

Athletic Programs in Independent Schools: Minimizing the Risks

The number of students injured during school athletics has seen a significant increase during the past decade. According to Public Health Canada, playing or training for a sport is a major cause of injury for both boys and girls. Unfortunately, injuries arising from sporting activities are the 3rd most common cause of hospitalization for young Canadians¹. Many of these injuries occur on playgrounds or during school athletic programs.

In a 2009 memo to its member schools, the Alberta School's Athletic Association (ASAA) wrote, "The ASAA strongly recommends that, at minimum, every high school rugby team in Alberta have at least one individual who is coaching or assisting with the school rugby team take the *Safe Rugby* clinics...." Further on, addressing the issue of what teams Grade 9 students can play on, the memo states, "Any liability or insurance issues related to Grade 9 participation is the responsibility of the school and [its] respective board."²

The above highlights the key challenges that your school faces: namely, to safeguard your students and protect your school from the risks of both injury and litigation.

A comprehensive risk management plan

While an athletic program is integral to a well-rounded education, physical activity and sports, by their very nature, include inherent risks and the potential for injury. Whether it is a contact sport like football, soccer, basketball and hockey... track and field or gymnastics activities...or a swim program, there is no way to eliminate the risks of injury completely. There are, however, ways to reduce the risks and the first step is to develop a comprehensive Risk Management Plan. Your Plan should cover all aspects of your school's athletic program and include:

- guidelines for engaging athletic program staff
- protocols for volunteers
- steps to ensure that facilities and equipment are appropriate and well maintained
- procedures for a student athlete screening program
- rules to govern healthy adult-student relationships
- guidelines for retaining third party service providers
- a clearly documented Emergency Action Plan
- a best practices checklist for each sport

The following outlines some of the points that should be included in your Risk Management Plan:

Athletic program staff

Coaches and trainers are responsible for student safety. They should have the expertise required so that activities can take place without undue risk of injury. When hiring, it's important to ensure that coaches:

- are trained to provide proper instruction in each sport
- are trained to work with school-age children
- have appropriate certificates in first aid/CPR
- can evaluate athletes for injury
- are able to foster good sportsmanship and teamwork

The role of volunteers

Parents—and other community members—often participate in school athletic programs as volunteer coaches, referees and supervisors. Volunteers may also accompany school teams on overnight trips, acting as chaperones. In whatever capacity they participate, all athletic program volunteers should:

- have adequate knowledge of the rules and regulations of the sport
- be able to recognize hazards and potential risks
- maintain respectful relationships with students
- have some training in first aid/CPR

Generally speaking, if your school has a robust volunteer program, you should consider holding volunteer orientation sessions and distributing a Volunteer Handbook that outlines your school's policies, guidelines and expectations. With respect to athletic programs and overnight trips: these are considered to be high-risk volunteer activity and it is advisable to undertake formal screening and reference checks for volunteers.

In most public school systems, these procedures are not an option. For example, schools within the Toronto District School Board are mandated as follows:

Community members who wish to volunteer must, like all Toronto District School Board employees, complete a Police Reference Check (which will include a vulnerable sector screening) and be cleared before they can tutor/mentor in any TDSB location or participate in activities with our students. School Principals will provide support with starting the Police Reference Check procedures³.

While this is a delicate issue, it is a necessary part of your efforts to protect your students and your school, and parents will surely recognize it as such.

Equipment and facilities

A safe physical environment helps avoid health hazards and injuries. That's why it's important to conduct regular inspections and practice preventative maintenance. This applies to athletic equipment, playing fields, indoor and outdoor track facilities, pools, pool decks and diving boards, tennis and squash courts, climbing walls, and locker rooms. Among other things, you should:

- optimize the safety of all equipment and facilities
- ensure that equipment is CSA approved
- inspect playing fields prior to use and repair any hazards prior to the game
- consider using an outside company to examine and assess your school property, including playing facilities and sports equipment
- keep records of maintenance and safety checks, as well as warranty information, for all equipment

A 2008 Fact Sheet produced by the Public Health Agency of Canada and titled 'Injury and Physical Trauma among Canadian Youth' states that high academic achievement is linked to lower rates of injury and that students with a positive attitude towards school report fewer serious injuries².

Athlete screening program

At the beginning of the school year (or season), each student should submit a medical form completed by the family doctor. The form should include general health information as well as information about past sports injuries and any symptoms indicating cardiac abnormalities—a leading cause of death among young athletes. A physical assessment of each student will help:

- identify students who face potential medical risks as athletes
- allow coaches and parents to amend/modify at-risk students' physical activities
- help athletic staff recommend ability-appropriate activities

Coach-student relationships

As teachers, mentors and role models, coaches often play a very significant and positive role in the lives of student athletes. To help ensure healthy coach-student relationships, it is important to establish a formal policy that governs appropriate behaviour—a "code of conduct" by which all coaches, assistants and volunteers must abide. It's also important to communicate this policy to students and parents. In light of the heightened awareness of sexual harassment in society today, it becomes imperative for those in athletic settings to become knowledgeable about what types of behavior constitute sexual harassment and to be educated about healthy and positive ways for coaches, athletic directors, and athletes to interact⁴. Among other things, coaches (and all other adults who interact with student athletes), must:

- maintain respectful and appropriate boundaries when interacting with students
- avoid being alone with a student in such places as equipment storage rooms or locker rooms
- avoid situations that could be misinterpreted, inviting rumour and speculation
- be aware of the potential of cyber bullying and 'reputational' harm

Engaging third party providers

Whether you engage a third party to use their facilities and/or their staff (for example, a community swimming pool or pool staff) or contract with a third party to lead a trip (skiing, white water rafting, etc.), your best chance to mitigate risk is to work with a well respected, specialist in each area. However, no matter how experienced a third party may be, it is still up to your school to:

- make sure that the organization's staff and instructors are appropriately qualified and certified
- verify that the organization consistently reviews its operations and safety procedures
- determine they have the best possible equipment and that it is frequently tested and well maintained

You want to be sure that your service provider has identified the hazards created by the sports activity, evaluated the risks and determined the adequacy of existing safety precautions, and implemented measures to correct areas of concern. Since third party service providers will be working with young people, background or police checks are also necessary.

Third parties should have adequate liability insurance and hold your institution harmless in the event of an accident. Whenever possible, your school should be added as an additional insured to the third party's policy for the services rendered.

Emergency Action Plan

An Emergency Action Plan is central to effective risk management. Your plan should ensure that:

- coaches, assistants and volunteers have first aid/CPR training
- first aid kits are readily accessible at every activity
- a list of emergency numbers is posted in various locations
- if you have a swimming pool on your premises, lifesaving equipment is stored in a visible location and in close proximity to the pool
- an injured student should not return to the sport until the injury has healed properly
- all head injuries should be cleared by a physician prior to resuming the activity
- 911 is called immediately if the injury appears to be severe or spinal cord related and that no attempt is made to move the student

Best practices for each sport

To safeguard your students and to limit your school's liability exposure, a risk management checklist that documents all the necessary precautions and protocols should be developed for each activity.

For **team sports** like hockey, basketball and football, best practices should include:

- ensuring students have proper equipment, clothing and protective gear
- training all students on the rules of the game
- teaching students what is acceptable contact and communicating the potentially severe injuries resulting from unacceptable contact
- inspecting playing surfaces and repairing hazards prior to use
- providing supervision *before, during* and *after* each game to prevent physical altercations among students (a school can be held liable should an injury occur and an insufficient level of supervision determined)

For **track and field**, best practices should include:

- checking that equipment is properly anchored and set-up
- restricting the number of students using the area at any given time
- ensuring a 'one student at a time' limit for jumping and landing activities

For **swimming and pool safety**, best practices should include:

- having a certified lifeguard/s to watch students in and around the pool
- following prescribed student to lifeguard ratios
- restricting access to an onsite pool unless an activity is scheduled
- ensuring that all participants have been screened for health and level of competence

Conclusion

While injury statistics can be frightening, it's important to remember that risks can be minimized. It's also important to remember that an athletic program and sports teams generate a wonderful community spirit within a school. By having a Risk Management Program and by including sports education in the curriculum, students will be able to connect the dots between knowledge, safety and injury prevention. Most importantly, by participating in athletic programs, they will learn invaluable life lessons: teamwork, positive competition, conflict resolution, respect and fair play.

For information about hazardous and extreme sports, please download the Ecclesiastical Bulletin entitled '**Hazardous Sports: Exciting and Risky**'

Sources

¹ Public Health Agency of Canada: Child and Youth Injury Review 2009 Edition

²Public Health Agency of Canada Injury and Physical Trauma among Canadian Youth <http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/dca-dea/7-18yrs-ans/injury-blessures-eng.php>

³Toronto District School Board www.tdsb.on.ca [retrieved August 27,2010]

⁴Sexual Harassment in Athletic Settings http://www.education.com/reference/article/Ref_Sexual_Harassment/ [retrieved August 12, 2010]

Some Additional Resources

Public Health Agency of Canada: <http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/index-eng.php>

The Coaching Association of Canada (CAC)—is a not-for-profit amateur sport organization: www.coach.ca

Safe Kids Canada—the national injury prevention program of The Hospital for Sick Children: www.safekidscanada.ca

Ontario Physical and Health Education Association (OPHEA)—a not-for-profit organization dedicated to developing programs and services that support healthy active schools and communities: <http://www.ophea.net/>

School Sports Newfoundland and Labrador <http://www.schoolsportsnl.ca>

Ontario Injury Prevention Resource Centre (OIPRC)—operated by SMARTRISK, a national charity dedicated to preventing injuries, focusing mainly on youth: www.oninjuryresources.ca.

Canadian Standards Association: www.csa.ca

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