

ATTENTION, PARENTS!

COMMITMENT TO PERSONAL SAFETY: UNDERSTANDING THE GROOMING PROCESS

by Rosemary Wooden Webb and Jennifer Wooden Mitchell,
Co-Presidents, Child Lures Prevention, education partner of USA Gymnastics

USA Gymnastics is proud to launch the We Care Campaign specifically designed to educate and support parents in the prevention of child sexual misconduct. Visit usagym.org/WeCare to learn more about creating a safe environment for all children.



PARENTS SHOULD WATCH FOR COMMON GROOMING TECHNIQUES

- Befriending the youngster and his/her family to slowly gain trust.
- Giving gifts, money, trips, and/or performing special favors for youngster.
- Promoting the notion that the relationship with the boy or girl is special.
- Encouraging harmless secrets, laying the foundation for future sexual secrets.
- Taking pictures/video of the child.
- Communicating with the boy or girl excessively – texting, emailing or calling.
- Desensitizing the child through nonsexual touching, “accidental” touching of privates and/or walking in on bathroom or dressing time.
- Testing a child’s boundaries by using inappropriate language and/or telling dirty jokes.
- Playing body contact games with children – tickling, backrubs or wrestling.
- Making alcohol/drugs available to the youth.
- Introducing pornography to initiate sexual interest or normalize the behavior.
- Offering to babysit, including overnight trips or sleepovers.

In today’s world, you as a parent take your child to gymnastics practice and want to have confidence that you have chosen a safe and healthy environment where your child can learn, train, excel and have fun.

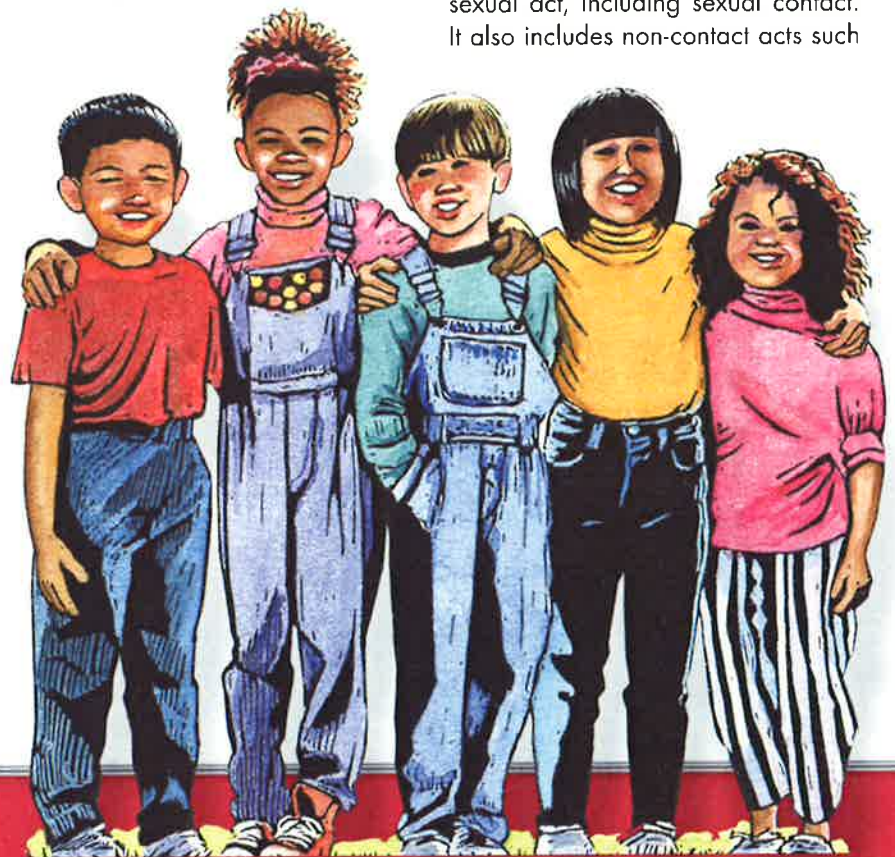
Thus, a safe gymnastics environment must include a commitment to the personal safety of all participants. While prevention of child sexual abuse has historically been the role of parents, educators and healthcare providers, best practices now dictate that all child-serving organizations take an active role in decreasing the likelihood of inappro-

priate behavior or sexual misconduct occurring within their organization.

While child sexual abuse can be a difficult subject to discuss, it is one that cannot be ignored. Knowing that one in four girls and one in six boys experiences some form of sexual exploitation before turning 18, all adults have an important role to play in helping to preserve the health and safety of children and youth. We all must be better informed to protect our children.

WHAT EXACTLY IS CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE?

It is forcing, coercing or persuading a child to engage in any type of sexual act, including sexual contact. It also includes non-contact acts such



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as exhibitionism, voyeurism, exposure to pornography, and communicating in a sexual manner by phone, Internet or electronic means, or, of course, in person.

WHO ARE THE ABUSERS?

Abusers come from all walks of life. Ninety-five percent are known to the child; both men and women offend, though men offend more often. Notably, juvenile offenders (abusers under the age of 18) are responsible for more than 30 percent of child sexual abuse.

HOW DO ABUSERS GAIN ACCESS TO, AND CONTROL OF, CHILDREN?

Most abusers use a subtle and gradual process known as "grooming" on children and their families. Grooming is typically done over weeks, months or years to slowly lure and manipulate children into abuse. On the surface, grooming can appear quite innocent and may even give the perception that the individual works well with children. Therefore, parents must become familiar with and watchful for grooming behaviors, as well as signs of abuse.

WHAT ARE THE SIGNS OF ABUSE?

Physical signs of sexual abuse are usually not observable (especially to adults other than parents, guardians and health professionals), but may include pain, injury, bleeding, discharge or disease.

Behavioral and emotional signs are typically more evident in both male and female victims, and can include:

- Sudden withdrawal from close ties.
- Disinterest or sudden inability to concentrate.
- Uncharacteristically aggressive or disruptive behavior.
- Sudden change in eating habits; drastic weight loss or gain.
- Marked fear or reluctance to be at a certain place, or alone with a certain person.
- Repeated health complaints, i.e. stomach aches, headaches.
- Depression, lethargy and weepiness.
- Noticeable change in dress; may include baggy, dark clothing.

- Interest in or knowledge of sexual matters beyond the boy's or girl's years.
- Using sexual language or acting out sexually.
- Touching other kids sexually.

Any one sign doesn't mean that a boy or girl has been sexually abused, but the presence of several gives reason to begin asking questions and consider seeking help.

The vast majority of professionals are committed to the safety and well-being of children. Those who abuse youngsters are the exception. As parents, you have an active role to play in your child's personal health and safety. It is important for you to know and watch for grooming techniques and signs of abuse. One-on-one situations involving your child need to be limited to times and places when the activities can be conducted within sight and earshot of other adults. It is important for your child to know not to keep secrets from you, even seemingly innocent ones. And when something doesn't seem right, it's important to report it right away.

Working together, we can prevent inappropriate behavior and sexual misconduct.



WHAT CAN I DO?

1. Learn about child sexual abuse, grooming techniques, signs of abuse and reporting procedures.
2. Talk to your child about appropriate vs. inappropriate behaviors and make sure your child knows he/she can talk to you if there is a problem or concern.
3. Talk to the staff at your child's gym about the policies and procedures in place to prevent inappropriate behavior and sexual misconduct.
4. Go to usagym.org/WeCare to learn more and access valuable resources

For the past 27 years, National Child Personal Safety Experts Rosemary Webb and Jennifer Mitchell have been leaders in advocating for awareness, transparency, prevention education and action surrounding child victimization. As moms to children ages 9-14, they are keenly in tune to the issues facing youth today and the importance of talking openly about them.

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