

# Playing It Safe With Youth Sports

By Michael Gurtler

Youth sports programming may vary greatly, but there are two commonalities: children and volunteers. We must understand how to manage these two areas to effectively manage these programs in terms of safety and risk. We have to play it safe.

Risk management doesn't take a crystal ball. It does just take common sense and some time to step back and think. It is important to take a realistic approach to managing risks and to develop practical strategies that can easily be implemented.

We know that accidents and incidents are going to pop up, but other times they can be prevented. We can better assess the risks involved by thoroughly evaluating what we're doing at the Y. This article cannot list all the risks involved with youth sports programs, but I can share some simple techniques to follow and common problems to look out for. Not every Y will have a single person that works to manage its risks, but every Y has staff that can effectively do so if they are encouraged to think about how to play it safe.

## THE RULES

It is important to establish and then follow the rules whenever we play a game. This makes things fair and leads to better participation by all. Managing a sports program is no different. We need to ask ourselves what are the rules and how do we follow them?

First of all, are there any governing bodies that have pre-established guidelines or generally recognized procedures

for what we are doing? Does Y-USA or some governing body have standards for us to follow? Knowing and understanding these rules can help us to manage a safe and enjoyable program that follows sound procedures.

## COMMON SENSE RULES

There are also common sense rules like inspecting the field before we play, knowing what rules to follow when a thunderstorm approaches, what the emergency procedures are, what we do when the lights go out in the pool, and who to contact if someone gets hurt.

Do we have a use agreement for the facility if it is not Y-owned, and does it spell out other guidelines and responsibilities? These things should be in writing so they can consistently and effectively be communicated to everyone involved.

YMCAs will generally rely on volunteers to actually deliver the program because youth sports programs are typically so large and budgeted to keep costs down. It is important that program directors ensure their volunteers are well trained and understand all the rules of the game. Knowing the rules before we play can help prevent problems or at least help prepare us to deal with them properly.

Many common injuries can be prevented by ensuring that youth participants are properly equipped for the sport they're playing. Obviously we do not need to have kids wear helmets for swim team, but it isn't a bad idea for baseball, football, hockey, and other sports. Protective equipment should be supplied or mandatory for participation in many sports in order to prevent, eye, mouth, and head injuries. Program leaders should follow commonly recognized standards for their sport and use common sense.

## INSPECT EQUIPMENT

Team and game equipment should be inspected regularly to ensure it is in safe working order in addition to personal protective equipment. These reviews, checks, or inspections should be documented. If a serious injury does occur, it is always a good idea to take a picture of the area and equipment to be kept with the accident report documents.

Some common problems to watch out for are unsecured soccer goals, loose or inadequate padding, uneven surfaces, and poorly lit areas. Identifying hazards is not enough though; issues need to be effectively dealt with in a timely manner. The worse thing is to have known about a hazardous situation and not have corrected it. If the roof is leaking in the gym, do something about it. Do not wait until someone slips and injures himself or herself.

Picking your team is extremely important. No one wants to be on a losing team. But, we're all on the losing team if children are hurt. Therefore it is important to pick our staff team wisely.

Staff can be employees and/or volunteers. Be thorough when it comes to selecting them. Follow your YMCA's procedures. They should include an application, interview, phone reference, and background checks. This



Michael Gurtler is Assistant Director of Risk Management, YMCA Services Corporation. He is a member of AYP Chapter 5. Email: [mikegurtler@adelphia.net](mailto:mikegurtler@adelphia.net).

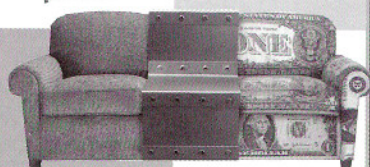


# Your 1-Stop Furniture Shop!

Institutional Furnishings  
with the Look & Feel of Home.



**TOUGH  
STUFF®**



Beautiful Durable Affordable

800-969-4100

www.furnitureconcepts.com



*Managing risk, as in all things YMCA, is important in youth sports.*

staff is interacting with children entrusted to our care. We have the responsibility to ensure that the staff is the best we can get and that they will be of good character.

Don't fall into the last minute recruiting trap and try to cut corners on screening. When we cut corners, problems follow. Who is the last person picked for your staff team? Was he or she as thoroughly screened as the first person picked? Screening is part of Child Abuse Prevention and we have to make sure we are doing everything we can. The Y-USA Child Abuse Preventing program includes very good resources for staff screening.

## AGE-APPROPRIATE LEVELS

How about youth teams? Are we dividing the programs into age-appropriate levels? Are developmental milestones and skills being considered? Does our Program Director make up the teams and are they evenly matched? Other issues to be aware of are gender related such as male coaches with female teams. What about traveling team issues such as

transportation and overnight accommodations?

Preparing your program leaders is terribly important, whether you call it training camp, preseason, or orientation. No one should be expected to lead a program without some level of training. This training should minimally include general staff safety, emergency procedures, and child abuse prevention. It also may include first aid and CPR certification. The more training and experience you can provide to your leaders, the better.

Some sports require certification level training in order to be the leader or coach. It is also a good idea to have your leaders trained in sports leadership,

**‘KNOWING THE RULES  
BEFORE WE PLAY CAN HELP  
PREVENT PROBLEMS OR AT  
LEAST HELP PREPARE US TO  
DEAL WITH THEM  
PROPERLY.’**

behavior management, and problem solving. Parents and players also should be informed of all the expectations, their roles, and the rules.

One of the best examples I ever saw of a training program was at a youth basketball kick-off day. The entire family was involved and everyone — coaches, parents and kids — were thoroughly oriented in a day-long series of workshops, videos and games. The best part was that it didn't really feel like a day of training. A little bit of planning and common sense goes a long way.

So you've set the rules, picked your team, equipped everyone, and have your game plan arranged. Now it's time to let the games begin. Remember to provide supervision, ongoing support and ensure your policies are being followed. Your program will not only be successful, but with proper preparation and attention to managing risks involved, you will be making sure everyone is playing it safe. **P**