As coaches, sports scientists, and trainers, our core objective is often considered to be preparing athletes to achieve their athletic potential and reach sporting success. But that is only half of the whole. Our role also encompasses being a teacher, a mentor, a counsellor, and protectors of the overall health and integrity of athletes.

Worldwide research and anecdotal evidence tell us that harassment and abuse have and continue to occur within sport, across all countries and all sports disciplines - with elite athletes being more at risk. Sport for many athletes may provide their only safe space, however, for some athletes abuse can happen inside of sport.

As key members of an athlete’s entourage involved in the development of an athlete, you can play a crucial role in preventing harassment and abuse from happening in your team, as well as recognise, identify and report when an athlete is in need of help or support.

This is why the IOC has created this factsheet – to help you understand what constitutes harassment and abuse, explain some of the common signs and symptoms, and offer you a guide in what you can do to help.

In becoming coaches we accept a duty of care to help athletes become the very best they can be. That means empowering and protecting them in very sense of the word.”

Sir Clive Woodward, OBE,
IOC Athletes’ Entourage Commission member
and Rugby World Cup Winning Coach

What is Harassment and Abuse in Sport?

Harassment and abuse can be expressed in five forms which may occur in combination or in isolation. These forms of abuse are defined here as:

**Psychological Abuse** means any unwelcome act including confinement, isolation, verbal, assault, humiliation, intimidation, infantilisation, or any other treatment which may diminish the sense of identity, dignity, and self-worth.

**Sexual Harassment** means any unwanted and unwelcome conduct of a sexual nature, whether verbal, non-verbal or physical. Sexual harassment can take the form of sexual abuse.

**Sexual Abuse** means any conduct of a sexual nature, whether non-contact, contact or penetrative, where consent is coerced/manipulated or is not or cannot be given.

**Neglect** means the failure of a coach or another person with a duty of care towards the Athlete to provide a minimum level of care to the Athlete, which is causing harm, allowing harm to be caused, or creating an imminent danger of harm.

**Physical Abuse** means any deliberate and unwelcome act that causes physical trauma or injury, this includes things such as inappropriate training loads, forced doping, training whilst in pain, punching, etc.
Improving understanding and awareness of harassment and abuse in sport has been identified as one of the most effective mechanisms to prevent abuse from happening. In many cases, athletes (and especially young athletes) are not aware of what constitutes harassment and abuse which results in smaller chances of reporting. There are educational programs on Olympic.org and Athlete365 which can help educate athletes and youth athletes on how to recognize harassment and abuse and where they can go to report it.

During the Olympic and Youth Olympic Games, a #SAFESPORT booth is present offering interactive educational materials and resources. The IOC Safeguarding Officer is also present on-site. Team staff should encourage all athletes and entourage members to visit the #SAFESPORT booth and participate in the educational resources available.

The cultural context of harassment and abuse is rooted in discrimination based on power differentials across a range of social and personal factors (Figure 1). Anyone can be a victim of harassment and abuse just as anyone can be a perpetrator, including performance staff and athletes themselves.

Experiences of harassment and abuse can have long-term and potentially devastating consequences for athletes. These can manifest as physical and/or psychological symptoms which impact health, well-being and performance. Some of these impacts are listed in Figure 1.

Figure 1. IOC Prevention of Harassment and Abuse Toolkit, 2017
## Best Practices DO’s and DONT’s

### DO’s
- Do remain open and observe environments both at home and during team trips
- Do develop relationships with athletes based on openness, trust and respect
- Do ensure you and your athletes have signed codes of conduct
- Do know organisational safeguarding procedures and actively seek out safeguarding education and information
- Do foster supportive environments for the safety of athletes’ mental health
- Do encourage open practice to be observed by parents/family
- Do praise and encourage athletes for positive performance rather than humiliate them for negative performance
- Do minimise touching of athletes outside of normal technique training instructions (appropriate interactions: high-fives, fist bumps, handshakes, side to side hugs)

### DONT’s
- Don’t over-train athletes in order to ‘toughen them up’ or use physical exercise as punishment
- Don’t force athletes to compete when injured or ill
- Don’t invite athletes to your home or vehicles without a guardian present
- Don’t accept responsibility of athlete supervision outside of club or sport related activities
- Don’t disrespect athlete privacy in situations such as changing rooms and showers; non-athlete members should also protect their own privacy

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75% of young athletes in organized sports experienced psychological/emotional abuse

(Stafford A, et al.)
Recognising Signs and Symptoms

If coaches, trainers and team sports scientists are to bring out the best performance in training and competition, measures and education are needed in order to understand and identify signs of harassment and abuse.

Likewise, it is crucial for these performance stakeholders to adopt best practice solutions to ensure they are not facilitating malpractice which can manifest into harassment and abuse.

(Parent & Hlimi, 2012)

2-8% of children in sport are victims of sexual abuse.

Signs that an athlete may need further help are:

- Fatigue/decreased energy
- Weight loss/weight gain
- Bullying of peers
- Change in mood (sad, irritable)
- Loss of interest/anhedonia
- Decreased/lack of concentration
- Sudden drop in performance
- Acting out behaviours/sudden change of attitude
- Frequent/unexplained injuries (bruises, scratches, fractures, bites, cuts, burns, etc.)
- Fear of going home or seeing parents/fear of participating in sports

What to do if you witness or suspect abuse

If you suspect an athlete may need support or may be suffering from harassment and abuse, or if you witness something yourself, it is vital that you report it swiftly, confidentially and via the appropriate channels. Witnessing something and not saying anything can give the impression that the behaviour witnessed is acceptable and may put up another barrier in stopping people from seeking help – this is called the bystander effect.

Remember, the onus is not always on the athlete to report – this may be an extremely difficult thing for them to do. Reporting your suspicions may not lead to a full investigation, but it may start to build a file which forms a part of a bigger picture and identifies a significant concern.
For those who are suffering from abuse, speaking about it may be a terrifying prospect. This fear, coupled with the fear of repercussions, are only two of the reasons why abuse is often underreported. As coaches, trainers and sports scientists, the culture that you foster in your team can go a long way in building a trusted environment which supports help seeking.

If an athlete does come forward with concerns, it is important to know what to do. Here is a quick guide to help you:

**Take the time:** Treat all suspicions or disclosures seriously.

**Well-being:** Ensure that the complainant does not require medical attention and know where to direct them if they do.

**Act:** Know who to go to in case you suspect harassment or abuse. Is there a safeguarding process in place? Or speak directly to your line manager. *Remember: deal with complaints promptly, sensitively and confidentially.*

**Do not pre-judge:** Maintain a calm attitude. Do not pre-judge the situation.

**Jot down a few notes:** This will make it easier for you to ensure the information is correctly passed on. Try to use their own words.

**Don’t make promises that you cannot keep:** Note that you will do everything that you can.

**Confidentiality:** Keep the complaint confidential except to report to the Safeguarding Officer/your director, etc.

**Report to the police:** If you feel in danger, suspect criminal action if there is immediate risk of harm, or if the case involves a minor.

For further information, please go to the [Athlete365 Safe Sport](https://www.athlete365.org) page where you will find:

- The IOC Athlete Safeguarding Toolkit
- The IOC Consensus Statement Harassment and Abuse in Sport (2016)
- Educational initiatives on safeguarding in sport
- And many other useful tools and resources.