

Protecting young athletes from abusive coaches – Let's get it right

February 22 2019, by David Telles-Langdon



Credit: Pixabay from Pexels

The federal government has announced new initiatives aimed at keeping young athletes safe from abuse and harassment. The announcement by

Minister of Sport Kirsty Duncan follows a [CBC investigation](#) that revealed more than 200 coaches have been convicted of sexual offences against 600 victims under the age of 18 in the past 20 years.

"No athlete or child should ever experience abuse and my heart breaks for those that have suffered," said Duncan after announcing the government would work with the Coaching Association of Canada [to develop a national code of conduct](#). The government will also create a new secretariat to develop a gender equity strategy in the hope that having more women coaches will lead to greater safety.

These new moves follow an announcement in 2018 that made [national sporting funding contingent on organizations having mandatory training and reporting mechanisms, among other rules](#).

If we truly want to address the issue of [coach](#) abuse of [young athletes](#), we need to look critically and realistically at the different risks young people face in different sporting contexts.

In [amateur sports](#), I believe two things are needed: support for parents in educating their children about the grooming techniques of predatory coaches, and a simple and expedient independent reporting mechanism.

Efforts to date to keep young people safe

Ideas that the [federal government](#) is now raising follow earlier reform attempts.

On the heels of public awareness of abuse perpetrated by [convicted sex offender and former junior hockey coach Graham James](#), a federal advisory panel was convened in early 2000 to address concerns.

After a working group [released its report](#), criminal record checks have

been required every four years in order for [coach certification](#) through the Coaching Association of Canada to be current. An educational component about making ethical decisions was also added to the association's certification program.

Coaching certification doesn't always happen in grassroots amateur sport. However, a rigorous screening process for coaches working with minors came into place, including criminal record checks and what's known as a "vulnerable sector check" that [verifies if a person has a pardon for sexual offences](#).

Additional programs were [also developed](#), including the [Responsible Coaching Movement](#), [True Sport](#) and [Respect in Sport](#). In Manitoba, the provincial government has partnered with Sport Manitoba to run the latter program to help [coaches, parents and bystanders identify and deal with abuse, neglect, harassment and bullying in sport](#).

Yet other suggestions were never taken up. For example, in 2008, kinesiology and physical education researchers Gretchen A. Kerr and Ashley E. Stirling recommended a [federal government agency should provide broad information for parents and organizations, as well as "mechanisms for reporting, processes of investigation and standardized consequences."](#)

Will online education stop abusers?

I agree with many physical education researchers that it's important for governments to provide [protection for athletes with human, material and financial resources](#).

But through my professional and academic coaching experience, and as a parent in athletic communities, it's clear to me some of the directions we are taking with education are wrong.

Additional education isn't going to prevent predators from preying on children. It may simply provide them with knowledge to circumvent screening.

My doctoral research analyzed how [professional career coaches made ethical decisions in an attempt to develop a model for moral reasoning](#). I didn't look specifically at sexual abuse, but I interviewed seven high-level coaches who discussed a range of power and boundary issues they were familiar with.

Through this, and also based on anecdotal evidence from conversations with some victims, I believe sexual predators know what they're doing is wrong.

For the tiny percentage who may actually not see their actions as harmful, a brief online course won't change their misguided perception.

I also teach sport ethics at the University of Winnipeg. Even addressing boundaries at what seems to be the most basic level requires people talking to each other. This is difficult stuff to talk about.

It could be the case that more intensive education like this might prevent particular forms of exploitation and inappropriate behaviour—for example, by challenging understandings of power, sexual consent or sexual harassment.

But successful coaching requires intimate knowledge about a person in order to prescribe training and elicit a peak performance. Predators in any profession can inappropriately exploit this knowledge and groom potential victims.

Requiring all parent volunteer coaches to follow online training I think is redundant and adds unnecessary cost and time to decent coaches.

Where education could be particularly helpful is with supporting parents in educating their children about the dangers of predatory coaches.

The problem with police checks

Additional screening is also sometimes floated as a route to safer sport.

But there are several problems with police checks. Most obviously, this measure does nothing to prevent people from coaching with the intent or risk of abusing children who have no records. People with criminal records don't get into coaching.

In 2012, [Alix Krahn](#) (now a coach and Ph.D. student at York University) and I wrote an article for Coach Plan, a newsletter of the Coaching Association of Canada. We questioned the value of police record checks for coaches and asked what more could be done if that money was spent elsewhere to improve safety.

By requiring police checks, we also exclude people with convictions for crimes such as tax evasion that don't put children at risk or impact coaching ability. Police record checks only indicate a criminal record, not the reason for the criminal conviction.

As with additional moral education, extra requirements for screening may simply turn away good volunteer coaches, making it more difficult to deliver grassroots sport.

A new approach

The solution is better-informed parents and athletes and a clear, open, expedient and supportive reporting structure.

Kim Shore, a gymnastic parent and Gymnastics Canada director at large, discussed with CBC [the importance and the difficulty discussing sexual abuse in sport](#) with her 11-year-old daughter in an effort to ensure early intervention should anything occur.

But [resources for parents](#) are in short supply.

In search of swift political action, we should not obscure the different contexts of sport. Being alone in a hotel with a [coach](#) at an Olympic event is a far cry from little league baseball where parents supervise everything.

As new codes of conduct are proposed at various levels of sport, further research will be needed to understand the particular and exact cases where abusers have wreaked harm in sport and in individual lives to ensure the solutions we propose will be genuinely helpful.

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