

THE SECRETS OUT ON HAZING

BY DANA NOLAN, MS, LMHC

What young athletes need to know about hazing...

There has been a lot of attention lately in the media about hazing: how to prevent it and its consequences on those involved. So what exactly is hazing anyway? Sometimes social clubs or sports teams initiate new members to their group to mark the occasion of joining the group, organization or sports team. Ideally, initiation should be a positive event when “old” group/team members educate and welcome “new” members (or rookies) to the club. However, sometimes initiations can become dangerous, abusive, illegal or humiliating. When this happens, initiation becomes “hazing.”

What are some examples of how new members of a group/team are hazed?

- They are yelled at or ridiculed
- New members are made to wear embarrassing or revealing clothes
- Expecting new members to perform “slave-like” duties (carry books, clean out lockers, etc.)
- Forcing or coercing them to drink alcohol or take drugs
- New members are beaten or paddled
- Forcing rookies to eat disgusting foods or substances

Why is hazing so dangerous and why is it illegal?

Historically, hazing practices were wacky, embarrassing antics or harmless pranks usually associated with young men wanting to join college fraternities. However, hazing activities were never officially approved or sanctioned by colleges or universities. As a result, these activities have traditionally been carried out in secret and without any official supervision of adults or administrators of the institution. It is the lack of supervision and the secrecy of hazing which helped create the potential for emotional and physical harm or injury...even death.

In 2005, Florida adopted anti-hazing legislation which is among the toughest in the nation in terms of consequences of participating in hazing. However, the law only addresses hazing on college and university campuses. Research carried out in the last several decades about students’ experiences with hazing BEFORE entering college indicate that hazing is very prevalent in high school sports/clubs, youth church groups and other youth programs.

In addition to the risk of physical harm to those involved in hazing, there are also emotional and psychological consequences. Those who have participated in hazing (both as

victims of hazing and the hazers) reports lower levels of self-esteem and feeling ashamed. This seems to go against the very reason for joining a club or a sports team in the first place, which is to experience a sense of a community and socialization with peers.

What should you do if you are asked to be a part of a “secret initiation” to a club or sports team?

The very first thing that you should do is to tell your parents if you are asked to be involved in an “initiation” to a club or team at a time and location that is isolated and separate from any usual club or team activity. Many students who have experienced hazing did not tell their parents, coaches or club officials because they believed that the parents or coaches wouldn’t know how to handle it. Other students who were hazed admitted feeling embarrassed and feared that they would be punished for participating in the hazing. If you are unsure if an activity is considered “hazing,” visit the website www.stophazing.org for further examples of different types of hazing and how to get help from responsible adults in your life.

What parents and coaches can do to ensure that their children do not become victims of or

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participate in hazing?

First of all, talk to your children about what hazing is, why it happens and the dangers of participating in hazing activities. There are many unfortunate examples in the media of hazing activities gone horribly wrong. Use these media opportunities to discuss hazing with your children including the consequences of being involved in any way in hazing

activities. The main reason students reported that they did not tell anyone about being involved in hazing is that they didn't think their parents/coaches could or would do anything to stop it. Parents can also pro-actively approach school administrators and coaches and inquire about their policy towards hazing. For further information about hazing, visit www.stophazing.org. ▀



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