

“SafeSport Has Changed Our Coaching Business Practices”

Content for this article compiled by:

Susi Wehrli-McLaughlin, Malia Arrington, Karen Terry-Perreault, Alex Chang and Heidi DeLio Thibert

It has been about one year since the U.S. Figure Skating SafeSport Handbook was approved by Governing Council. There are several areas that the guidelines in the handbook have facilitated changes in the business practices of figure skating coaches. This article will discuss how coaches can navigate those changes to protect themselves and the athletes they work with.

There are several components of the U.S. Figure Skating SafeSport Handbook that all coaches should be aware of and understand. Coaches can download, print and read the U.S. Figure Skating SafeSport Handbook, by visiting: www.usfigureskating.org/safesport. The handbook has information on the following:

- Policies prohibiting abuse and misconduct
- Education about abuse and awareness training
- Mandatory background screening
- The reporting process
- The response system to reports of abuse
- Monitoring and supervision of the SafeSport Program

U.S. Figure Skating’s Athlete Protection Policy Overview:

An Athlete Protection policy clarifies to all stakeholders that the organization is committed to creating a safe and positive environment for athletes. It also emphasizes and sets forth standards of behavior that clearly outline unacceptable behaviors, minimize opportunities for misconduct, and help to prevent unfounded allegations.

U.S. Figure Skating and PSA’s “Commitment to Safety” Overview:

In the event that a coach, official, director, employee, parent or volunteer observes inappropriate behaviors (i.e., policy violations), suspected physical or sexual abuse or misconduct, it is the personal responsibility of each member to immediately report his or her observations and take the appropriate action stated in applicable U.S. Figure Skating Rules.

U.S. Figure Skating “Supervision of Athletes and Participants” Overview:

This policy describes U.S. Figure Skating’s plan for advising the proper supervision of members and participants during all program activities and to minimize one-on-one interactions between a coach, official, director, employee, parent or volunteer. A plan for proper supervision raises awareness about those activities that pose a high risk for child physical or sexual abuse and other misconduct, as well as ways to minimize one-on-one interactions.

Coaches of all levels need to become familiar with the different expectations for their behavior as coaches of young athletes. Coaches will want to give consideration to some areas that are listed here:

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1. Boundary-Violating Behaviors

Boundary-violating behaviors are actions that are not necessarily criminal, but can still be harmful to minors and may lead to abuse. Examples: Patting a child on the rear end; hugging and kissing; holding hands; helping the skater with placement of a “butt pad”; letting the minor sit on your lap

Behaviors to avoid:

- Spending time alone with a minor
- Becoming the minor’s friend (as opposed to an authority figure)
- Hanging out, IMing/ texting/sharing photos, etc.
- Touching the minor in any way not directly related to achieving a skill

2. Travel Guidelines - Hotel Rooms

The SafeSport handbook addresses the practice of coaches sharing hotel rooms with athletes or participants reducing opportunities for boundary violations.

“Regardless of gender, a coach shall not share a hotel room or other sleeping arrangement with an athlete (unless the coach is the parent, guardian, sibling of that particular athlete)”.

U.S. Figure Skating SafeSport Handbook Section 2: Athlete Protection Policies (pages 16-27)

3. Travel Guidelines - Vehicles

The SafeSport handbook addresses the practice of coaches transporting athletes or participants in their personal vehicles reducing opportunities for boundary violations. Athletes are most vulnerable to misconduct during travel. Travel guidelines direct how minors will be supervised during travel to and from practice and competitions and provide two-deep leadership and minimize one-to-one interactions (page 16). No coach, staff member, or volunteer will engage in travel without the proper safety requirements in place, including valid drivers’ licenses, proper insurance, well-maintained vehicles and compliance with all state laws (page 17). Coaches should avoid transporting athletes in their personal vehicles, but if the coach cannot avoid transporting an athlete, the following should be observed:

- Written and notarized permission from both parents or guardians
- Increased insurance coverage
- Athletes sitting in the back seat with seat belt on at all time
- Companion coach or two athletes (both in the back seat)
- Observe all traffic laws and regulations

U.S. Figure Skating SafeSport Handbook Athlete Protection Policies (page 19)

4. Social Media, Mobile and Electronic Communications Guidelines

The SafeSport handbook addresses appropriate social media, mobile and electronic communication interactions with athletes or participants reducing opportunities for boundary violations.

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“All email and text message content between adults and minors must be non-personal in nature and be for the purpose of communicating information about club/skating-related activities. Emails and text messages from an adult to any minor participant should copy or include a parent.”

- Coaches should avoid the common practice of using social media to communicate with athletes.
- Coaches should not have athletes as “friends” or “follow” athletes.
- Coaches should avoid all sites and pages that may link to inappropriate photos, etc.

U.S. Figure Skating SafeSport Handbook Athlete Protection Policies (page 18)

5. Private Meetings with Athletes

The SafeSport handbook addresses appropriate one-on-one interactions with athletes or participants, and the policy reduces opportunities for boundary violations by describing “Two-Deep Leadership”. In the past, coaches used locker rooms for one-on-one time with athletes during tests and competitions, but this is no longer allowed with following the policy. An individual meeting may be necessary to address an athlete’s concerns, training program, or at an event or competition. Under these circumstances, coaches, staff members and volunteers should observe the following guidelines:

- 1) Any individual meeting should occur when others are present and where interactions can be easily observed. You and the athlete should always be in clear lines of sight.
- 2) Where possible, an individual meeting should take place in a publicly visible and open area, such as the corner of the arena.
- 3) If an individual meeting is to take place in an office or a locker room, the door should remain unlocked and open.
- 4) If a closed-door meeting is necessary at a test session or competition, the coach, staff member and/or volunteer should inform another coach, staff member and/or volunteer and ensure the door remains unlocked.
- 5) All locker rooms should be labeled by intended use, and a coach in the locker rooms is discouraged.

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6. Emotional Abuse: What It Is and What It Isn’t

Definition: Emotional abuse involves a pattern of deliberate, non-contact behavior that has the potential to cause emotional or psychological harm to a participant. These behaviors may include verbal acts, physical acts or acts that deny attention or support. Clarification – a single incident, e.g., a verbal outburst – while it may be inappropriate – does not constitute emotional misconduct, which requires a pattern of harmful behaviors over time.

Examples: Coach telling a skater he/she is not ever going to be good enough, is fat, is ugly, can’t skate as well as (competitor); weighing skaters in a public setting and making derogatory comments.

- Emotional abuse does not include generally accepted and age-appropriate coaching methods of skill enhancement, physical conditioning, motivation, team building, appropriate discipline or improving athletic performance. It should be emphasized that emotional abuse is a pattern of behavior, not a single isolated incident.

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Additional Thoughts

Physical Contact is inherent in skating instruction and training and is acceptable as long as:

- 1) The physical contact takes place in public with clear lines of sight.
- 2) There are no potential for or actual, physical or sexual intimacies during the physical contact.
- 3) The physical contact is for the benefit of the athlete, not to meet an emotional or other need of an adult. (Example: Male pair/dance coach practicing with or teaching lifts to female athletes.)

Coaches Code of Conduct:

All coaches must agree to the U.S. Figure Skating SafeSport “Coaches Code of Ethics, Standards and Conduct” as part of the Coach Compliance process. Coaches should be cognizant that we have a duty to report arrests, convictions, and any change in our status.

Final Thoughts

It is imperative that coaches recognize that there is a fine line between coaching with “tough love” and “bullying”. Coaches should always consider the perception of everything we are doing as coaches. Ask yourselves: (1) How does what I am doing or saying look or sound to others? (2) How could what I am doing or saying be misconstrued by others? Coaches should realize and respect that conversations between coaches and athletes must have boundaries. And most importantly, coaches must understand that coach/athlete sexual relations are wrong, and that is it.

SafeSport Resources

Please send any questions to: safesport@usfigureskating.org, and please find information on the webpage: www.usfigureskating.org/safesport. There coaches will find:

- Complete SafeSport Handbook
- Policies and Guidelines for Athlete Protection
- Codes of Conduct for skaters, parents, coaches, and board members
- Link to register for the USOC SafeSport Video Training
- Club SafeSport Compliance Chair job description
- How to Make a Report – link to state laws
- Monthly USOC SafeSport e-newsletters
- FAQ’s section

There are a multitude of people to provide support for coaches with regard to SafeSport, but here are a few who can answer questions:

- Karen Terry-Perreault: SafeSport Sub-Committee Chair
- Susi Wehrli-McLaughlin: U.S. Figure Skating Staff
- Heidi DeLio Thibert: PSA Staff
- Alex Chang: SafeSport Committee Member
- Patrick O’Neil: SafeSport Committee Member
- Paul Wylie: SafeSport Committee Member