

Kids on Thin Ice

By Lynn Loar, Ph.D., LCSW

As a kid, I initially didn't like skating. It didn't come easily to me, and I had ill-fitting skates, my parents having followed the disastrous but all-too-common advice of buying skates large enough for me to grow into. I stuck with it because I adored my skating teacher. After a while, I began noticing kindred spirits, other kids who skated for a variety of reasons besides the enjoyment of skating. It gave some kids something structured and disciplined to do in otherwise chaotic lives. It gave other kids a safe and supervised activity with a caring and competent adult clearly in charge, and it gave kids from the most troubled families an alternative to the abuse, neglect or alcoholism at home. These kids were able to count on a responsible adult and be part of a group with a common interest, getting from the coach and core students stability and continuity, ongoing relationships and purposeful activity, in a safe, respectful atmosphere.

Skating coaches must keep in mind that child abuse and neglect are unfortunately common occurrences, and that troubled children may seek refuge in an all-encompassing activity like skating. The hard work and focus that skating requires and the attentive one-on-one relationship between pupil and coach may appeal greatly to children at risk.

Responsible coaches care about the well-being of their students off the ice as well as on and should know how to get assistance for an abused or neglected child. Although few athletic coaches are aware of it, they are mandated reporters of suspected child abuse and neglect. The law requires teachers, day care providers, youth recreation program staff (which includes skating and other athletic coaches), health and mental health providers, among others, to alert the appropriate protective agency (child protective services, police or sheriff) if they reasonably suspect the abuse or neglect of a child (legally defined as anybody under 18 years of age). Because people who work in responsible positions with children are mandated by law to report abuse or neglect, they have absolute immunity from suit when reporting. Additionally, the identity of the reporter may not be given to the child's family except by court order.

Despite the immunity and confidentiality afforded mandated reporters, people are often reluctant to report suspected child abuse or neglect for a number of reasons. Here are a few commonly voiced concerns:

1. What if I'm wrong? Won't the children be removed and put into foster care? Making a report lets the protective agency know a responsible adult is worried about the safety of a child for a specific reason. The report triggers an assessment by a social worker trained in evaluating allegations of abuse and neglect. What follows depends on what the social worker can substantiate. Few children are removed from their homes and only in the most serious cases. Most of the children who are removed stay with relatives. Only a few children end up in foster care, and most foster homes (despite media coverage to the contrary) are pretty good.
2. Don't parents have a right to rear their children as they see fit? Parents have a great deal of discretion in child rearing, but this discretion stops short of willfully endangering, injuring or neglecting minors. Children are entitled to personal safety as well as food, shelter, clothing, basic medical care and supervision.
3. What if the parent finds out I made the report? Although every practical attempt is made to keep the identity of the reporter confidential, parents do sometimes guess correctly who made the report.

If you are worried about retaliation or your safety, you must ask yourself how safe the child is in this person's care. Add your concerns about retaliation and safety to the information you report.

4. What if all I have is hearsay? You should report when you are reasonably suspicious. Child abuse and neglect most commonly occur at home in private when nobody is looking. Eyewitness information is rare. Remember also that a child may confide in you the woes of another child. If it sounds serious, report it. The investigating social worker will assess and sort out the second- and third-hand information received.

What Responsible Coaches and Arena Managers Should Do

Contact your local child abuse council, child protective or other social service agency for a brief presentation on the problem, reporting responsibilities and local resources. Ask the speaker to bring a supply of child abuse reporting forms (each state has a slightly different one) and handouts, booklets, lists of emergency numbers and local resources. Post the lists on the bulletin board in the arena. Just doing that will let troubled children know it's OK to talk to somebody at the rink about the problem.

If you suspect abuse or neglect, phone the Child Protective Services agency (CPS) in the child's county of residence. These and other emergency numbers are listed in the emergency/government/services sections of the phone book. As a mandated reporter (a person required by law to report), you will also need to fill out the state form and mail it to CPS within a limited time, typically 36 hours from the time of the phone call.

Employers of mandated reporters are required to inform employees of the mandate, have them sign a statement saying they agree to comply with the reporting law, and keep the signed statement in each employee's personnel file. Sample forms are usually available in publications created by your state Department of Social Services or Office of Child Abuse Prevention.

Learn more through national, state and local agencies.

National resources:

- National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect (NCCAN); 800-394-3366; www.calib.com/nccanch
- Childhelp USA's 24-hour hotline has hotline counselors and can provide local referrals; 800-4-A-Child (800-422-4453); www.childhelpusa.org
- National Coalition Against Domestic Violence (NCADV); (303) 839-1852; www.ncadv.org

State Resources:

State Department of Social Services

County Resources:

- Child Protective Services
- Child Abuse Councils
- Parental Stress Hotlines
- Other social service agencies

Above all, create a positive and enjoyable learning experience for your skaters in a safe setting supervised by responsible adults. Be prepared. Learn who to contact and how to make a report. If a child seems troubled, or you are worried, ask the child how things are going. Since most families urge children not to share dirty linen in public, you may need to ask several times before the child will open up to you. Also ask the child what he/she would do to get help in an emergency. Make sure the plan is practical. Above all, let the child know you care!

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