

# Soccer: Making safety your goal



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# Soccer: Making safety your goal

According to U.S. Youth Soccer, the number of children participating in their programs has increased from 100,000 in 1974 to more than 3,200,000 in 2003. Soccer has eclipsed baseball as the favorite sport of America's youth—U.S. Youth Soccer has more registered players than Little League. As the popularity of the sport has grown, so too have concerns about safety and injuries.

The American Academy of Pediatrics completed a review of soccer-related injuries in 2000. Of the approximately 150,000 soccer-related injuries that occur each year, 45% occur in participants under the age of 15. This study does not include injuries to spectators, volunteer coaches, and other parents who are involved in the sport.

The purpose of this safety guide is to help you create a safe environment in which young athletes can compete. It covers procedures that coaches and parent volunteers can follow in the event of an emergency, critical injury, and sudden severe weather. It also describes the steps you can take to keep players and spectators safe from hazards and injuries during soccer events.



## Understanding the coach's responsibilities

Coaches involved in youth sports have a tremendous obligation to safeguard the welfare of the children involved in their programs. Parents trust a coach to be not only a coach, but also a teacher, mentor, safety expert, doctor, and yes, even a babysitter. Volunteer coaches are now being held to a higher standard of care because of the importance parents place on sports.

By analyzing the coach's responsibilities, you can clearly identify areas that can expose your soccer program to liability. The way coaches manage themselves and their players' activities is critical to keeping players safe and injury-free.

The Coalition of Americans to Protect Sports (CAPS) suggests a coach is responsible for performing nine legal duties:

1. Properly planning the activity.
2. Providing proper instruction.
3. Providing a safe physical environment.
4. Providing adequate and proper equipment.
5. Matching athletes by ability, age, and size.
6. Evaluating athletes for injury or incapacity.
7. Supervising the activity closely.
8. Warning of inherent risks.
9. Providing appropriate emergency assistance.

Many experts agree that coaches have additional responsibilities. Tom Appenzeller, author of *Youth Sport and the Law: A Guide to Legal Issues*, feels there are six basic guidelines for the youth sports coach to remember:

- Explain, demonstrate, communicate, and enforce rules.
- Supervise practice and games.
- Warn participants and parents about the risks and dangers of the activity.
- Teach proper and correct techniques and skills.
- Plan, and always prepare, for practice and games.
- Put the child's welfare first.

By incorporating these guidelines and legal responsibilities into your soccer program, a coach can create and maintain a winning environment for players, spectators, and volunteers.



## Supervising athletes

Supervision is more than just overseeing a soccer player's activities. Many experts estimate that 80% of athletic injuries result from a lapse of direct or indirect supervision.

Although soccer programs differ based on the age, gender, and skill level of the players, the activities associated with supervising them are very similar. These areas include:

- **Facility supervision:** Provide for overall facility supervision, including the safe arrival and departure of participants. Include procedures for special care when an athlete is stranded after a practice or game. Always have two adults present and encourage parental involvement with transportation. Make sure all participants are aware of schedules, and begin and end practice on time.
- **Field activity supervision:** Attend to field-of-play safety issues, spectator safety, and the use of proper equipment. Some activities can be supervised from a distance; some may require close proximity for supervision to be effective.
- **Class/activity supervision:** Recognize the hazards and potential injury-causing elements of a particular activity. Here again, close-proximity supervision may be required, especially if a young athlete is attempting an activity for the first time.
- **Gender-sensitive supervision:** Recognize the potential for sexual abuse and molestation, and take steps to prevent it from occurring. Develop, publish, and follow plans and policies to supervise opposite-gender athletes. Maintain a general rule that an individual coach should **never** be alone with an individual athlete. Institute a policy of requiring background checks on anyone who may act in a supervisory capacity, volunteer coaches included.
- **Emergency supervision:** Train supervisors and coaches to be aware of all emergency procedures, how to handle an injury, how to get help, and how to handle peripheral problems until emergency personnel arrive at the scene.

When engaging in supervisory activities as a coach, or assigning supervisory activities to an assistant coach or volunteer parent, it is important to set a high standard of professionalism and accountability to make the supervisory activity effective. Allow for quick reaction time in the event of an emergency and allow for no distractions while an activity is being supervised. Have a plan and a backup plan. Don't place inexperienced and unskilled supervisors in situations beyond their experience and abilities. (In the event of a lawsuit, plaintiff's counsel will closely scrutinize this aspect of your supervisory practices.) If possible, match different teaching styles with different learning and training situations.

The person who is accountable for supervision, be it the team coach, assistant coach, or parent volunteer, must be mature enough to handle situations that may arise during practices or games. At a minimum, a coach should be 18 years old. Unless there is a sibling relationship, under no circumstances should a young child be left in the care of another child under the age of 18.

## Performing background checks

It's critical to the success of your soccer program to provide an environment that both players and parents can trust. In today's world, there is a growing concern over the inappropriate behavior of adults that may lead to child abuse. This abuse may be in the form of either physical or sexual abuse. Criminal record and sexual offender checks are tools you can use to verify that coaches or parent volunteers will meet the standard of integrity necessary to coach young athletes.



Depending on the resources available, there are a number of ways to obtain a background check on any adult wishing to coach or volunteer. Many states provide a background check system through their state police authority. There are also a variety of commercial vendors that conduct these checks.

If you choose a commercial vendor to conduct background checks, make sure the check includes the following:

- Multi-state criminal search
- Multi-state sex offender registry
- Identity verification/address history

If coaches or parent volunteers will transport children to and from practices or games, it's also a good idea to check their driving records.

## Keeping athletes cool during hot days

During hot weather, coaches must take precautions to prevent players from suffering heat-related injuries. These typically include dehydration, heat exhaustion, and heat stroke.

- Dehydration occurs when the body exhausts its supply of body fluids, which help keep an athlete cool. Symptoms may include a dry, sticky mouth; thirst; and sunken eyes.
- Heat exhaustion can be detected by examining the appearance and activities of your players during practice or a game. Look for nausea, dizziness, weakness, headache, pale and moist skin, heavy perspiration, normal or low body temperature, weak pulse, dilated pupils, disorientation, and fainting spells.
- Heat stroke, which is the most dangerous of heat related injuries, typically has symptoms such as headache; dizziness; confusion; and hot, dry skin. These may lead to vascular collapse, coma, or death.

All these conditions may cause severe injuries or even result in fatality. These injuries can be prevented by including proper hydration as part of every game or practice session.

*Patient Care* magazine offers the following recommendations to help coaches keep players safe in the heat:

1. Recognize the dangers of playing in the heat.
2. Respond quickly if heat-related injuries occur.
3. Schedule regular fluid breaks during practice and games. Water is the best choice; other drinks may include fruit juices and sports drinks.
4. Recognize that children need to drink eight ounces of fluid every 20 minutes, plus more after playing.
5. Make player substitutions more frequently in the heat.
6. Have players wear light-colored, breathable clothing, and wide-brimmed hats when not on the field.
7. Use misting water sprays on the body to keep cool.



*Arnheim's Principles of Athletic Training: A Competency-Based Approach*, provides some basic guidelines for dealing with heat and humidity that coaches can follow to regulate the potential of heat injuries. The following table summarizes these guidelines:

In temperatures of	With humidity	Coaches should
80 – 90 degrees	Under 70%	Closely watch overweight athletes.
80 – 90 degrees	Over 70%	Give players 10 minute rest periods every hour.  Have players change tee shirts when wet.  Provide constant and careful supervision.
Over 90 degrees	N/A	Suspend or cancel practice.

A child's safety is far more important than a victory on the field. You can stay abreast of heat and humidity by including a temperature and barometer gauge in your coach's kit. You can also refer to the local weather report when planning a practice.

## Keeping players safe during the game

All successful soccer programs strive to keep players safe and injury-free while they learn, develop, and compete. In addition, the steps coaches take to protect players from injury can be a determining factor if a player is injured and you are sued for liability. For example, you may be found negligent if you fail to require players to wear proper protective equipment or fail to match players according to weight, size, and gender.

## Protective equipment

Because a number of soccer mishaps result in lower-extremity injuries, encourage athletes to wear shin guards and shoes with molded cleats or ribbed soles during all practices and games. Other required protective equipment includes mouth guards, as well as athletic supporters with protective cups for male soccer players. Protective eye wear with polycarbonate lenses can help reduce the possibility of a severe eye injury. If players wear glasses, they should wear sports glasses or use a sports strap to keep regular eyeglasses in place.

Do not allow athletes to wear hair combs, barrettes, or jewelry during play.

## Warm up and conditioning

Soccer is an aerobic sport, so it's important to involve athletes in proper conditioning exercises during practice and stretching exercises before a game begins. One resource that provides a guideline for exercises and stretches based on a child's age is *Kids & Sports* by Dr. Eric Small, a nationally recognized expert in pediatric/adolescent sports medicine. The book helps parents and coaches determine age-appropriate sports, prevent and treat injuries, and plan sports programs for children with chronic conditions such as asthma or diabetes. It also addresses the importance of good nutrition.

## Synthetic vs. leather balls

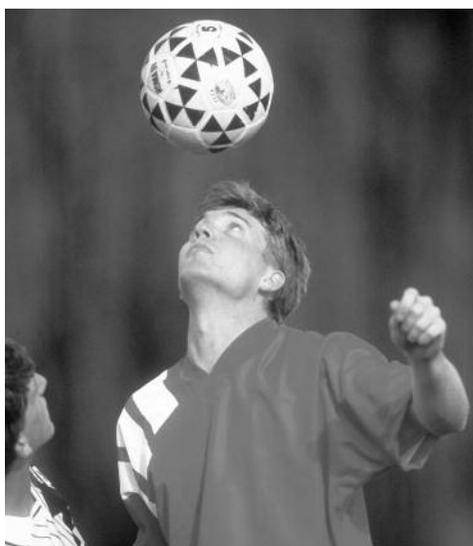
For youth soccer, it is recommended that you use a ball covered in a waterproof, synthetic material to avoid the risk of injury associated with leather balls. Leather balls can become heavy and slippery when wet, increasing the possibility of injury to players and spectators alike.

## Heading

Heading has received a tremendous amount of attention over the past few years. Questions have emerged regarding the safety of allowing young children to head a soccer ball. Studies regarding this issue are ongoing and as facts develop, standards will be developed to keep players safe from potential head injuries.

For now, the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that until more facts are known, common sense must prevail. Heading should not be encouraged until a child can learn the skills needed to head safely. Proper technique is essential (contact with the forehead, neck held rigid, and legs used to propel the player toward the ball). Most importantly, players unwilling to head the ball should never be forced to do so.

Coaches are accountable for teaching players the proper skills needed for safe play and promoting strict adherence to the rules. Failure to do so could expose your program to liability for injuries resulting from a player's lack of skills and knowledge of the rules of the game.



## The RICE principle

Because coaches and assistant coaches are often the first to be made aware of an athlete's injury, they should have some training in first aid and CPR. If a child is injured during practice or a game, it is important to know how to reduce the stress of the injury and obtain proper medical assistance as soon as possible. When an injury occurs, contact emergency medical services (EMS) immediately.

After an injury has occurred, coaches can employ the R.I.C.E. (rest, ice, compression, elevation) principle to treat an injury until EMS arrives. The National Athletic Trainers' Association provides these guidelines:

- **Rest:** Resting an injured area is necessary to allow the body time to control the effects of trauma and avoid additional stress and damage to the injured tissue. The period of rest required will vary depending on the severity of the injury. Failure to rest an acute (sudden or traumatic) injury can prolong the inflammation period and increase the healing time required which delays recovery.
- **Ice:** Ice applied promptly to an injury can slow down or minimize inflammation. You can apply ice to an injury by using an ice bag or ice bucket for 15 to 20 minutes or ice massage for 7 to 10 minutes. Don't apply heat until you are sure that the bleeding and swelling associated with the injury have stopped completely.
- **Compression:** Compression is the application of an Ace bandage or similar item around the injured area. Compression helps to control swelling and provides mild support. It is important to note that any wrap should be applied carefully. A bandage that is too tight could constrict or interrupt vital circulation to the area.
- **Elevation:** This involves raising the injured area above the level of the heart. This position promotes the lessening or elimination of swelling through the use of gravity and the lymphatic drainage system.

## PREPARE

An additional resource is available to help soccer coaches and volunteers who have no formal training and want to improve their understanding of sports safety. The National Center for Sports Safety (NCSS) and the National Soccer Coaches Association of America have partnered to educate soccer coaches nationwide. The program they offer is called PREPARE. This online program covers everything from minor injuries such as blisters, nose bleeds, and ankle sprains to life-threatening injuries, including head and neck injuries.

## Spectator safety

Spectator safety is another key area of responsibility for an organization sponsoring a soccer event. Youth soccer fields are designed to allow spectators to stand on the sidelines during a game or practice. This can expose both spectators and athletes to hazards that can result in an injury. Spectators have been injured when they were struck by a ball traveling out of bounds, or when a player running off the field collided with a spectator.

## Spectator safety zones

When sponsoring an event where spectators may be present, you have a degree of responsibility to protect them from harm. As spectators arrive, warn them that standing or sitting too close to the playing field can be hazardous. Hand out flyers or make a verbal announcement before the practice or game advising spectators that there is a risk of injury if they sit or stand near the touch line or goal line. Designate someone to patrol the spectator area during a game or practice, reminding spectators to be aware of balls and players traveling out of bounds. If spectators sit in beach chairs to watch the game, move them far away from the out-of-bound lines.

If the soccer field you are using has bleachers, check them before spectators arrive and remove all potential hazards. Keep an eye out for protruding screws or nails that may cause a scratch or cut or that can damage clothing.

## Parking

Before any game or practice, take steps to control spectators and protect their property. Establish a parking area at least 300 feet from the designated field of play. Encourage spectators to park in the designated area to protect their vehicles. Provide designated walkways and seating areas that do not expose spectators to harm.

## Pre-game facility inspection

Conducting a facility inspection before any soccer event will allow you to identify potential hazards. Check areas that spectators may use as a walkway and remove anything that might cause them to trip and fall. If there are areas that spectators should not enter, including parking areas, block them off so they are inaccessible.

If indoors and protective screens are provided, check for and correct defects before the event begins. Place nonskid, absorbent mats at entrances to reduce wet floor hazards. Also put nonskid, absorbent mats under water fountains and concession areas to reduce slip and fall injuries caused by wet floors. Place signs or post a greeter to warn spectators and athletes of spills or wet floors. Warning signs must be tall enough to be easily seen and must be visible from all angles. If a spill occurs, clean it up immediately.

## Spectator security

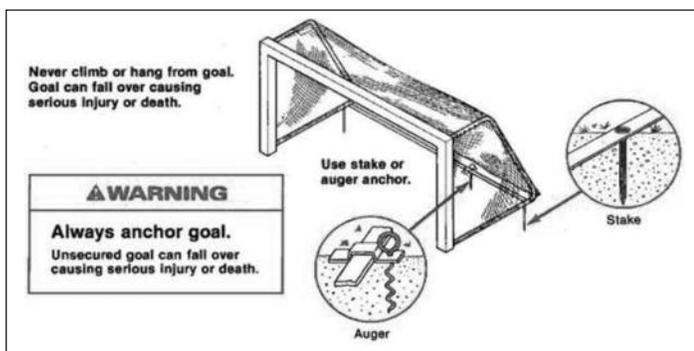
You are also responsible for the security of spectators who attend your soccer event. With the increase in spectator violence at sporting events, it is recommended that you ask local law enforcement personnel to attend any competitive game. Practices may not require law enforcement attendance, but you should be prepared to contact 911 if necessary. Carry a cell phone or have a process in place for contacting police in the event of trouble. Never try to resolve issues with an irate spectator yourself. This can be dangerous and lead to significant liability exposure.

## Soccer goal safety

The U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) has reported at least 35 deaths since 1979 that have resulted from soccer goals falling over. They estimate some 120 injuries from falling goals are treated annually in U.S. hospital emergency rooms.

Now is a good time to address soccer goal safety at your practice and playing fields. The Coalition to Promote Soccer Goal Safety and the CPSC provide these safety guidelines:

- Securely anchor or counter-weight movable goals at all times. This may include auger-style anchors that are screwed into the ground; semi-permanent anchors, which require a permanently secured base that is buried underground combined with the use of tethers or bolts to secure the goal; peg, stake, or j-hook style anchors that are driven into the ground; and sandbags or counterweights for indoor facilities.
- Never allow anyone to climb on the net or goal framework.
- Anchor or chain goals to nearby fence posts, dugouts, or any other sturdy fixture when not in use.
- Check all connecting hardware before every use. Replace damaged or missing fasteners immediately.
- Ensure safety labels are clearly visible.
- Fully disassemble goals for seasonal storage.
- Always use extreme caution when moving goals.
- Always instruct players on the safe handling of and potential dangers associated with movable soccer goals.
- Use movable soccer goals only on level (flat) fields.
- Never allow or ask youth players to move soccer goals. This should only be done by maintenance staff or adult coaches.



ASTM Standard F2056-00, *Standard Safety and Performance Specification for Soccer Goals*, requires that movable soccer goals, except very lightweight goals, not tip over when the goal is weighted in a downward or horizontal direction. It also specifies warning labels must be attached to the goal, such as “Warning: Always anchor goal. An unsecured goal can fall over causing serious injury or death.” All soccer programs should comply with this standard.

## Playing field safety

Field safety helps maintain the health of the athletes in your program. A field in poor condition is a time bomb full of injuries waiting to explode. Inspecting both practice fields and game fields before and after every practice or game helps to promote a safe playing field. Look for and remove foreign objects and debris from the field. Fill in holes or trenches with dirt to eliminate tripping hazards, or block off the area to prevent people from entering. Your ultimate goal with field safety is to prevent unwanted injuries from occurring to athletes and spectators.

## Lightning safety

Lightning is the weather hazard that most frequently affects organized outdoor athletic events. You can reduce the risks of lightning by education, preparedness, and practice. Every soccer program should implement lightning safety training. A good lightning safety motto is, “If you can see it (lightning), flee it; if you can hear it (thunder), clear it.”

The National Lightning Safety Institute developed these tips:

1. Designate a responsible person to monitor weather conditions. Get your local weather forecasts—from The Weather Channel, NOAA weather radio, or local TV stations—24 hours prior to athletic events. An inexpensive portable weather radio is recommended for obtaining timely storm data.
2. Plan, in advance, to suspend and resume athletic activities when unsafe conditions occur. Evacuate players and spectators to safe sites, including fully enclosed metal vehicles with windows up, substantial buildings, and low ground (seek cover in clumps of bushes).
3. Avoid unsafe shelter areas, such as outdoor metal objects like flag poles, fences, and gates; high-mast light poles; metal bleachers; golf carts; and machinery. Avoid trees, water, open fields, and high ground.
4. If you see lightning or hear thunder, take shelter immediately. If you hear thunder, it and the associated lightning are about 6 to 8 miles away. The distance from Strike A to Strike B also can be 6 to 8 miles. Different distances to shelter will determine different times to suspend activities.
5. If you feel your hair standing on end or hear crackling noises, you are in lightning’s electric field. If you are caught outside during close-in lightning, immediately remove metal objects, place your feet together, duck your head, and crouch down low in baseball catcher’s stance with hands on knees.
6. Wait a minimum of 30 minutes from the last observed lightning or thunder before resuming activities.
7. If someone is struck by lightning, get emergency help immediately. If you are qualified to do so, apply first aid. People who have been struck by lightning do not carry an electrical charge and are safe to handle.

## Soccer safety: Field inspection checklist

Safety concern	Yes/No	Initial/Date	Corrective action taken
<b>Field/facilities inspection</b>			
Are soccer goals anchored to the ground, stable, and in good condition—free of corrosion, protruding screws, and other hazards that may cause injury?			
Are soccer goals safely stored when not in use to prevent tipping (locked together or to a fence)?			
Have you walked the field and identified and corrected any tripping hazards?			
Is the field of play free of tripping hazards, such as trenches, debris, or exposed irrigation pipes? Have hazards been removed or cordoned off to prevent accidents?			
Are any uncovered drains and above-ground water spigots present? These can cause a major injury to an unsuspecting athlete or spectator.			
Are fences in good condition, free of any holes that can be a hazard?			
Is a first aid kit available for practice and games? Have supplies been replenished?			
Are entrances and exits free of tripping hazards and defects? If not, take corrective action to remove or repair the hazard and write down your activities. Be sure to identify who was involved and when.			
Are all floors, walkways, stairs, and other surfaces in good condition and free of hazards/protruding nails?			
Is lighting adequate for stairways and walkways for night games? If not, you may need to redirect pedestrian traffic or designate an usher to lead spectators to their seats.			
Are handrails installed on steps?			
Are locker rooms, restrooms, and portable toilets in good condition?			
Are lockers anchored to prevent tip-over?			

Safety concern	Yes/No	Initial/Date	Corrective action taken
Is a sweep schedule in place for restrooms and walkways to prevent slip-and-fall injuries? Do you require inspections at least once every hour?			
Are benches/bleachers free of protruding nails, anchored to the ground, and in good condition?			
Are bees' nests present on the field or concession area?			
Are boundaries marked between playing areas visible and clearly established?			
<b>Player safety</b>			
Have you checked weather conditions for the upcoming game or practice?			
Is water available for players to drink to avoid dehydration?			
Are uniforms appropriate for weather and conditions?			
Are shin guards required for each player?			
Do you use a waterproof ball, covered in synthetic material, not a leather ball, for youth leagues?			
Are shoes appropriate for conditions?			
Is there a phone (cell or land line) available to call from the field in the event of injury?			
Is emergency contact information available for each player?			
Do any players have special needs, and are these needs accounted for?			
Have players trained and warmed up properly?			
Are players matched according to similar skills and abilities?			
<b>Spectator safety issues</b>			
Are spectator rules of conduct communicated before every practice or game?			
Are law enforcement and EMS services provided for the game?			

Safety concern	Yes/No	Initial/Date	Corrective action taken
<b>Accident management</b>			
Have accident reporting procedures been established to report an injury? Are report forms available?			
Are EMS needed for the event?			
Have you identified the closest hospital?			
Are the coach and assistant coach trained in CPR and first aid?			
Have you practiced your injury response plan?			
Is your inclement weather management plan in place?			

## References

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## Resources

- American Academy of Pediatrics: [www.aap.org](http://www.aap.org)
- Coalition of Americans to Protect Sports
- National Athletic Trainers' Association: [www.nata.org](http://www.nata.org)
- National Center for Sports Safety: [www.sportssafety.org](http://www.sportssafety.org)
- National Lightning Safety Institute: [www.lightningsafety.com](http://www.lightningsafety.com)
- National Soccer Coaches Association of America: [www.nscaa.com](http://www.nscaa.com)
- U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission: [www.cpsc.gov](http://www.cpsc.gov)
- U.S. Soccer Foundation: [www.ussoccerfoundation.org](http://www.ussoccerfoundation.org)
- U.S. Youth Soccer: [www.usyouthsoccer.org](http://www.usyouthsoccer.org)

For free soccer goal warning labels, contact:

Coalition to Promote Soccer Goal Safety at the Soccer Industry Council of America  
 200 Castlewood Drive  
 North Palm Beach, FL 33408  
 800-527-7510

4600 Cox Road  
Glen Allen, Virginia 23060  
800-431-1270  
[markelinsurance.com](http://markelinsurance.com)

