

## ERADICATING BULLYING

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***“Coaches have to watch for what they don’t want to see and listen to what they don’t want to hear.”***

– Coach John Madden, Football

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**Preview** – Coaches must know the signs of harassment and act on it immediately.

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*“I can’t believe Mikey slugged Bobby; it was just some good natured trash talking going on.”*

– Coach to an assistant

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Early in my coaching career, I let little things slide with players. I quickly learned this was wrong. Failing to act led to a bigger headache, as parent involvement came and I had to explain my hesitancy.

A fine line exists between good-natured ribbing and intimidating tactics. At the youth sports level, small intimidating acts often start as a fun thing. People believe it’s just “*kids being kids*.” Harmless actions may begin with knocking off players’ hats or snickering. But it can get uglier with someone pulling another player’s shorts down and making fun of others. Players laugh and seem to think it’s amusing, so coaches believe everything is OK. What you may not know is that the player being taunted may not be laughing inside. The seemingly fun acts turn into bullying – aggressive behavior that means to intimidate. The bully wants to exert control over another.

Just as serious an issue in sports is hazing – rituals that initiate players to the team in some way. The consequences of bullying and hazing are psychological and emotional confusion. Those offensive actions can depress the victims for a long time.

Hazing, bullying, and harassment of any sort has no place in sports, at any level. You need to be able to recognize that what might seem like fun to some is offensive and hurtful to others. When coaches do nothing, things can escalate quickly. You must stop harassment at the initial sign of it no matter how innocuous it seems. If you’re not sure about questionable interactions, you should act on the side of caution and end them. When parents get wind of an issue, lawyers and a coaching nightmare may follow.

Following are suggestions to stop harassment in its tracks.

### **Coaches Should:**

- Never bully players, either. Players will follow a coach’s lead, and if they see adults do it, they will act the same.
- Tell parents they should be careful of what they tell their children. With or without realizing it, some parents encourage behavior that leads to harassment. When parents give their child instructions like “*Take no bull from anyone*” and “*Show them how tough you are,*” it may result in alarming incidents.

- Institute a no-harassment rule to everyone at the opening parent gathering. Inform parents that any sign of threatening player-to-player behavior is unacceptable. You should advise parents to relay this message to their kids.
- Encourage team members to come to the coaches if another person bothers them in any way. A subtle sign of harassment is small talk when players are out of the coach's hearing range. Any report of players picking on others is worth investigating.
- Have a policy of keeping words to self, no swearing, and no offensive talk about body parts.
- Institute these guidelines:
  - Hands-off others.
  - No cutting in lines.
  - No laughing at other players' play or skill level.
  - No trash talking.
- Watch for and discourage cliques. Small groups may exclude others and be another subtle sign of player mistreatment.
- Watch for and disallow any signs of an initiation ritual, even when it seems like harmless behavior. Once players believe it's OK, initiations can lead to distasteful acts the next time.
- Talk to athletes whose demeanor changes to find out if anything is bothering them. Individual conversations are always necessary if you notice behavior changes.
- Show appreciation for all and talk to teams with consideration, too.
- Talk to the team often about the importance of valuing teammates and opposing teams.

### **Final Thoughts**

It bears repeating; coaches must never dismiss offensive actions as *kids just being kids*.

Coaches must follow up on any accusations, even in cases where the accused is the child of a close friend, one of the best players, or a coach's child.

Stopping bullies and hazing at the lower levels will limit them at the upper levels.