



GROOMING AND SIGNS OF ABUSE

Clubs and coaches can take steps that will help prevent sexual abuse. One current prevention technique is understanding, watching for and interrupting predatory tactics, such as “grooming.”

Grooming

Abusers can use a subtle and gradual process known as grooming on children and their families. Grooming is a systematic process typically done over weeks, months or years to slowly lure and manipulate children into abuse.

There is no “checklist” that can be used to identify an offender. However, there are red flags that can help clubs and coaches recognize predatory behaviors that may lead to abuse. Common grooming techniques can include the following:

-  Befriending the youngster and their family to slowly gain trust.
-  Giving gifts, money, trips, and/or performing special favors for youngster.
-  Promoting the notion that the relationship with the boy or girl is special.
-  Encouraging harmless secrets, laying the foundation for future sexual secrets.
-  Taking pictures/video of the child.
-  Communicating with the boy or girl excessively; texting, emailing or calling.
-  Desensitizing the child through nonsexual touching, “accidental” touching of privates and/or walking in on bathroom or dressing time.
-  Testing a child’s boundaries by using inappropriate language and/or telling dirty jokes.
-  Playing body contact games with children; tickling, backrubs or wrestling.
-  Making alcohol/drugs available to the youth.
-  Introducing pornography to initiate sexual interest or normalize the behavior.
-  Offering to babysit, including overnight trips or sleepovers.

Individual behaviors may occur that can seem like grooming without being part of a predatory process. They certainly

require attention, but do not necessarily mean the person is abusive. It is important to understand these red flags so that gymnastics professionals can closely observe such individuals and, when needed, intervene to disrupt and/or report abuse in an effort to protect the athlete.

Signs of Abuse

In addition to understanding grooming, watching for signs of abuse can help distinguish between a proper coach-athlete relationship and predatory behavior.

Physical signs of sexual abuse are usually not observable (especially to adults other than parents, guardians and health professionals), but may include pain, injury, bleeding, discharge or disease in the private parts and/or mouth.

Behavioral and emotional signs are typically more evident and can include:

- Sudden withdrawal from close ties.
- Disinterest or sudden inability to concentrate.
- Uncharacteristically aggressive or disruptive behavior.
- Sudden change in eating habits; drastic weight loss or gain.
- Marked fear or reluctance to be at a certain place, or alone with a certain person.
- Repeated health complaints, e.g., stomach aches, headaches.
- Depression, lethargy and weepiness.
- Noticeable change in dress; may include baggy, dark clothing.
- Interest in or knowledge of sexual matters beyond the boy’s or girl’s years.
- Using sexual language or acting out sexually.
- Touching other kids sexually.

Follow up if you see such signs, especially multiple signs.

Training coaches and staff to recognize grooming techniques and signs of abuse is a critical step in abuse prevention. That awareness can then be turned into action:

1. **empower** coaches and staff to speak up and not to dismiss questionable interactions or behavior, and
2. promptly and thoroughly **follow up** on any issues raised.

Q. WHAT CAN I DO?

- Learn about child sexual abuse, grooming techniques, signs of abuse and reporting procedures.
- Review your policies and procedures to determine whether they prohibit or discourage grooming opportunities.
- Follow-up on any report of suspicious behaviors.