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Decision support to create a “safe environment in sports” for Sports Organizations



PROTECTING CHILDREN IN SPORT: DEVELOPING SAFE AND INCLUSIVE SPORT ORGANIZATIONS





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1. Background

Ensuring the safety of children and young athletes in sports settings is crucial for fostering a healthy and encouraging environment where young talents can thrive. This document outlines the fundamental steps and requirements needed to establish these safe environments, emphasizing the significance of protective measures across physical, psychological, and social aspects of sports activities.

2. Importance of a Safe Environment

Sport has the potential to transform lives and strengthen communities, but it can only achieve this if it prioritizes physical, social, and emotional well-being. However, in recent years, it has become clear that the sports system often needs to catch up in this regard. The intense focus on excellence and winning can sometimes compromise an individual's safety and well-being, leading to severe and lasting repercussions. It is an environment that fosters both physical and emotional well-being, ensuring that children's needs are fully met. Establishing a safe environment for children is a continuous process that requires regular monitoring and adjustment to accommodate their evolving needs and abilities. While an ideal safe environment eliminates all risks, it is challenging to eradicate every potential hazard completely. A supportive emotional environment provides children with adults who offer emotional support, understand their feelings, and show empathy. This creates a sense of safety and security, allowing them to learn, develop, and confidently explore and overcome challenges. Stability is characterized by the predictability and consistency in a child's social, emotional, and physical surroundings. Nurturing involves consistently and sensitively meeting children's physical, emotional, and developmental needs.

A safe environment in sports supports the overall well-being of child athletes, preventing injuries and psychological stress and promoting a sense of social inclusion. For sports managers, maintaining such environments is crucial for the athletes' development and upholding the organization's responsibility, prestige, and good governance.





3. Risk Assessment

Current Situation Analysis: Evaluating the security of sports facilities involves a thorough assessment to identify potential risks and vulnerabilities. There are steps to follow for the excellent evaluation:

3.1. Pre-Evaluation Preparation

Gather Relevant Documents: Collect existing safety policies, emergency plans, incident reports, and maintenance records.

Form an Evaluation Team: Include safety experts, facility managers, coaches, medical personnel, and security professionals.

Define Evaluation Objectives: Clearly outline the goals of the evaluation, such as identifying hazards, assessing compliance, and recommending improvements.

3.2. Conduct a Physical Inspection

Facility Walkthrough: Inspect all facility areas, including playing fields, locker rooms, spectator areas, and entrances/exits. Look for physical hazards such as damaged equipment, poor lighting, inadequate signage, and obstructed pathways.

Safety Equipment Check: Ensure all safety equipment (e.g., fire extinguishers, first aid kits, defibrillators) is present, accessible, and up-to-date.

Security Measures: Evaluate the effectiveness of security systems, including surveillance cameras, access control systems, and alarm systems.

3.3. Review Policies and Procedures

Safety Policies: Assess the comprehensiveness and clarity of safety policies and emergency procedures. Verify that policies are regularly updated and communicated to all stakeholders.

Training Programs: Evaluate the frequency and quality of safety training for staff, coaches, and athletes. Ensure training covers critical areas such as emergency response, injury prevention, and child protection.





3.4. Analyze Incident Data

Incident Reports: Review past incident reports to identify common injuries or safety breaches. Look for patterns or recurring issues that need to be addressed.

Response Effectiveness: Assess how effectively incidents were handled and whether the response protocols were followed.

3.5. Engage Stakeholders

Surveys and Interviews: Conduct surveys and interviews with athletes, coaches, parents, and staff to gather their perspectives on safety and security. Ask about their experiences, concerns, and suggestions for improvement.

Focus Groups: Organize focus groups to facilitate in-depth discussions on safety issues.

4. Identify Risk Assessment

- **Identify Potential Threats:** Consider various threats, including natural disasters, accidents, violence, and health emergencies.
- **Evaluate Vulnerabilities:** Assess the facility's vulnerability to each identified threat, considering location, design, and current security measures.
- **Impact Analysis:** Determine the potential impact of each threat on participants, staff, and the facility itself.
- **Identification of Risks:** List potential risks (physical, psychological, social) without further explanations.

4.1. Physical Risk

4.1.1. Injuries

- Sprains and strains
- Fractures and dislocations
- Concussions and head injuries
- Cuts, bruises, and abrasions
- Overuse injuries (tendinitis, stress fractures)
- Heat-related illnesses (heat stroke, dehydration)
- Cold-related illnesses (hypothermia, frostbite)





4.1.2. Equipment and Facility Hazards

- Faulty or inadequate protective gear
- Poorly maintained or unsafe playing surfaces
- Inadequate lighting
- Lack of safety padding on walls, goalposts, or other structures
- Hazardous or improperly used training equipment

4.1.3. Health Risks

- Exposure to infectious diseases (e.g., MRSA, COVID-19)
- Allergic reactions (e.g., to insect stings, latex, food)
- Asthma attacks triggered by exercise or environmental conditions
- Cardiac events (e.g., sudden cardiac arrest)

4.2. Psychological Risks

4.2.1. Performance Pressure

- Anxiety and stress related to competition
- Fear of failure or letting down teammates, coaches, or parents
- Burnout from overtraining or excessive competition

4.2.2. Mental Health Issues

- Depression and mood disorders
- Eating disorders (e.g., anorexia, bulimia)
- Body image issues
- Substance abuse (e.g., steroids, recreational drugs)

4.2.3. Trauma and Abuse

- Emotional abuse from coaches, parents, or peers
- Verbal harassment and bullying
- Sexual abuse or harassment





4.3. Social Risks

4.3.1. Bullying and Harassment

- Peer bullying within the team or from opponents
- Hazing rituals in sports teams
- Cyberbullying related to sports performance

4.3.2. Social Isolation

- Isolation from non-sporting peers due to time commitments
- Exclusion from social activities outside of the sport
- Lack of support network outside the sports context

4.3.3. Cultural and Identity Issues

- Discrimination based on race, gender, sexual orientation, or disability
- Stereotyping and marginalization within the sports community
- Challenges related to balancing cultural or religious practices with sports participation

4.3.4. Economic and Educational Risks

- Financial strain from costs associated with participation (e.g., equipment, travel, fees)
- Neglect of academic responsibilities due to time dedicated to sports
- Pressure to perform in sports at the expense of long-term educational or career goals

5. Strategy and Action Plan Development Example

Objective Setting: Develop a practical approach to ensuring a safe environment. This approach can be connected to a PCSOS (Preventive, Corrective, and Strategic Operational System) action plan, utilizing its theoretical steps to broaden the scope and enhance examples.





Objective Setting and Prioritization: Increasing physical security, following the defined standards of space, equipment, devices, and props. Maintaining psychological safety during the training process in the club on the relationships between the coach, child, sports team, parents, club management, and "managers," significantly suppressing all forms of sexual harassment of children, coaches, and parents, preventing the use of doping by the actions of coaches and parents and forming and maintaining a healthy social environment, especially in relationships: training in working with the child, team and child, parent and child, responsibility of public media and significant control of the influence of social networks.

Assessment of Current Environment

- **Physical Safety:** Evaluate the facilities, equipment, and infrastructure to ensure they meet safety standards.
- **Emotional and Social Well-being:** Review policies and practices that promote a supportive and inclusive environment. Assess how well the needs of participants are met, including mental health support.
- **Monitoring and Reporting Mechanisms:** Examine existing mechanisms for reporting and addressing safety concerns, including bullying, abuse, and injuries.

Policy Review

- **Safety Policies:** Review existing safety policies and guidelines to determine their effectiveness and adherence to best practices.
- **Training Programs:** Evaluate the availability and quality of training programs for coaches, staff, and volunteers on safety practices and child protection.

Stakeholder Engagement

- **Participants:** Gather feedback from athletes, parents, and coaches about their perceptions of safety and well-being within the sports environment.
- **Experts and Authorities:** Consult with experts in sports safety, healthcare professionals, and governing bodies for insights and recommendations.

Data Collection and Analysis

- **Incident Reports:** Analyze data from injury reports, misconduct allegations, and other incidents to identify patterns and areas for improvement.





- **Surveys and Interviews:** Conduct surveys and interviews with stakeholders to gather qualitative data on their experiences and concerns.

Identification of Key Issues

- **Strengths:** Identify what is working well regarding safety practices and supportive environments.
- **Weaknesses:** Pinpoint areas where the current environment falls short, such as inadequate facilities or lack of mental health resources.
- **Opportunities:** Look for opportunities to enhance safety measures, such as new training programs or partnerships with safety organizations.
- **Threats:** Recognize potential threats to safety, including emerging risks or regulation changes.

Recommendations

- Implement regular safety audits of facilities and equipment.
- Develop comprehensive mental health support programs for athletes.
- Provide mandatory training on child protection and safe sports practices for all staff and volunteers.

By conducting a thorough Situation Analysis, sports organizations can create a strategic approach to ensuring a safe and supportive environment for all participants.

6. Education and Awareness Raising

Training Programs: Discuss the importance of mandatory training programs for coaches, athletes, and managers. One of the essential tasks and steps is to provide required training on child protection and safe sports practices for all staff and volunteers. Mandatory training programs for coaches, athletes, and managers are vital for ensuring safety, promoting a positive environment, enhancing performance, complying with regulations, building trust, fostering continuous improvement, and improving communication. These programs help create a well-rounded, professional, supportive sports environment that benefits everyone involved.

Training ensures that coaches, athletes, and managers are well-versed in safety protocols and procedures, reducing the risk of injuries. This includes knowing how to properly use equipment, understanding the importance of warm-ups and cool-downs, and recognizing signs of overtraining. Also, Training programs on child protection, anti-bullying, and anti-harassment equip coaches and managers with the knowledge to create a safe and respectful environment. They learn to recognize and address inappropriate behavior, ensuring that all athletes feel secure and valued. Diversity and inclusion training helps coaches and managers create an inclusive environment that





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respects and celebrates differences in race, gender, sexual orientation, and ability. This promotes a positive team culture where everyone feels welcome and supported.

Parents are more likely to trust and enroll their children in programs where coaches and managers are certified and well-trained. This confidence is built on the assurance that their children are in a safe and supportive environment. Athletes are more likely to respect and follow the guidance of coaches and managers who demonstrate professionalism and expertise through ongoing training and education.

Awareness Campaigns: Provide examples of initiatives emphasizing the importance of a safe environment, such as incentive applications, seminars, etc. Here are some suggestions for education and raising awareness;

- **SafeSport Program:** The U.S. Center for SafeSport offers a comprehensive program with education and training on preventing abuse, harassment, and bullying in sports. It provides resources and a reporting mechanism for misconduct.
- **Certification Programs:** Implement mandatory safety certification programs for coaches, trainers, and staff. Organizations like the National Athletic Trainers' Association (NATA) offer sports safety and emergency care certifications.
- **Regular Training:** Conduct workshops and training sessions on first aid, CPR, concussion management, and child protection.
- **Mental Health Resources:** Provide access to mental health professionals and create programs focused on the psychological well-being of athletes. This can include stress management workshops, counseling services, and mental health awareness campaigns.
- **Promote Balance:** Encourage a balanced approach to sports, academics, and personal life to prevent burnout and promote overall well-being.
- **Zero Tolerance Policies:** Implement and enforce strict anti-bullying and anti-harassment policies. Make it clear that abuse or discrimination will not be tolerated.
- **Inclusion Programs:** Promote inclusivity and diversity within sports teams. This can include initiatives to support underrepresented groups and foster a culture of respect and acceptance.
- **Parental Involvement:** Engage parents in the safety process by providing them with education on recognizing signs of abuse, stress, and injury. Please encourage them to support a positive sports environment.
- **Community Partnerships:** Collaborate with local health and safety organizations to bring additional resources and expertise into the sports environment.



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- **Facility Inspections:** Conduct regular safety audits and inspections of sports facilities to identify and address potential hazards.
- **Equipment Checks:** Ensure all sports equipment is regularly inspected and maintained to meet safety standards.
- **Emergency Plans:** Develop and regularly update emergency response plans for various scenarios, including medical emergencies, natural disasters, and security threats.
- **Drills and Simulations:** Conduct regular drills and simulations to ensure that all staff and athletes are prepared to respond effectively in an emergency.
- **Awareness Campaigns:** Launch campaigns to raise awareness about the importance of safety in sports. This can include posters, social media campaigns, and informational brochures.
- **Resource Libraries:** Create a library of safety resources, including guidelines, best practices, and educational materials, accessible to all stakeholders.
- **Anonymous Reporting:** Establish anonymous reporting mechanisms for athletes, parents, and staff to report safety concerns or incidents of abuse without fear of retaliation.
- **Regular Feedback:** Encourage regular feedback from athletes and parents on safety practices and concerns and use this feedback to make continuous improvements.
- **Safety Awards:** Implement a recognition program that rewards teams, coaches, and athletes who demonstrate exceptional commitment to maintaining a safe and supportive environment.
- **Highlight Success Stories:** Share success stories and best practices in safety to inspire others and emphasize the importance of these efforts.

By implementing these initiatives, sports organizations can create a culture that prioritizes the safety and well-being of all participants, fostering a more positive and secure environment for everyone involved.

7. Resource Identification and Allocation

- **Human Resources:** Coaches, trainers, medical staff, volunteers, and mental health professionals.
- **Financial Resources:** Budget allocations, grants, sponsorships, and fundraising.
- **Material Resources:** Safety equipment, facilities, training materials, and technology.
- **Information Resources:** Guidelines, research, best practices, and expert advice.



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Effectively utilizing resources to create and maintain a safe sports environment involves strategic planning, implementation, and continuous evaluation. Here's a comprehensive guide on how to achieve this:



8. Conclusion

To create a safe environment for children in youth sports, a comprehensive approach is needed that addresses their physical, emotional, and social well-being. By preventing abuse, ensuring a safe environment, and promoting inclusivity and overall well-being, we can establish a nurturing space for children to thrive in their sports. Implementing training programs that educate athletes on behavior and discrimination can help reduce instances of bias and bullying. Equipping children with this knowledge empowers them to contribute to a more inclusive sporting environment. Regular maintenance of sports equipment and facilities can significantly lower the risk of injuries, a responsibility that sports organizations must consistently uphold. Good air quality during sports activities is essential, whether indoors or outdoors. Minimizing exposure to secondhand smoke, cleaning chemicals, and pesticides is crucial for maintaining a healthy environment. Enforcing strict policies that define appropriate physical contact between adults and athletes is vital to ensuring all interactions are in the child's best interest, reducing the risk of abuse or harassment.