Sports have always involved team-bonding exercises and various other activities designed to improve interpersonal relationships. The vast majority of these experiences are fun and meaningful and lead to closer relationships within the team. But there is a fine line that is sometimes crossed where a seemingly innocuous activity ends up turning into a dangerous hazing practice, resulting in physical harm and/or emotional damage (and sometimes even crimes).

**Hazing or Team Bonding?**

Hazing is the practice of requiring individuals to go through rituals that often include physical pain, harassment and humiliation in order to be accepted by the group. Team bonding experiences share the same end goal of enhancing relations between team members, but are dramatically different from hazing in that there is no risk for harm, harassment or pain. Examples of team bonding include team dinners and video game competitions, compared to hazing examples that include whipping, spanking or other means of embarrassing and harassing teammates.

To the extent that an experience is considered hazing versus team bonding is somewhat subjective, especially after you get past experiences that are clearly hazing (i.e. forcing someone against his will to be subjected to pain or punishment). While it may be easy to identify hazing practices that cause pain and discomfort, more subtle hazing practices that lead to emotional pain and suffering may not be so easy to see. For example, humiliation practices like forcing an athlete to wear certain clothes (or no clothes at all) may not lead to physical pain, but can still be very devastating emotionally—and in worst-case scenarios can even lead to long-term mental problems, including Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

Making matters worse, it is not uncommon for athletes to seemingly agree to the stunts they are prompted to complete while being hazed, leaving the impression that there isn’t any harm occurring. For example, simply because an athlete willingly allows teammates to tape him up or hit him with a paddle does not mean the athlete wanted to go through the ritual, nor does it imply the athlete isn’t physically or emotionally harmed by what happened (even if he doesn’t say anything). It is important to mention that some acts of hazing can be viewed as criminal in nature, resulting in charges beyond what the school of family established.

**Hazing Issues with Kids**

Hazing practices are of particular concern when it comes to student athletes for a variety of reasons. Kids who are emotionally immature often do not think through the potential dangers of a hazing practice, particularly as this applies to emotional damage that is much more difficult to see. Kids are also more vulnerable to resist being hazed, as most kids will willingly go along with being hazed even when it is clearly against their better interest (the power of peer pressure). And finally, kids are less likely to immediately stop a hazing activity that becomes dangerous compared to adults who typically pick up on more subtle cues and indicators of direct or indirect pain.

**Tips For Parents & Coaches**

1. Team traditions and rituals are not the same as hazing. Team dinners, movie nights and video game competitions are examples of safe team traditions and bonding, while acts that include physical harm and/or humiliation are almost always interpreted as acts of hazing. Make sure the kids you coach and parent know the difference.

2. "Agreeing" to be hazed should be carefully interpreted. Remember, many hazing victims will seemingly go through the hazing ritual without problem only to be "part of the team." This willingness to participate does not mean hazing isn't occurring, nor does it mean the victim wanted to be hazed (psychological group pressure explain why people go along with conformity).

3. Hazing can lead to devastating consequences quickly. While some hazing practices might seem safe, or even funny, keep in mind how quickly things can go wrong and result in pain, serious injury, arrests or even death.

4. Legal ramifications. Hazing is illegal in almost every state, so there are also serious legal concerns to be aware of when dealing with hazing. It is important to make kids aware of this reality, as most kids don’t naturally make the connection that making a teammate go through an initiation drill could be illegal.

5. Speak out, teach and offer support. Coaches need to talk to their teams about the dangers of hazing and make sure to not turn a blind eye when they suspect hazing is happening. Additionally, coaches should teach kids about healthy team bonding while also offering help and support to victims of hazing.

6. Parental involvement is key. Similarly, parents need to talk to their kids about hazing and be proactive when they learn it is occurring.