

MEDIA RELEASE

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Safeguarding children in sports a team effort – expert

Prioritising children’s mental and physical safety and wellbeing while participating in organised sports should be the number one goal, according to an Australian Catholic University safeguarding expert.

Following recent media coverage of fighting among spectators on the sidelines of a junior suburban basketball game, Douglas Russell, who has compiled five top tips to safeguard children, said it was an opportune time to reflect on children’s safety and wellbeing in organised sport.

Mr Russell, a senior research officer with ACU’s Institute of Child Protection Studies, said sport should be a place of fun, growth, and teamwork, but when adults behaved poorly, fear and anxiety replaced excitement among young participants.

“Respect and fairness start with the adults on the sidelines,” he said.

“Children watch and learn from the way adults behave. When parents argue with referees, coaches, or other supporters, they send a message that anger wins over respect.

“Referees, regardless of age, deserve to be treated with fairness. Appropriate conduct means accepting decisions, speaking calmly, and showing good sporting behaviour.”

Mr Russell called on sporting bodies and families to ensure young people’s physical and mental health was also prioritised and to understand and accept children’s limitations while simultaneously supporting them to achieve their goals and enjoy their chosen activity.

“Schools, coaches, parents, and athletes themselves should work together to ensure that a strong balance between high performance and physical and mental safety is met,” he said.

He said greater efforts were also needed to ensure respectful behaviours between young athletes and to prevent abuse in children’s sport, with a recent European study showing a prevalence of up to 20 per cent for touching sexual abuse and 35 per cent for non-touching sexual abuse.

“It’s important for clubs and teams to not only have robust policies and procedures about safeguarding and codes of conduct, but also to equip parents and athletes with the confidence to speak up if they see something inappropriate or want to discuss safety concerns,” he said.

“Many of the standard risks apply in sport and are often actually more prevalent such as adults and coaches holding power and using this power inappropriately. Close physical contact is also a risk factor in many sports as is travel to and from competitions or training and the risks related to adults being alone with young people.”

Mr Russell compiled a list of five tips for families to help keep their children safe while participating in organised sports:

1. **Stay Involved and Observant:** Attend training (if allowed), watch for changes in behaviour, and be aware of interactions. If training is “closed” make sure you ask your child their impressions afterwards.

2. **Educate Your Child on Boundaries:** Teach them about appropriate behaviour and encourage open communication.
3. **Know the Policies:** Ensure the club has safeguarding policies and proper screening for staff.
4. **Encourage Open Communication:** Make sure your child feels safe reporting any concerns.
5. **Recognize Warning Signs:** Watch for favouritism, secrecy, or unsupervised one-on-one time.

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