



Guide to Child Physical Abuse

As a coach or volunteer, you often spend more time with an athlete than most other people. This means that you have the unique opportunity to notice when they are not themselves, when their behaviors are abnormal or even when they might be experiencing harm apart from the swim team.

Specifically, in swimwear, athletes' bodies are more exposed than while wearing clothing. As a coach or volunteer you may be in a position to see signs of physical abuse that isn't visible to other adults the athlete interacts with regularly, such as their teachers. Because of this, it is important for you to be aware of what to look for and what you should do if you see potential signs of physical abuse.

What is physical abuse?

The legal definition of child physical abuse will vary based upon your jurisdiction. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention defines physical abuse as "the intentional use of physical force that can result in physical injury." (For information on state laws, go to www.childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/laws-policies/state/).

Who can be physically abused?

Anyone. Child physical abuse knows no boundaries. Children of any age, from all types of families, race, gender, ethnicity and socioeconomic background are at risk.

What are signs of child physical abuse?

A child's behavior or emotional state is not a direct indication of whether abuse has occurred. The best way to know is if they tell you. When working with athletes, you may notice bruises, cuts, burns, fractures, lacerations, abrasions, patterns of injury like fingertips or shapes that do not match the explanation etc. on their bodies. These types of markings could be evidence of physical abuse, but not always.

Accidental injuries are more likely to occur to the shins, on the skin over the bony projections of the hips and spine, on the lower arms, on their foreheads and under the chin (Veith, 2014). Inflicted injuries occur more frequently on the upper arms, the trunk of the body, the upper anterior legs, the sides of the face, ears, neck, genitalia, and buttocks (Alexander, MD & Giardino, MD)

Indicators that may assist you in knowing if one of your athletes has been physically abused include, without limitation:

- Injuries that do not fit the explanation given to you by your athlete or their parent/guardian.
- Frequent absence from or lateness to practice or team activities without a credible reason.
- Repeated physical injuries that are attributed to the child being clumsy or accident-prone.
- Continual marks that seem legitimate at first but do not add up after repeated injuries and excuses.

What should you do if you suspect an athlete is, or has been, physically abused?

As a person who spends a lot of time with these children, a great way to begin is to talk with the athlete. Start by checking in with them. Ask open-ended questions and do not assume that abuse is occurring. There could be reasons for why they are acting a certain way or for what you might be seeing on their body. There could be conditions that the athlete has that make them more vulnerable to broken bones or bruises. Ask the athlete how they were hurt and ask those open-ended questions as a follow up to see if there are any inconsistencies. Many kids will not tell you actually what happened so building that safe relationship is best.

If the athlete discloses physical abuse, you **must** report the abuse to local law enforcement and/or the child protection agency where the athlete lives. If you have a reasonable suspicion that a child is being abused, REPORT. The only consequence is for not reporting.

For support on how to make a report go to www.childwelfare.gov/topics/responding/reporting/how/.