

# How to Protect Kids From Abuse

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**INSTRUCTION**

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When Larry Nassar was sentenced for up to 175 years in prison for decades of sexual abuse against youth athletes, the nation watched in shock and disgust.

“How could this happen?” people wondered.

“Surely this doesn’t happen that often,” people hoped.

But Torey Ivanic wasn’t shocked. She was watching her own story play out in the public eye. She was relieved, mostly, that we are finally talking about it. The conversations we’re having now could have protected her.

Ivanic was 11 or 12 when she was training in a local gym and put on one of the highest-ranking gymnastics teams in her area. With her eyes toward national medals and even the Olympics, it was the opportunity of a lifetime for Ivanic. The coach, Greg Dew, was widely loved. No one even called him by his name. He was simply called “Mr. Wonderful.”

After about a year, Ivanic started realizing that things were “a little weird” with Dew and the kids on her team. She learned that he was “hooking up” with “Jennifer” (not her real name), one of her friends who was about a year older than Ivanic. Then he started paying more attention to Ivanic—commenting on her body, saying things like, “Hey, I like your abs. Can I touch your abs?” Or when he was stretching Ivanic, her gut told her the touching wasn’t right.

She didn’t say anything because everyone loved Mr. Wonderful, so maybe it wasn’t wrong. Except that it was, and it kept getting more wrong.

When Ivanic was 15, he pressed her up against a wall and kissed her. One time she and Jennifer both spent the night at his house when his wife and child were out of town. They all spent the night in the same bed, with Dew kissing and fondling each of them in turn.

Ivanic wasn't sure how their relationship got to this place, but she felt partly responsible. After all, she hadn't stopped him. In many ways, she loved him.

"My parents were divorced. He was like my father figure," she explained. "I remember one time, he made me tell him I love him, and I told him I couldn't do that. But he made me. He told me I couldn't get off the platform until I told him I loved him."

Then he laughed and smiled, she recalled, as if it was all a joke.

"He did things like this all the time, little inside jokes," she explained. It's part of what made her feel like they had a special relationship.

All of this, according to Stephen Estey, is absolutely typical. Estey, founding partner of Estey Bomberger in San Diego, California, has been prosecuting childhood sexual-abuse cases for the last decade, and what happened to Ivanic fits the pattern perfectly.

Why does abuse happen in youth sports so often?

"Because that's where the kids are," Estey said. "They're fishing, they go where the kids are, and youth sports is a good pond."

The predator is looking for the most vulnerable child in that pond.



*Youth coaches must be held to the highest standards of behavior at all times. (iStockphoto.com/monkeybusinessimages)*

“The pattern is the same in every case. It’s truly amazing. They just innately find the most vulnerable one and start grooming them,” Estey said.

“Grooming” is the term for the patterned behaviors a predator uses to prepare a victim for abuse.

In Ivanic’s case, she came from a family with a single mom, which led to a desire for a father figure, as well as some dependence on her coach to assist with logistics.

“They don’t usually gravitate to the child with the strong family foundation,” Estey confirmed.

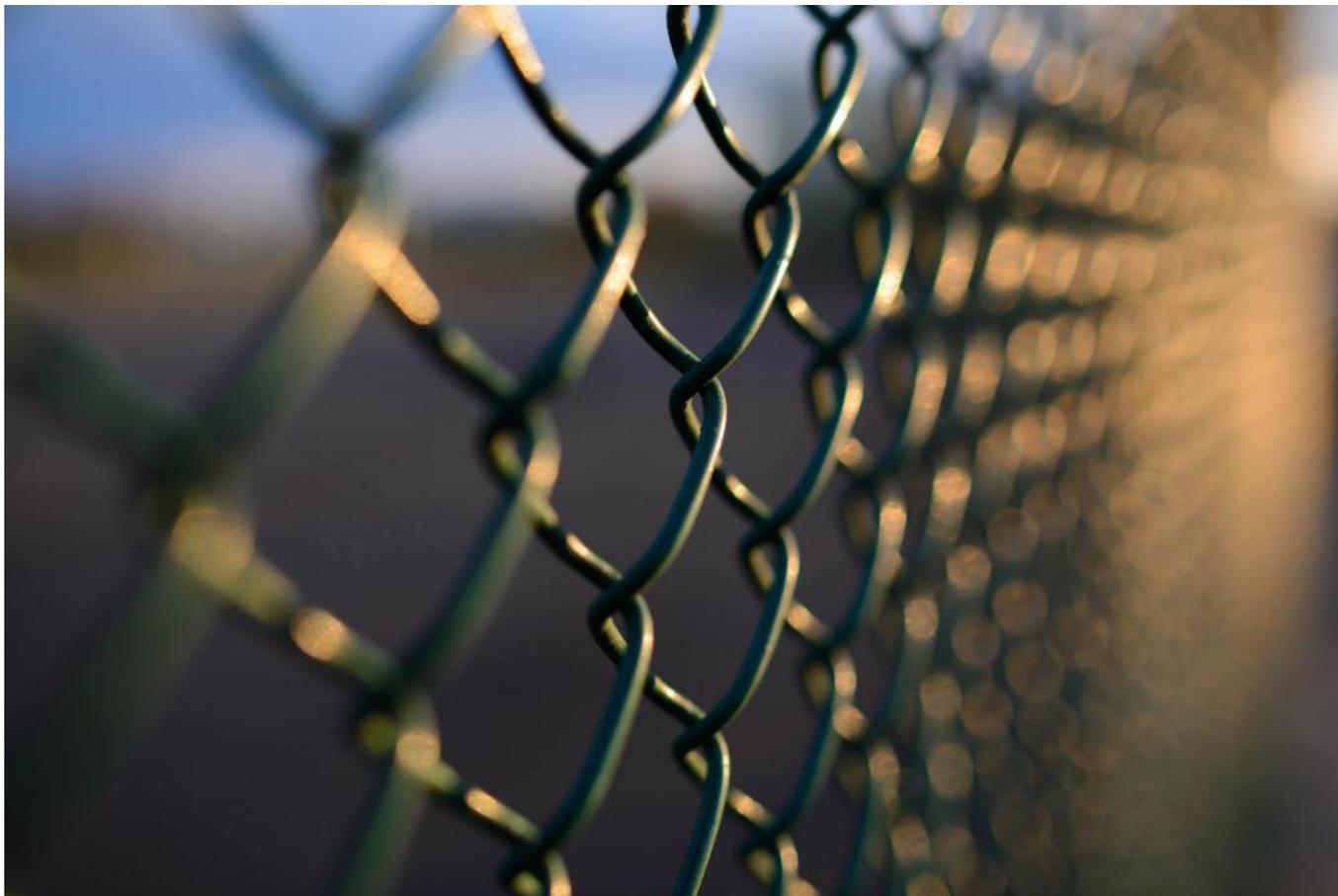
This is not to blame the family but to point out a pattern. It starts as a predator identifies a potential victim and begins grooming that victim.

Vulnerable youths are most likely to need a chaperone or a ride someplace, and they often feel like they have no one to talk to. Simply put, they are easier targets.

Predators use close relationships to create opportunities. Once trusted, the predator can isolate victims by offering rides, meals, shopping trips and the like. These relationships also create a situation in which the victims feel great internal conflict

because reporting their abuser would mean harming someone everyone loves. It's a trap, and it's very effective.

The pattern is so common that we must all learn to see the signs so that we can prevent it.



*A predator will look for a vulnerable child and then try to push the boundaries in preparation for abuse.  
(iStockphoto.com/Sergii Kateryniuk)*

## The Grooming Process

"The grooming part of the process is the visible part. You almost never see the actual abuse," Estey explained.

Understanding grooming offers the possibility of prevention.

When we look for grooming, we're looking for a cluster of behaviors that, when combined, might be warning signs. While any behavior on its own might be innocuous, together they are widely recognized as a system that isolates a victim and makes him or her more vulnerable to abuse.

1. Giving gifts—Expensive gifts are a common way to make a potential victim feel special and loved. This lays the groundwork for other “special” things, like inappropriate banter, outings or time alone.
2. Social-media stalking—When a coach is calling, texting or emailing an athlete about anything other than training or logistics, or if the coach is following a kid’s social-media accounts, that’s a red flag.
3. Separating a kid from peers or parents—It can be risky to allow a coach to be alone with a young athlete for extended periods of time, like driving to meets or staying in hotel rooms at meets.
4. Treating an athlete differently from the other kids—Predators will usually treat their victims preferentially, but not always. While grooming usually involves flattering behavior, it can also involve behavior that weakens, or breaks down, an athlete. If one athlete on the team is being treated very differently, that’s a red flag.
5. Consistently pushing boundaries in public—Examples include a coach who has athletes sit on their lap, slaps kids on the butt or even makes slightly inappropriate jokes that don’t cross an obvious line. These behaviors get the community accustomed to moderately inappropriate behavior, which makes it easier to write off rumors of other inappropriate activities.
6. Forming an unusually close relationship with parents—The closer predators are to parents, the easier it is to get the child alone, and the harder it will be for the child to tell his or her parents.
7. Asking the athlete to keep secrets—This is an important test for the predator: making sure discovery is unlikely.
8. Excessive control of the athlete on and off the field—Predatory coaches will often deny athletes access to practice time or rehearsal time until they get what they want.

As adults, it is our job to be on the lookout for these behaviors. When we see them, we need to call them out to the perpetrators and let them know they are inappropriate. We also need to tell our children to be aware so they know when something is wrong and have the language to tell us about it. Once predators know they are being watched, they are less likely to continue.

It’s our job to watch and warn.



*If you witness abuses or are told about it, get the police involved and make it a legal issue. (iStockphoto.com/BCFC)*

## What if You Suspect Abuse?

We usually don't see the actual abuse, "just" the grooming, which can get in the way of reporting. It's hard to be sure something is wrong, especially if we know and like the perpetrator. But suspicion, according to Estey, is enough to prompt action. If you see suspicious grooming behavior, report it to club leadership, go up the chain of command, and make sure that your concerns are heard.

You can and should put your concerns in writing and ask a manager to sign a statement indicating what actions are being taken. Those actions can vary depending on what's being reported. If it's something as simple as "I have a funny feeling about these interactions," then it's appropriate to sit down with a manager and the coach in question and simply discuss it. A date should be set to sit down again and follow up on observable changes. Any good youth coach would be happy to have that conversation and eagerly err on the side of caution.

As simple as it seems, you can protect a child simply by making it known to coaches that you are uncomfortable with their behavior. Remember, a predator's primary goal is to avoid getting caught. Knowing you are watching out for kids on the team can protect everyone.

If your team is affiliated with the United States Olympic Commission—such as USA Weightlifting, Gymnastics, Taekwondo, etc.—and you feel that your concerns aren't addressed, you can contact **SafeSport**, the independent organization that is now monitoring all Team USA organizations.

Once notified, Safe Sport will notify concerned parties that an investigation has begun. That investigation will include interviewing everyone involved, including witnesses; attempting to gather evidence; sending reports and evidence to a third-party reviewer; and notifying everyone of the outcome of the investigation.

On the other hand, if you actually witness something that is abusive, or if a child tells you abuse happening, you should report to the police immediately.

"You need to get it to an investigator who is trained in allegations of sexual abuse," Estey explained.

The report should automatically be assigned to an abuse investigator, but if it isn't, push to make that happen.

Once the police are involved, it becomes a criminal case. In that situation, the only person being investigated is the predator. However, it is also possible to file a civil suit against the organization that ran the program. Much like the case with Larry Nassar and USA Gymnastics, only one person is accused of perpetrating the actual abuse, but the organization can be held responsible for not adequately protecting athletes by acting on allegations.

This is, after all, a systemic issue. Nassar was able to abuse many victims over many years because so many people failed to report it. Had any of them turned him in, he could have been stopped years ago.

In the wake of the Nassar case, some change has already taken place. Senate Bill 534 became law Feb. 14. The Protecting Young Victims From Sexual Abuse and Safe Sport Authorization Act of 2017 makes it a federal offense to not report suspected abuse if you are part of an amateur sports organization that is recognized by the International Olympic Committee.

USA Weightlifting, for instance, is recognized by the IOC, so if your gym has USAW-certified coaches and a USAW-registered affiliate, you are now a mandatory reporter. You are subject to federal criminal prosecution if you fail to report to authorities if you have been given reason to suspect abuse.

But what about neighborhood teams, CrossFit gyms with youth programs or school leagues? While Senate Bill 534 doesn't directly affect them in terms of possible criminal prosecution, Estey said it would be easy to bring a negligent-supervision case against a gym if a child was abused in its program. Such a case could easily bankrupt a program and a person. If we aren't reporting abuse for any other reason, then let the fear of both criminal and civil prosecution scare us into doing the right thing for children.

For those of us who own gyms, we can make reporting abuse a clearly stated part of our culture. For this reason, the **"CrossFit Specialty Course Kids: Training Guide"** has a section on prevention of predation, and CrossFit Kids trainers must submit a **background check**. However, we know that educating coaches isn't enough. We need to educate parents and children, too. Predators are good at what they do, so we have to get good at recognizing their tricks.

If you are running programs with kids, consider taking the following steps to protect your kids and your community:

1. Share the signs of potential predation. Educate your community on grooming behavior. We talk to our kids about "stranger danger," but the truth is that they are in far more danger from the people who are close to them. We need to educate our children about what constitutes abuse and the grooming behaviors that often lead to abuse.
2. Make it clear that you will take any report seriously, and make sure that people have a way to reach you directly if they suspect problems.
3. Make sure your community knows when and how to contact law enforcement.
4. Make the reporting of abuse an expectation and condition of employment.
5. Remind parents and other students that we look out for each other, not just ourselves.



*Prevention is the best plan. Stay vigilant and protect our children. (iStockphoto.com/zenstock)*

## **We all Have to Talk About It**

Although stricter reporting is great, our real goal must be preventing our children from becoming victims. And that means talking to them.

If anything good has come from the catastrophic failures of USA Gymnastics, it's that we are all talking about this subject and taking action.

Ivanic knew something was wrong with her coach's behavior but didn't really know what or why.

"I knew it was wrong, but I didn't know how to say it. I didn't know what to call it," she explained. It took years before she even recognized his actions as abuse, much less sexual abuse. She spent much of her life believing he loved her because she didn't know the language of abuse or how to recognize it.

Ivanic is a mother now, and in the process of raising her own kids, she's thinking about what would have helped her.

"It would have helped if my mother was more involved," she said. "If my mom had asked, 'Why do you want to go to his house? Why do you want to go to a concert with him? Why are you riding in a car by yourself with him?' But she didn't."

Ivanic is making sure her kids will know what to look for and how to protect themselves.

Will it work? There is no way to protect ourselves 100 percent from predators. It is never the victim's fault, no matter what. Predators are good at what they do. They have complex systems and years of practice.

That said, the best thing we can all do is talk.

It might seem like a lot is at stake. We risk losing games, medals and championships. We risk losing friends, systems and organizations we value. But that all pales in comparison to risking the health, welfare, future and life of a child.

It took 15 years, but Ivanic and others got justice. They reported their abuser, the **case went to trial**, and he's now 10 years into a 43-year sentence for a variety of sexual-assault charges.

And Ivanic is still talking.

She's just finished writing a book about her experience, and she's talking to community groups whenever and wherever she can.

"I have this ability to speak about it, and I have to use it because so many people can't," she said.

And that is the key. We have to talk about it—as parents, as coaches and as a community. We have to get it out of the shadows so that predators can't hide.

*About the Author: Alyssa Royse and husband Brady Collins operate **Rocket CrossFit** in Seattle, Washington. When she's not in the gym, Alyssa is a writer, speaker and frequent TV guest on the topics of fitness and human sexuality (often the intersection of the two). You can reach Alyssa through her website **[Alyssaroyse.com](http://Alyssaroyse.com)** or at Rocket CrossFit. She can generally be bribed to do almost anything with the promise of good ribs.*

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