to keep public confidence high. Similarly, MacPherson et al. (2022) found that even organizations dedicated to child protection frequently fail to make comprehensive, easily accessible information about safety and reporting available to the public.

Few websites provided information about each type of harm. Only 15% mentioned aspects of child sexual abuse prevention. Only about 65% of the websites contained information about injury prevention, about half mentioned keeping children safe emotionally, and 15% mentioned infectious disease prevention. Clearly, there are notable gaps in most of these youth sport websites about key information many caregivers should be able to readily access. It is also important to note that to receive a score of "present=1" rather than a score of "absent=0" the website only needed to contain a minimum of one statement referencing that concept. This means that the topic may be hard to find and may be easily overlooked when perusing the site. Nonetheless, the prevalence of indicators of the relevant content was still low.

Even when using a generous coding system, many websites were found to lack content regarding safety, including child sexual abuse. Future research should examine systematically the barriers to youth sport

organizations providing more content on their websites about how children are protected from harm. Focus groups with key stakeholders within such organizations could shed light on the dilemmas they face in making this information available. The findings could be used to help organizations develop and field-test modifications of their websites to be more transparent about safety concerns. Such modifications could include, for example, having leaders in the field of CSA collaborate on the creation of a youth sport safety guidebook, drawing on the recommendations from the SafeSport Parent Handbook (U.S. Center for SafeSport, n.d.; McKeen et al., 2026). The guide would include information about the prevalence of CSA and other potential harms to children participating in youth sports, the importance of developing safety policies (with examples), and the importance of including the policies on their organization's website. This guidebook could then be disseminated through local professionals and concerned parent advocates to ensure that the information is made available to youth sport organizations on a widespread basis.

Especially notable is the absence of information about child sexual abuse prevention. Only 15% of the websites contained any such information, mostly with comments that staff must be background checked, which in and of itself is not sufficient to protect children (Finkelhor, 2009; McKeen et al., 2026). Mention of any CSA related topic was statistically less frequent than information about physical injury or emotional harm. This lack of information about CSA on websites means that caregivers will need to take it upon themselves to learn the practices and guidelines of the organization. That puts the onus on the caregiver to both know the questions they should be asking and to feel comfortable asking them, which may not always be the case. Some parents may feel reluctant to ask such pointed questions out of a general discomfort related to the topic of child sexual abuse (Albert, 2012; Jerman & Constantine, 2009), which may be compounded by the fear of being labeled difficult by staff which could potentially negatively impact their child's opportunities within the sport.

For two of the topics—child sexual abuse prevention and physical injury prevention—information was more common on gymnastic and soccer websites than on the ballet and karate websites. This may be because the leadership of these organizations knows/believes that caregivers want to be reassured about their children's safety considering highly publicized stories of children being harmed, and/or because of the guidelines put forth by SafeSport. Ideally, other youth sports would be engaging in safety precautions and informing caregivers about them prior to a scandal emerging.

We also informally observed that locating the safety information was quite challenging. This lack of transparency can create consequential barriers to accessibility. Even caregivers who proactively search for information about child protection or are familiar with key terminology may struggle to locate relevant material due to convoluted website design. As a result, they may never encounter important safety information, defeating the purpose of making it publicly available. These challenges raise broader concerns about equity, as caregivers with lower digital literacy or limited time are particularly unlikely to uncover hidden or poorly organized safety regulations.

Implications for Policy

Ideally, all youth sport organizations would implement a set of evidence-based practices that protect children from harm, such as those presented by the Government Accountability Office (GAO, 2015) and the McKeen et al. (2026) report. As Wurtele (2012) pointedly noted, "The United States lacks a comprehensive national plan or act to prevent CSA in general, let alone institutional CSA" (p. 2444). We would like to go further and add that not only should all youth sport organizations be mandated to follow these recommendations, but their websites should include this information and present it clearly (i.e., not buried in an obscure part of the website), so that caregivers will have easy access to it. One way to make this happen would be for insurers and public health licensing entities to require proof of these efforts. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report *Preventing child sexual Abuse within Youth-serving Organizations: Getting Started on Policies and*

Procedures (Saul & Audage, 2007) was considered the gold standard by youth-serving agencies and many of their insurers. Research conducted in the past two decades has added a great deal of new information on what works to promote sexual abuse prevention in youth-serving agencies and sports programs, but the CDC report was still considered the standard, given its status as a federal report. The CDC convened a panel of experts to update their report (McKeen, 2026) and chose Prevent Child Abuse America to act as the dissemination partner. Ideally, this new report will have the same impact as the 2007 report by setting uniform standards. Insurance companies are likely to require organizations to follow these standards to qualify for coverage, as they did for the earlier standards. For example, guidance offered by The Redwoods Group (2026), a major underwriter of insurance for national youth organizations and their affiliates, offers a code of conduct which aligns with the core elements of the 2007 report.

Further, community leaders and youth advocates can use this new resource to advocate for enhanced safety in youth programming, and readers of this article can play an important role. As a professional working in child welfare, your expertise and commitment to child safety can magnify this issue. Start by sharing the McKeen et al. (2026) report with parents and organizations serving youth, urging people to help determine if organizations serving their children address the issues described in this report. Then consider advocating with the government to require proof that youth programs have developed and disseminated safety policies that meet these recommendations as part of the process when seeking a business or health license.

Suggestions for Professionals Working with Families

Three practical suggestions can be made based on these findings. The first is that a parent pamphlet or guide should be created which includes a list of topics related to protecting children's health and safety. This will enable parents to know what to look for when selecting a youth sport organization for their children. The Parent and Guardian Handbook (U.S. Safe Sports) presents a useful starting place for such a list. What is missing is a simplified version in the form of a pamphlet or brief checklist/guide (or app) for caregivers to use when choosing a youth sport organization and/or a coordinated social media campaign to promote this information. Appendix A offers another resource: a script for parents to use when communicating with a youth sport organization about safety topics, based in part on the work of the YMCA (2025). Appendix B offers a sample script for professionals who work with families to initiate a dialogue about the benefits and risks associated with youth sports.

Research should also be conducted to determine what barriers are preventing youth sport organizations from protecting children from harm and from including safety information on their websites. Stakeholder interviews and focus groups would be helpful for identifying the individual, institutional, financial, and logistical challenges. Potential reasons for the lack of information on the websites include absence of actual regulations and guidelines, fear that discussing these topics on the website could deter customers, and lack of awareness that parents would be interested in this type of information. Understanding which obstacles are driving this problem would be a first step in developing approaches to ameliorate it.

Research should also assess the barriers preventing caregivers from interacting directly with youth sport organizations to obtain this information. If all caregivers were aware of the potential risk, understood their role as protectors, knew what information to seek, and were effective in obtaining that information, absence of relevant information on the websites would be less concerning. Surveys of caregivers should be conducted to identify the internal barriers (e.g., awareness, knowledge, efficacy) and external barriers (e.g., organizational climate that welcomes questions about safety protocols). This information could be used to develop targeted interventions to address these barriers. For example, if focus groups with caregivers reveal that they are reluctant to ask about these topics for fear of being perceived as difficult or unlikable, sample scripts could be created to help them navigate

this situation. These scripts could be disseminated through online caregiver resources (Schickler et al., 2022) and by child welfare agencies, particularly to foster parents. (Appendix A presents one possible sample script).

Additionally, efforts could be made to modify social norms. Public education campaigns and social media influencers could portray caregivers who ask about sexual abuse prevention as normative and appropriate rather than weird or difficult. Efforts to change social norms have been successful in the past and could be successful here. A growing body of research has identified effective strategies to challenge prevailing social norms around harsh parenting practices and corporal punishment and to support positive parenting practices globally (e.g., Durrant et al., 2017.)

Ideally, all professionals working directly with families should be familiar with the health and safety concerns related to youth sports as well as their benefits. Mental health professionals, child welfare professionals, and educators should all be able to converse with caregivers about their protective function with respect to CSA and be able to identify specific risks that the caregiver should be concerned about. Providing caregivers with a checklist of potential red flags could be particularly useful for guiding them in their conversations with staff. Furthermore, it could be fruitful to encourage caregivers to talk to their children about appropriate boundaries, red flags, grooming, and appropriate contact and communication with staff. At a broader level, child-serving organizations might consider offering training to their staff on this topic. Child-serving professionals could use their position as local child safety experts to advocate for better health and safety protections for all children in youth sports, particularly if these professionals work for government agencies with the mission of protecting children's well-being. ■

About the Authors



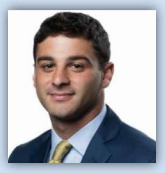
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Appendix A

Sample Email From Caregiver to Youth Sport Administration

The following is a sample of the types of questions a caregiver might ask of a youth sports organization. Questions are best directed towards administration rather than instructors. If possible, sending an email may be an easier way to start this conversation, in case you feel uncomfortable addressing this in person. To ease into things, pick a few of the questions that interest you the most and consider asking others over time, or coaching other parents to ask. If we all work together, we can make this a common, expected step when enrolling a child in any new activity.

"Hi, I'm [your name], my child [child's name] is joining your [team/league/studio/class]. I'm really glad that they'll be participating here, and I'd like to understand your safety policies, especially around preventing bullying, sexual abuse, injury, and illnesses; there's so much of that in the news these days! Could you please take a few minutes to respond to the questions below, and email it back to me at your convenience?

By the way, I'm not asking because I expect problems. I ask these questions of any program my child joins, just to be sure I understand how we can work together to keep kids safe.

Thank you so much!

1. Do you have a written policy or handbook about child protection or information you follow from SafeSport that I can see?
2. Do you have rules or policies about limiting one-on-one situations between adults and kids and between kids themselves?
3. What kind of background checks and screening do you do for instructors, coaches, volunteers, and anyone else who spends time with the kids?
4. What training do coaches, instructors, and staff receive on recognizing and preventing bullying, sexual abuse, grooming, and other boundary violations, and how often do they take it?
5. Is there a code of conduct that spells out what's appropriate and inappropriate—for things like physical contact, private lessons, one-on-one contact and communication between staff and youth, texting, travel, and locker rooms or changing areas?
6. If a parent, coach/instructor, or child has a concern or suspects abuse, how are they supposed to report it, and what happens next?
7. What are your policies about keeping kids home if they are sick in order to avoid infections?
8. What are your policies for keeping kids from getting injured while participating in the activity?
9. How do you keep parents informed about these policies?
10. What can parents do to support your efforts to keep all our kids safe and happy while participating in this activity?

Appendix B

Sample Script For Speaking to Parents About Safety in Youth Sports

1. Does your child currently participate in a youth sport?
   - ☐ No, ask questions 2 and 3
   - ☐ Yes, ask questions 4 to end

2. Would you like to hear about some of the possible benefits of youth participation in sports?
   - ☐ No
   - ☐ Yes, then discuss potential benefits

3. Would you like some assistance in locating a youth sport that would fit your child's and family's needs?
   - ☐ No
   - ☐ Yes. Then discuss how you can assist with this, taking into account the child's age and interests along with the family's concerns regarding costs, location, and schedule.

4. That's great that your child participates in a youth sport. Did you know that some of the benefits include fitness, skill development, pride and self-esteem, discipline and focus, fun, and friendship? Which of these are you hoping your child will experience?
   - ☐ Fitness and physical health
   - ☐ Skill development
   - ☐ Pride and self confidence
   - ☐ Discipline and focus
   - ☐ Fun
   - ☐ Friendship
   - ☐ Other:

5. Were you aware that some children may get injured or harmed while participating in a youth sport?
   - ☐ No
   - ☐ Yes

6. Which of the following types of harm are you worried about for your child?
   - ☐ Physical injury
   - ☐ Bullying by peers or instructors
   - ☐ Sexual abuse or grooming
   - ☐ Infections
   - ☐ Other:

7. Would you like to see a sample of an email you can send to your child's youth sports so you can get more information about how they will protect your child from potential harm?
   - ☐ No
   - ☐ Yes. If so, provide them with the script.