



YARDSTIK

THE PLAYBOOK FOR **SAFER** YOUTH & HIGH SCHOOL SPORTS



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PURPOSE

Every youth and high school sports organization is unique and will have its own journey to increasing safety within its programs.

Our goal with this playbook isn't to be prescriptive in dictating your path forward. Instead, our goal is to draw from our collective experience at Yardstik, inspire change, and guide you towards an executable plan that increases safety for your youth athletes.

In this guide, we'll be walking you through simple processes that we've helped youth and high school sports organizations implement successfully. It's important to note that you don't have to tackle anything suggested here on your own.

At the end of this guide, you'll be invited to a free consultation with Yardstik to explore options and assemble your own personalized, actionable plan towards safer environments.



INTRODUCTION

Youth athletes are in a uniquely vulnerable position. As a society, we ask our coaches and volunteers to be teachers, protectors, and, in some cases, even parental or maternal figures for our children. And with that responsibility comes access to children that requires a tremendous amount of trust—and, unfortunately, a tremendous amount of risk.

While there's no perfect model for safety, there are steps we can all realistically take collectively to educate, introduce transparency to our processes, raise awareness, and proactively minimize risk.

In recent history, we've seen a disturbing trend of abuse in the world of youth athletics—emotional, physical, and sexual. According to a [2017 study by the National Criminal Justice Reference Service](#), an estimated 10% of K-12 students will experience sexual misconduct by a school employee by the time they graduate from high school. The youth sports world, in particular, has been shaken in the wake of countless scandals, both on the national stage and disturbingly close to home for many of us.

The silver lining here is that public consciousness of these risks—alongside the dangers of insufficient response to medical emergencies or inadequate concussion protocol—is higher than ever. Parents are more aware and involved, putting a spotlight on the issue and forcing reactive and proactive

responses from those responsible for keeping their children safe. That activism has created a swelling of bottom-up pressure that has affected real, meaningful change for the better across the country. But we still have a ways to go.

Encouragingly, from our experience at Yardstik working alongside youth sports organizations, we see that those most responsible for safety are by and large acutely aware of the risks, willing to listen, and eager to do something. The more challenging questions are generally what to do and how to do it.

In a recent survey of high school athletic directors conducted by Yardstik and VNN Sports, 89% of respondents identified themselves as responsible for ensuring appropriate screening is complete. 56% either didn't have a mandated screening process in place or were unsure if one existed at all. And none of the respondents were actively re-screening their staff every year, creating potentially massive blind spots.

It starts with individual accountability. The bystander effect is natural. Don't wait for protocols to be handed down to you or for someone else to take the lead. Instead, do your research, identify risks, and propose solutions.



STEP 1: EDUCATE

It's important to take your blinders off every so often and think outside the box. Look at what other programs are doing. Look at programs similar to yours and look at programs entirely different from yours—different age groups, different sports, different organizational structures.

There isn't going to be a one-size-fits-all solution, and you may patch your ideal solution together from a few examples.

A natural place to start is background screening. For many organizations, background screening happens only at the point of hire and may not be as comprehensive as you would hope. If you find your solutions lacking, you might consider enhanced background screenings that survey 7-year criminal history versus the riskier instant searches that only search national databases and leave visibility gaps.

We're also seeing more organizations run social media screenings, surfacing character concerns and red flags that don't appear in traditional background

screens, and continuous monitoring—alerting them to any new potential threat to consider in real-time. Different roles will allow for varying levels of risk, and risk tolerance will vary from organization to organization. However, wherever you land on that sliding scale, the ultimate goal should be to have accuracy and completeness of information in proportion to the individual's access to vulnerable athletes.

Be proactive and comprehensive in your approach. Of course, background screening only raises alarms after an incident has occurred, and they only identify the "bad actors." Equally important is applying a proactive approach to prevention.

There is no shortage of certifications and training programs specific to youth and high school sports—like SafeSport, as an example. Programs that can educate everyone on your staff about abuse risk factors, raise consciousness and awareness, and arm them with the tools to act quickly when situations arise.

And comprehensive safety doesn't stop at abuse prevention. Inadequate training or certifications in CPR and concussion protocol for contact sports can have very serious consequences.

Put yourself in the shoes of a parent. Parents of athletes have a heightened sensitivity to news of inappropriate conduct in sports environments. They're also better informed on the risk of chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE) from head injuries in sports and have a better understanding of concussion protocols.

Imagine them as your audience. Describe what your ideal safety program might look like, and consider how they would react. Are you doing enough?

To reiterate an earlier point, it all starts with individual accountability. Look to others to co-sponsor your proposal and help you research possible solutions, but don't assume someone else will initiate change.



STEP 2: EVALUATE

The next step is to take the information you collected in your research and objectively compare and contrast your ideal to your existing program. Where are your strengths, and where do you have gaps?

Evaluation can be a painful and revealing process. No organization is perfect. It's essential to keep in mind why you're doing this and to stay focused on your goal, not letting yourself get discouraged. Most organizations we partner with are surprised at how quickly things can turn around.

It starts by asking yourself the right questions about your screening process today:

Is everyone getting screened? Who else should be?

How frequently is screening taking place? When was our staff last screened?

How comprehensive is the screening? Are there potential gaps in our screening?

And remember to think proactively, including training and certifications:

Are we being proactive enough in prevention? What else could we be doing?

Are all staff members adequately trained? What else could we be doing?

Is anyone on our team missing relevant certifications? How are we validating that those certifications are current?

Keep in mind that maintaining safer environments for your youth athletes is a journey, not a destination. How long has your existing program been in place? When was the last time anyone sat down and took a hard look at the processes? How frequently are you re-auditing and refreshing, and is it prioritized appropriately?

Stay focused on the positive. Remember why you're doing this. We're all accountable and working towards the same shared goal: safer environments for our youth athletes.



STEP 3: ACT

Incremental steps are critical. Start by making an actionable plan that you can execute. Then, take small steps towards your ultimate goals. Even seemingly minor improvements to your safety processes can make a significant difference.

Set clear targets. Timelines, budgets, and deliverables will help everyone visualize the successful implementation of your proposal and can help to enforce accountability for everyone. Be aggressive but realistic in your expectation setting.

Maintain a collaborative mindset. Don't try to do this in a vacuum. Identify the key stakeholders. Who will be most influential in affecting change, and who needs to be involved in executing this vision successfully? Gain organizational buy-in early to avoid any potential roadblocks down the road.

Communicate early and often. Once you have a plan and your organization's commitment, communicating this new direction internally and externally can be hugely impactful. Bringing parents into the conversation with transparent communication and progress reports will keep your organization accountable for realizing your vision.

Emphasizing your commitment to safety as a core value of your youth sports organization can also have long-lasting effects, both in how your organization makes decisions and how the community perceives you.

Don't get overwhelmed. You shouldn't expect to be going at this alone. Choosing the right partner—one that can provide you with the right technical solutions, guidance, and support that your organization needs for sustainable success—can be the difference between a successful implementation and one that falls short.



CONCLUSION

To summarize, minimizing risks for youth athletes is critical for any youth or high school sports organization. The trend of abuse in youth sports is a tragic reality that we all need to face.

The good news is that more tools and resources are available today than ever before to proactively tackle abuse prevention, concussion protocol, and medical emergency response.

Aligning with the right partner allows you to unlock those tools and takes some of the burdens off you and your team. Don't wait for others to initiate change. Act now to avoid reacting later.

Key takeaways:

- Get current on the trends, resources, and look to examples outside of your bubble. Drive change together and accept personal accountability.
- Be honest in your self-assessment and identify your most significant risks and potential gaps.
- Make an actionable plan, iteratively, towards your ultimate defined goal. Don't work in a vacuum, gain buy-in, and proudly broadcast your new commitment to safety.

NEXT STEPS

The best time to start is now. It all starts with a conversation.

Lean on our experience and expertise in youth and high school sports to guide your organization towards a sustainably safer model for your youth athletes.

Yardstik's platform offers a comprehensive ecosystem of screening, certification, and training solutions that can be managed through a unified dashboard.



VNN Customer Special

Get ready for fall sports! Sign up by July 31st and **save 20%** on your first 20 screens.

Email us at vnn-customer@yardstik.com to start the conversation.