

20211012 – Parent 24 - Schools sports and grooming - Why is this such a widespread issue

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12 Oct - Schools sports and grooming: Why is this such a widespread issue?

parent24

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As many as one in three children, in fact, fall prey to opportunistic adults...

Too many stories of school sports coaches taking advantage of their positions are making headlines. If the headlines are to be believed, it would appear that the sexual abuse of children is widespread in schools and sports institutions throughout South Africa... but is it really - and why?

Luke Lamprecht, Head of Advocacy: [Women and Men Against Child Abuse](#), tells [Parent24](#) that we don't have any idea of how widespread the problem is, primarily due to the lack of disclosure.

Additionally, only convictions are adequately recorded, and few cases appear in the formal system.

But, he warns, ultimately, the problem is endemic. When one uses the expanded definition of sexual abuse as exposure to something sexually inappropriate, the chances of your child being exposed to porn, inappropriate behaviours, and even actual criminal abuse, is high, he says.

As many as one in three children, in fact, fall prey to opportunistic adults who have worked their way into positions where they have access to children, intending to take sexual advantage of minors.

- ['The results are incredibly detrimental': A look into the widespread issue of grooming and sexual abuse by teachers](#)

Grooming

We asked Lamprecht why there seems to be an increase in these instances, and he explained that in the midst of the #metoo movement we started giving children the vocabulary for what is happening.

This has led to an increased number of children talking out about what happened to them. "It's good," he adds, "to draw awareness to the issue, as grooming doesn't happen overnight."

Lamprecht stresses that the predator's motive is sex. They may try to excuse and validate their behaviours, but ultimately, they are sexually attracted to children.

For career offenders, who choose jobs that give them access to children, their average number of victims is 300 to 400. These jobs include positions as sports coaches, therapists and teachers.

[Grooming is a crime](#) in its own right and is the precursor to child abuse by trusted adults.

Lamprecht explains to [Parent24](#) how predators work their way through a set of stages, to get close to a child.

'It works'

"It works because they are meeting the real needs of children, and using that to meet their own sexual needs," he says, first.

Usually, the predator is a person in a position of power and trust, and they work to groom the organisation, or in many cases the school or sports institution they work for, before they work on the parents and then finally the child.

While most work with children is relational in nature, predators behave unprofessionally. He describes how, for example, this person may choose one (or sometimes a few) favourites out of a number of children they are entrusted with.

For example, they will often pay more attention to one child than any other child. This can appear harmless, or even flattering, such as an offer of extra lessons, one-on-one coaching sessions, lifts to sports events, and other such special treatment.

But there should be "no reason" for this in a professional setting, Lamprecht stresses, and if this situation arises, parents should be "afraid".

The next step in grooming is isolation, when the predator isolates the child by removing them from traditional spaces such as with their family, friends and trusted groups, or even by taking them out of school individually. Here also an element of secrecy is often introduced.

When a child is already set in a total institution, with total rules, such as a boarding school, Lamprecht says this preferential treatment is linked to privilege or access to privilege.

- [The warning signs of child abuse and how to respond](#)

The attraction of school sports

Sport often involves physical contact with children that is not possible in any other teaching profession, warns [wmaca athletes against child abuse](#).

Certain behaviours by coaches are accepted in this context, where it would not be in a broader social context, and therefore sport allows grooming to take place, often in plain sight.

Lamprecht stresses to Parent24 that parents must understand there are two kinds of abuse: non-contact and contact.

Non-contact abuse

While possibly harder to recognise because parents and guardians don't realise it for what it is, non-contact abuse can be just as damaging as contact abuse.

It can also happen in person, online or via phone calls and messages.

Non-contact abuse includes inappropriate voice notes and messages, and also sounds and images of an explicit or sexual manner.

Voyeurism and inappropriate touching (also known as frotteurism, the behavior of making sexual contact with others in a public place) are also considered forms of non-contact abuse, as is exhibitionism, which is the act of exposing one's genitals to non-consenting people.

Contact abuse

According to [nspcc.org.uk](https://www.nspcc.org.uk) contact abuse is where an abuser makes physical contact with a child, and includes sexual touching of any part of a child's body, whether they're clothed or not.

Using a body part or object to rape or penetrate a child, forcing a child to take part in sexual activities or making a child undress or touch someone else is also listed.

Contact abuse can include touching, kissing and oral sex.

'If I knew what I knew now'

In a recent example, Richard Leach, a former St Andrew's College (SAC) pupil, [shared with News24](#) how water polo teacher David Mackenzie's touchy water polo tactics were 'questionable'.

David Mackenzie has made headlines in recent weeks as News24 investigates his inappropriate behaviour during his time at SAC. The claims against him included signing out a boy from the school sanatorium against school policy and sending inappropriate messages to schoolboys.

In an interview, Leach, who was 15 at the time of his exposure to MacKenzie detailed the inappropriate behaviour.

"But often I would find that he uses his hand and grabs your costume more than any other player. I have had coaches that have coached me in the pool, and they don't grab your costume at all."

"His hand is touching things that it's not meant to be touching. His hand is touching your private parts because of the way that you move in water polo."

He recounted how he would "defend" Mackenzie when his parents raised a word of concern but says now, looking back, he realises Mackenzie's actions weren't, in his opinion, appropriate.

"Yes, I saw him as a friend, and that's why I didn't find it weird at the time. If I knew what I knew now, back then, then I definitely would have spoken to someone or spoken up about [it] because it was inappropriate and it was wrong."

- [EXCLUSIVE | 'It was inappropriate, wrong' - David Mackenzie's touchy water polo tactics questioned](#)

How to warn your kids

So how do we empower our children to speak up, to say no?

Lamprecht stresses that if we don't give children authority in their safe spaces, which begins in the home, and we don't give them the vocabulary to say no, then it is no wonder that isolated teens and children cannot say no when they are faced with a boundary-pushing adult.

The biggest issue for children, he says, is that they are not warned that predators engage in taboo and boundary violations.

Predatory adults will, for example, allow an underage child to drink or use drugs or illegal supplements or expose them to porn.

And once the child has engaged with the adult in this way, he says, the adult has control of the child as the child feels complicit and unable to approach another adult for support or advice or assistance. And then the predator has what they need to cross the remaining physical boundaries.

It is important to note that many of these are normal behaviours for teens, but not when an adult facilitates them.

A parent's role

He says that children need the ability to say no, as the abuse occurs through grooming, not by force.

Lamprecht says we must not underestimate the role of sport in these cases, as the pressure to succeed along with potential exposure to predators may be seen as the price paid for the privilege of competing.

He says parents should be telling their children about grooming and sexual abuse by making it part of the discussion around topical conversations, such as the recent headlines about sports coaches.

"It is important to explain what is normal first, so they know what is not normal," he adds.

He says parents can also ask professionals for assistance and for developmentally appropriate messages and information.

"If you don't teach children what is normal and healthy, how will they know? If they don't have a script/language for it, they can't talk about it. Stress to your children that you are their safe place, and use phrasing such as 'When you feel you can't say no to another adult, come tell me'," he advises.

"Parents cannot substitute their role," Lamprecht says, adding, "in fact, the only job where you are not expendable is parenting."

Parents must not surrender to predators in return for access to privilege, he says.

This means parents must not allow private conversations or interactions between their child and their coaches and teachers. If another adult does anything that makes the child or parent feel uncomfortable, bring it up immediately.

"Be firm and fierce, and clear that you won't allow anyone to take advantage or condone the behaviour," he says.

"It's not monsters who abuse children; it's the likes of you and me," he adds.

Safeguarding policies

Lamprecht stresses that the safety of children is in our hands, and just as much as children need fences around pools and other basic safety measures, they need safe people.

These are the people who keep an eye on children and can spot questionable behaviour and ask hard questions, which includes oversight over all sorts of abusive behaviours, including swearing and overtraining.

Children's spaces can also be kept safe by policies to guide how people think, their conditions of employment and introducing training and education of everyone in the system, including the children.

He stresses that these policies must include the outcomes and consequences of any transgression, with clear consequences.

Without strong interventions, Lamprecht says we won't be able to stop the carnage of mental health issues.