



GUIDELINES FOR ADULTS INTERACTING WITH CHILDREN IN SPORT

INTRODUCTION

Sport offers incredible experiences and opportunities for children. These experiences are integral to communities and enhancing child development. Positive experiences are tied to healthy relationships between athletes and coaches, as well as to safe environments where there are clearly established guidelines for professional boundaries between adults and children. As such, the purpose of these guidelines is to establish a common understanding of expectations for adults interacting with children in sport, and a sense of safety for those who need to bring forward any concerns of misconduct towards children.

For the purpose of this document “a coach or adult” refers to any person working, volunteering or otherwise interacting with children in sport. “Children” refers to anyone under 18 years old.

This document does not address every situation nor is it meant to be an exhaustive list of acceptable or unacceptable conduct. It is meant to provide a framework within sport in which individuals are expected to exercise common sense and good judgement when interacting with children.

THE COACH AND ATHLETE RELATIONSHIP

Generally, coaches are in a position of trust, and it’s through professional boundaries that this foundation of trust between coaches and athletes is built. If boundaries are broken, that pillar of the relationship crumbles. The coach and athlete relationship is also characterized by a power imbalance in favour of the coach. Athletes are taught to respect and listen to their coaches, and they are dependent upon the coach’s knowledge and training to further develop their skills.

Both trust and power can be used to breach the coach-athlete relationship, and often this happens through boundary violations, which occur when the adult places their needs above the needs of the child and gains personally or professionally at the child’s expense. The responsibility is always with the adult to establish and maintain appropriate boundaries with children.

AGE OF PROTECTION IN CANADA

The age of protection (also called the age of consent) is the age at which a young person can legally consent to sexual activity. The age of protection in Canada is generally 16 years old, but the Criminal Code increases that age to 18 in the context of certain relationships. If the child is:

Under 12 years old	No person can engage in sexual activity with the child under any circumstance.
12 or 13 years old	The age difference must be LESS THAN 2 years AND the relative positions of the parties must be such that a child is able to give consent.*
14 or 15 years old	The age difference must be LESS THAN 5 years AND the relative positions of the parties must be such that a child is able to give consent.*
16 or 17 years old	The relative positions of the parties must be such that a child is able to give consent.*

* For all children aged 12-17: If the other person is in a position of trust or authority over the child (e.g., a coach, teacher, etc.), the child is dependent on the other person or the relationship is exploitative of the child, the child is NOT able to give consent, making sexual activity in the context of such relationships illegal. **In these situations, only a person aged 18 or older is capable of consent.** The increased age takes into account the inherent vulnerability of the child and is meant to protect the child in situations that involve a power or other imbalance.

APPROPRIATE/INAPPROPRIATE BEHAVIOUR

Examples of Appropriate Behaviour:

- Interactions with athletes are goal-oriented
- Interactions with athletes are outcome focused
- Supportive language, tone and attitude towards others
- Model professional physical and emotional boundaries (know the line)
- Responsive to athlete's needs and not engaging with the athlete to meet the adult's needs
- Engaging with athlete in a manner that would be seen by a reasonable observer as maintaining reasonable boundaries
- Keeping practices open to observation by parents (transparent interactions)
- Communication with children (including electronic) is transparent and accountable and tied to job description and professional qualifications

Examples of Inappropriate Behaviour:

- Sexualized attention
- Humiliating or intimidating children
- Inappropriate touching of children (e.g., massaging, stroking, caressing, roughhousing, tickling)
- Confiding or sharing overly personal information with a child (e.g., sharing financial or relationship problems)
- Asking children to keep secrets
- Treating child as an "adult" under guise of maturity
- Creating an emotional dependency and isolating the athlete from other teammates/ staff/parents (e.g. pitting athlete against other teammates and/or against other athletic team staff)
- Electronic communication with athletes that is personal and not directly tied to coaching duties
- Communication that is excessive, not tied to work duties or athlete goals
- Pictures taken with personal devices or in change rooms
- Giving athlete inappropriate gifts

STANDARD OF MEASURE FOR MAINTAINING APPROPRIATE BOUNDARIES

All interactions and activities with children should be (including electronic communication):

- Transparent
- In response to meeting the child's needs
- Accountable
- Reflect a duty of care and protection
- Tied to coaching/volunteer duties

PARENTS AND COACHES PLAY A ROLE

It can be difficult to respond to a situation where you notice a coach and athlete relationship that appears inappropriate. Reporting inappropriate behaviour creates accountability so proper action can be taken and expectations can be re-established. Parents or coaches who have concerns should speak with that coach's supervisor.

Parents and coaches should also have regular age-appropriate conversations with children about personal safety and boundary-breaking behaviour. Some topics to talk with children about are the qualities of healthy relationships, importance of personal boundaries, and how to get help/where to bring concerns. For this information and more, visit: kidsintheknow.ca/safetysheets.

If you are concerned about a sexual image that has been shared, visit Cybertip.ca. This site has information for teens and adults. For more information on reporting inappropriate conduct and child sexual abuse visit commit2kids.ca/safesport.

Source: Canada Soccer Guide to Safety

https://commit2kids.ca/pdfs/C2K_CoachingAssocCanada_Interacting_en.pdf