

A GUIDE FOR PARENTS

Before You Sign Up

*What to ask a coach,
what to notice, and
when to walk away.*



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WHY THIS GUIDE EXISTS

Most coaches are good. The question is how you tell.

Almost every parent handing a child to a coach asks the same two questions: is this person any good, and is my kid going to be happy. Both are reasonable. Neither is the question that matters most.

The question that matters most is what this adult does with a child's mistake, and what happens in the parts of the building you never see.

I competed at five Canadian championships and later coached skaters to national podiums. I have been the child in a training centre where the results were excellent and the cost was invisible, and I have been the adult holding the whistle. I now teach Grade 2, which means I spend every day being the grown-up whose reaction decides whether a seven-year-old reads a mistake as information or as a verdict about who they are.

This guide is what I wish my parents had been handed. Suspicion is the wrong instrument, and most people in youth sport are decent and are doing it for the right reasons. What this asks of you is smaller and more useful: know what to ask, know what good looks like, know what to notice, so that if something is wrong you find out early rather than twenty years later.

A program can produce champions and still be doing damage. The two facts do not cancel each other out.

Nothing here requires you to be an expert in the sport. Every question in this guide can be asked by someone who has never laced a skate or held a stopwatch.

WHAT IS INSIDE

Before you commit

Twelve questions for the coach and the club, and what a good answer sounds like.

What good and bad look like

What to see in the room, the warning signs that arrive dressed as high standards, and the two clocks every program runs on.

After you sign up

What to watch for in your own child, how to keep the door open, what to do if something is wrong, and a one-page checklist.

How to use it: read it once before you commit to a program, then keep the checklist on the last page. The questions work for any sport, and most of them work for dance, music and theatre too.

Six questions to ask the coach

Ask these in person, and pay as much attention to how they are answered as to what is said. A good coach has thought about all six and will not mind being asked. Defensiveness is itself an answer.

- 1** How do you correct a child who keeps making the same mistake?
You are listening for a method, not a mood. Good answers involve breaking the skill down, changing the drill, or checking whether the child is tired or afraid. *Watch for: answers about the child's attitude, effort or character.*
- 2** What happens when a child says something hurts?
The only good answer stops the activity first and asks questions second. *Watch for: any version of learning the difference between pain and injury from a coach rather than a physician.*
- 3** Are parents allowed to watch practice? All of it?
Occasional closed sessions before a competition are normal. A standing policy that parents cannot watch is not. *Watch for: reasons that centre on the children being distracted by you.*
- 4** Are athletes ever alone with a coach, and where?
Ask specifically about change rooms, offices, cars and travel. Most sport organizations now require a rule of two, meaning a child is never alone and unobservable with one adult. Ask whether this program follows it. *Watch for: vagueness, or exceptions that apply to one particular coach.*
- 5** Do you weigh athletes, or comment on their bodies?
If the answer is yes in any form, ask who sees the numbers, how they are stored, and which medical professional is involved. *Watch for: weighing that is public, posted, ranked, or discussed in front of other athletes.*
- 6** What is your screening and training, and who do I report a concern to?
Expect a police record check, up-to-date safe sport training, and a named person who is not the coach. *Watch for: any answer where the complaint path leads back to the same person you would be complaining about.*

If asking feels rude, say this: "I ask every program the same questions, and I am not looking for a problem." A coach who has done safe sport training has heard all six before and will be glad you asked. If asking these costs you the coach's goodwill, you have learned something more valuable than the answers.

Six questions to ask the club

These go to whoever runs the program: a board member, a director, an administrator. If nobody can answer them, that is the finding.

7 What is your complaint process, in writing?

Ask to see it. A real process names who receives a complaint, what happens next, and how long it takes. *Watch for: a process that exists only as a conversation.*

8 Has anyone here been disciplined or removed, and how were families told?

You are not entitled to private details, and a club may not be able to share them. You are entitled to know whether the club tells families anything at all. *Watch for: silence as standard practice.*

9 Who travels with the athletes, and what are the overnight rules?

Ask about room assignments, curfews, supervision ratios, and who is awake and responsible. *Watch for: arrangements decided trip by trip rather than by policy.*

10 How are athletes grouped, and who decides?

Selection is where power concentrates. Ask what the criteria are and whether they are published. *Watch for: placement that appears to depend on a single adult's favour.*

11 What does a child give up to be here?

Hours, school, friendships, family time, money. A confident program will tell you the true cost without flinching. *Watch for: the suggestion that asking about cost signals a lack of commitment.*

12 What happens to a child who stops improving, or wants to stop?

Listen for whether leaving is treated as a normal outcome or a betrayal. *Watch for: former athletes who are never mentioned again.*

A club that has never been asked these questions is not necessarily a bad club. It is an untested one, and you are about to be the test.

A note on the answers. You are not looking for perfection. You are looking for a program that has thought about these questions before you asked them.

Signs you are in the right place

These are easy to miss because nothing dramatic is happening. That is the point. Watch a practice or two before you decide, and look for these.

Corrections are about the task

"Your arm came up early" rather than "you are being lazy." The child hears information they can act on, not a description of their character.

Mistakes are ordinary

Children fall, laugh, and go again. Nobody scans the coach's face first to find out how to feel about it.

The room sounds normal

There is chatter, some noise, occasional joking. A silent training floor full of children is not discipline. It is fear.

Doors are open

Parents can watch. Coaches are visible. Nothing important happens in a room you have never been shown.

Bodies are treated as equipment, not evidence

Nutrition and conditioning come from qualified people, privately, and are never announced to the group.

Your child can tell you what happened today

Not a highlight reel. The ordinary boring detail. Children who feel safe narrate freely.

Adults other than the coach are present and engaged

An assistant, a manager, a parent volunteer who actually watches. Cultures go wrong fastest where one adult is unobserved.

The healthiest programs are usually the least theatrical ones.

The ones that look like dedication

Serious problems rarely announce themselves as cruelty. They usually arrive dressed as high standards, and the people around them defend them for exactly that reason.

Access is the reward, and withdrawal is the punishment

Attention, ice time, partners and opportunities move according to a single adult's mood. Children learn to read that mood before they trust their own bodies.

Cruelty is public and praised as toughness

Humiliation in front of the group, framed as motivation. The other children laugh because not laughing is dangerous.

Weights, measurements or body composition are posted or announced

Any ranking of children's bodies, in a hallway, a newsletter, or out loud. There is no coaching justification for this at any level.

One adult spends time alone with athletes as a matter of routine

Private lessons behind closed doors, rides home, hotel rooms, an office at the quiet end of the building. Grooming almost always begins with legitimate-looking access.

The program is described as a family, and leaving as disloyalty

Warmth is not the problem. The problem is when belonging becomes conditional on silence.

Athletes disappear and are not discussed

A child leaves and is simply never mentioned again. Ask where people go and what happened. Note whether anyone will say.

You are discouraged from being there

Any pattern that separates you from your child's daily experience deserves your full attention, whatever reason is offered.

Every program runs on two clocks

This is the most useful idea I can give you, and it took me thirty years to be able to say it plainly.



The visible clock

The scoreboard, the stopwatch, the whistle. It measures the body: laps, repetitions, results. Everything it demands is public and countable. A coach can be hard here, in front of everyone, and you can see it happening. You can point at it and say **that was hard**, and everyone in the building knows what you mean.



The hidden clock

It measures worth instead of time, runs on one adult's schedule rather than the program's, and has no witnesses. It operates in offices, change rooms, cars and quiet corners. It leaves no mark you can point at, which is exactly why it is durable.

Almost everything parents are taught to look for belongs to the first clock: how many hours, how hard, whether the coach yells. Those things matter. But a program can be entirely reasonable on the visible clock and still be running a second one.

The first clock punishes effort, and the body absorbs it. The second punishes identity, and it does the deeper damage.

You cannot audit the hidden clock directly. What you can do is remove the conditions it needs: unobserved access, a complaint path that leads nowhere, and a child who has learned not to tell you things. The rest of this guide is about those three.

The practical version. Stop trying to decide whether a coach is a good person. You cannot know that from the stands, and neither could anyone else in the building. Look instead at whether the program is built so that a bad one could operate here unnoticed.

What to watch for in your own child

Children rarely report abuse directly. They change instead, and the changes are easy to explain away as growing up, tiredness, or the pressure of competition.

Talking

Stops narrating practice. Answers about the sport get shorter while answers about everything else stay normal.

Watching you

Checks your face before answering questions about the coach, or changes the subject when the coach comes up.

Food and body

New rules about eating, sudden interest in weight, eating differently in front of others, or distress about clothing and mirrors.

The body itself

Injuries that are minimized, pain treated as a character flaw, or sudden reluctance to be touched.

Before and after

Dread on the way, silence on the way home. Watch the car, not the arena. The car is where truth arrives.

Perfectionism

Distress out of proportion to a mistake. Apologizing constantly. Treating an error as evidence about who they are.

Sleep and mood

Trouble sleeping before practice days, new anxiety, irritability that peaks on a schedule.

Friends

Losing friendships outside the sport, or being told that people outside do not understand.

Loyalty that overrides

Defending the coach with unusual intensity, or explaining away treatment they would not accept from anyone else.

Borrowed language

Describing themselves in a vocabulary that is not theirs. Words about being lazy, soft, or a disappointment that arrived from somewhere.

Small secrets

Mentions something and then says not to repeat it. Any rule about what happens in the building staying in the building.

School and the rest of life

Everything outside the sport quietly shrinking, and exhaustion that is treated by everyone as the price of being serious.

None of these on its own proves anything. Children change for many reasons. What matters is a pattern, a change that tracks with the sport, and above all a child who used to tell you things and has stopped.

Keeping the door open

The single most protective thing in a child's life is an adult they are certain they can tell. That certainty is built in ordinary conversations long before anything is wrong, and it is undone by questions that carry a right answer.

INSTEAD OF "DID YOU HAVE A GOOD PRACTICE?"

"What was the most boring part of practice today?"

INSTEAD OF "IS YOUR COACH NICE?"

"What is your coach like when someone makes a mistake?"

ASK THIS ONE EVERY SO OFTEN

"Is there anything about this you would change if you could?"

SAY THIS OUT LOUD, MORE THAN ONCE

"There is nothing you could tell me that would make me angry at you, and nothing about this sport is worth you being unhappy."

AND THIS, WHICH MATTERS MOST

"If you ever want to stop, we stop. That is allowed, and I will not be disappointed."

Say the last one when things are going well. A child who only hears it during a crisis will assume you are asking them to quit. A child who has always heard it knows the door is real.

Children do not withhold because they distrust you. They withhold because they have decided the truth would cost you something.

What to do, in order

- 1. Believe them first, and say so out loud.** Before any question, before any decision, say that you believe them and that this is not their fault. Everything else can wait a minute.
- 2. Write it down.** Date, time, place, who was there, what was said, in your child's words as closely as you can. Do this the same day. Memory is honest and unreliable at the same time, and a note made that day is worth a great deal later.
- 3. Do not investigate it yourself.** Repeated questioning can distress a child and can damage a later investigation. Get the account once, gently, then stop.
- 4. Report it.** If a child is in immediate danger, call 911. Otherwise use the resources below. The duty to report a child in need of protection exists in every province, whatever a sport body decides to do.
- 5. Do not accept an internal resolution as the end of it.** A club investigating itself is not an outcome.

Emergency

911

If a child is in immediate danger, this comes before every other step in this guide.

Canadian Safe Sport Program · Sport Integrity Canada

1-866-971-2777 · call or text

Independent and confidential. Email safesport@cssp.realresponse.org or report online at cssp-pcss.caseiq.app/portal. It handles reports about people in national, federally funded sport organizations under the UCCMS. Many community clubs and provincial programs sit outside that scope; if yours does, ask your provincial sport organization for its process.

Child protection services

Your province or territory

Every province and territory has a legal duty to report a child in need of protection. This route is always open to you, and it does not depend on any sport body.

Kids Help Phone, for your child, any time

1-800-668-6868 · text CONNECT to 686868

Free, confidential, 24 hours a day, for young people who want to talk to someone who is not a parent or a coach.

This guide is general information from a former athlete, coach and teacher. It is not legal advice. Reporting obligations and processes vary by province and by sport organization, and they change. Numbers checked August 2026.

TAKE THIS WITH YOU

The one-page checklist

Print this page, or photograph it. Everything above, reduced to what you can hold in one hand at a rink door.

ASK BEFORE YOU COMMIT

- ☐ How do you correct a child who keeps making the same mistake?
- ☐ What happens when a child says something hurts?
- ☐ Can I watch practice? All of it?
- ☐ Is a child ever alone with one adult, and where? Do you follow a rule of two?
- ☐ Do you weigh or measure athletes? Who sees it?
- ☐ Who do I report a concern to, and can I see the process in writing?
- ☐ What are the overnight and travel rules?
- ☐ What happens to a child who wants to stop?

WATCH FOR, IN THE ROOM

- ☐ Corrections name the task, not the child's character
- ☐ Children make mistakes without checking an adult's face first
- ☐ Doors are open and more than one adult is present
- ☐ Nobody's body is discussed in front of anyone else

WATCH FOR, IN YOUR CHILD

- ☐ Has stopped narrating practice, or checks your face before answering
- ☐ New rules or distress about food, weight or their body
- ☐ Dread before, silence after
- ☐ Treats a mistake as a verdict about who they are

SAY OUT LOUD, WHEN THINGS ARE GOING WELL

- ☐ "If you ever want to stop, we stop. I will not be disappointed."

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

Why I wrote it

I competed at five Canadian championships in pairs and won four national medals in senior fours. I later coached skaters to nationals, junior worlds and national titles. I have taught Grade 2 in Ontario for almost twenty years.

Somewhere in the middle of all that, I spent years inside a training centre that produced champions and did a great deal of damage, and I could not have told you at the time which of those two things was happening. Neither could my parents, who were in the building.

This guide is the short version of what I learned the slow way. If it means one family asks better questions at a rink door, it has done its job.

What Ledger Couldn't Count

My memoir about that training centre, and about the thirty years afterwards, is complete and seeking representation. If you would like to know when there is news about it, there is a signup at mrcornfoot.com/memoir.

Pass it on

Free to print, copy and share with any parent, coach, club or school that would find it useful. Please keep it whole and credited. If you run a program and want to hand it to families at registration, you have my permission and my thanks.

If you have questions about anything in here, or you want to tell me it helped, write to me. I read everything that arrives.

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