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Sports groups take steps to protect youth [by Jennifer Beekman](#) *Staff writer*

The benefits of childrens' participation in sports are innumerable. When parents drop their kids off at practice, they expect them to be safe.

But 99 percent of the time, children and young people are sexually abused by someone they know, according to stopitnow.org, a website geared toward the education and prevention of child sex abuse.

The Washington, D.C., metropolitan area was shaken in late July by accusations that Curl-Burke Swim Club founder Rick Curl engaged in sexual misconduct with a minor during the early 1980s.

"That hits home to all coaches, I think, it's something as a coach you have to be responsible. People kind of look to coaches," said John Venit, the Laurel High School swimming and diving coach and president of the Prince-Mont Swim League. "It's sad. It's a sad thing when adults take advantage of kids."

There is a fine line between what is appropriate and what is not, and it's important for coaches to educate themselves on proper protocol and avoid putting themselves in questionable situations.

"A lot of it with a coach is common sense. Never be alone with an athlete is probably the No. 1 thing. Always be careful, whether someone needs a ride, who else is in the car with you?" Venit said.

As similar stories seem to be surfacing more recently, including the Jerry Sandusky conviction at Penn State, experts say reporting the behavior is the best way to stop it. And several youth sport organizations are taking steps toward ensuring athletes' safety.

USA Swimming was proactive about creating a safe environment before the recent Curl-Burke news and the newly-renamed CUBU club has abided by its policies, said Tom Ugast, the director of operations since 2010.

USA Swimming implemented a Code of Conduct in the late 1990s that provides specific, mandatory policies that must be followed at all levels, according to its website.

These policies must be adhered to by all members of USA Swimming; prospective members who do not will be denied membership.

In 2010, USA Swimming passed additional legislation under the Safe Sport program.

All coaches, officials and volunteers must pass a criminal background check before becoming a USA Swimming employee or volunteer. In addition, USA Swimming offers classes to train and educate coaches, officials and parents, among others, on issues that might arise when working with children.

In 2010, CUBU coaches attended the first seminar put on by Potomac Valley Swimming in conjunction with USA Swimming to educate coaches in athlete protection, Ugast said.

In June, the Amateur Athletic Union—one of the nation's largest nonprofit volunteer sports organizations—took action, announcing plans to implement new preventative measures, according to the organization's website.

According to the report, AAU plans on significant initial and ongoing screening procedures for all volunteers, clear policies and protocol, including preventing adults from being alone with children and eliminating other opportunities for abuse to occur, educating all staff and making reporting questionable behavior mandatory.

The Maryland State Youth Soccer Association has also buckled down on abuse issues in the last year with the Risk Management Program.

Program elements include criminal background checks, a zero tolerance policy and a coaching safety checklist, according to the MSYSA website.

Even the most carefully planned prevention tactics, however, cannot guarantee that issues will not arise.

It is important for parents to inform themselves on the safety protocols of organizations with which their children are involved, according to stopitnow.org.

There is no typical profile of someone who sexually abuses children, according to the website. Reporting the behavior is the best way to stop it but 88 percent of cases are not reported to the authorities.

"Background checks show someone who has a history. Unfortunately I think it's going to keep happening over and over until those people end up getting caught or the kids come forward. But sometimes kids feel embarrassed because they think it's their fault. It's not their fault," Venit said.

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