



AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF CHEERLEADING COACHES AND ADMINISTRATORS

Parent's Guide to Cheerleading Safety

Introduction

With an estimated 3 million participants in the U.S. alone, cheerleading is one of the most popular athletic activities. As cheerleading continues to grow in popularity, it's paramount that the safety of its participants be an integral part of any cheerleading discussion.

The **American Association of Cheerleading Coaches and Administrators** is a nonprofit educational association for the more than 70,000 cheerleading coaches and administrators across the United States. The AACCA is the leading source for cheerleading safety education.

Since it was founded in 1988, the AACCA has been working to apply universal safety standards to decrease the number of injuries and to prevent dangerous stunts, pyramids and tumbling from being included in routines.

Members of the association include youth, junior high school, high school, all-star and college or university coaches/advisors, as well as leading national cheerleading instructional companies dedicated to the safe and responsible practice of student cheerleading.

Why the Parent's Guide?

Cheerleading safety requires a team approach, and that team includes the cheerleaders, coaches, administration and parents. The American Association of Cheerleading Coaches and Administrators (AACCA) developed this *Parent's Guide to Cheerleading Safety* to give parents the tools they need to evaluate the safety of cheer programs.

The cheerleading safety tips included in this guide are to help parents understand the right questions to ask of their children's cheerleading coaches and school administrators, so that all parties are focused on ensuring that recognized safety standards are being observed.

Together, we can minimize the risk to our cheerleaders and maximize the benefits of participation in this popular athletic activity.





AACCA Coaches

The backbone of a great cheerleading squad is a qualified, caring and safety-conscious coach. The AACCA is committed to providing the safest experience possible for cheerleaders everywhere by training coaches who are competent in all aspects of cheerleading and proper safety precautions and measures.

The AACCA offers the most comprehensive safety training in the nation for cheerleading coaches. Coaches who are AACCA certified gain the understanding of how to implement the need for safety as their program evolves.

The AACCA Spirit Safety Certification Program is a lecture course, study manual and timed exam designed to educate cheerleading and dance coaches about their responsibilities in all aspects of spirit safety and risk management.

The course is a three-hour lecture and review of the AACCA Safety Manual directed by an AACCA National Safety Instructor. The course covers such topics as legal and medical responsibilities, spotting, skill progressions, environmental safety concerns, psychological readiness, physical readiness, program evaluation and more. It concludes with a 90-minute, 100-question exam which coaches must pass in order to qualify for certification.



A Chance to Connect (Why You Should Talk to Your Cheerleader About Safety)

Parents use your voice! Talk to your cheerleader about safety. Remember, while you play a key role in helping keep your cheerleader safe, he/she also bears some of the responsibility. It's necessary to communicate to your cheerleader the importance of speaking up when they feel uncomfortable with a particular stunt or tumbling skill.

The issue of cheer safety provides a great opportunity to connect with your cheerleader over a mutual interest. Help your cheerleader stay focused and committed. And support them by instilling good nutritional, health and fitness habits that will help them perform at their best.

Safety Questions to Ask Your Coach or Administrator

- **Has the school or program conducted background checks on our coaches with acceptable outcomes? Is that information on file?**

A school can inspire confidence in its programs and provide peace-of-mind so parents can be confident that their children are safe with their coaches.



- **Is our coach AACCA certified?**

Ask your coach or a school administrator if the coach has received AACCA safety certification. The AACCA Safety Course is required by numerous school districts and states around the country. Safety certification is also required of all NCAA college cheerleading programs. It should be required for yours. If the coach is not safety certified, talk to your child's school administration about the AACCA Safety Course and the benefits it provides to all cheerleading participants.



- **Are squad members aware of the cheerleading safety rules? Has the coach asked each member to sign a document acknowledging their understanding of these rules as well as their agreement to comply with them?**

Cheerleaders also have a responsibility for their own safety. Getting cheerleaders to sign a safety contract drives home the message that cheer safety is serious business, especially as teammates are relying on each other to be at their best during every performance.



It is important for cheerleaders to voice concerns when they are uncomfortable with a particular stunt or tumbling skill. They should take stunting very seriously, and stay focused on the skill and their part in it until it is safely completed.

- **Does our coach adhere to accepted practice and performance guidelines?**

AACCA practice guidelines require direct supervision by a coach with practices held in a location suitable for the activities of cheerleaders (i.e., use of appropriate mats, away from excessive noise and distractions, etc.). Most states require coaches to follow the cheerleading rules put in place by the National Federation of High Schools.

Absence of Safety Measures Could Mean Tough Choices for Parents

If parents find that standard safety practices aren't being employed, they should bring it to the attention of the coach. If that doesn't resolve the matter, parents should not hesitate to take their concerns to the school or program administration. Ultimately, if a parent feels that their child's safety is being compromised, they should take the difficult step of removing the child from the program.



Your program should be following these rules and procedures, which include restrictions on skills such as basket-toss flips, pyramids that are more than two people high and other surface-specific restrictions.



The stunts and tumbling involved in cheerleading should aid the cheerleader in generating excitement and participation by the fans. Performing difficult stunts only for the sake of athleticism should be avoided at games and reserved for competition venues with professional spotters and mats.

- **Does our coach ensure that performance skills are taught in the proper sequence using skills progression training, with an emphasis on training all squad members in proper spotting methods?**

Skills progression training ensures that cheerleaders master foundational skills first then build upon those techniques to learn more difficult and advanced stunts or tumbling. Spotters are responsible for assisting or catching the top person in a stunt with a priority to protect the head, neck and shoulders of the top person coming off of a stunt.



Coaches should ensure that their cheerleaders are in the best physical shape to keep up with the demands of cheerleading.
Ask your coach:



- Does the squad have a structured fitness and conditioning program that has been designed or approved by a qualified person?
- Does the coach keep thorough records of any injuries that may occur to squad members, as well as how and when they are deemed fit to participate in all squad activities?
- Does the coach have an effective way to determine when squad members who have been injured are physically ready to rejoin the squad for normal activities?



Preparing Your Cheerleader

Cheerleading is a high energy, fun athletic activity that fosters strong leadership and communication skills and builds physical strength. In order to perform at the best level possible, cheerleaders are expected to practice frequently and train more often than other activities.

More advanced cheer skills are learned as the child masters the foundation teachings. Skills progression training ensures that participants do not attempt skills that are too advanced and difficult for their current ability. If you are concerned that your cheerleader may be attempting a routine or stunt that is too advanced, please consult your coach and together consider these checklist items and evaluate your child's readiness to perform:

1. Is my child strong enough to perform this skill (which may include, but not be limited to, stunts and pyramids)?
2. Is my child powerful (can produce enough force) enough to perform the necessary skills?
3. Is my child flexible enough to perform the skill requested? Can he/she produce the necessary body positions?
4. Is my child fresh enough to perform the skill? Is he/she fatigued to the extent that the safety and ease of the performance are jeopardized?
5. Does my child adequately understand the skill? Does he/she have the coordination necessary to perform similar skills? Can the skill be broken down into smaller steps to learn?
6. Is the environment conducive to safe and easy performance of the skill? Is there adequate lighting, mats, etc.? Are spotters in place, if needed?

It is important that a cheerleader be in good health and well rested before a performance or practice session. If you suspect your child may not physically be able to participate in an activity, please voice your concerns to the coach or an administrator.



Cheer-LEADER

Cheerleading builds self confidence, leadership and communication skills and involves more than stunts and tumbling. Parents can check-in with coaches to ensure that the cheer program provides the proper balance of practice, athletic training and spirit leadership instruction.

Safety begins with leadership. Instilling these qualities in cheerleaders helps prevent accidents when all squad members hold safety as a priority.



The Emergency Plan

- **Does our squad have an emergency plan in place?**

A comprehensive emergency plan is necessary to provide a quick and effective response to an emergency situation with specific duties assigned to all responders. It is essential to review the plan with your cheerleader so that in an emergency situation, he/she is well equipped to respond.

How ready is my cheerleader's squad for an emergency? If your coach can't answer the questions below, you need an emergency plan!

- Do we have an emergency plan?
- What information do we need to include on our emergency cards?
- Do we have access to a phone during practice?
- Who will contact 911?
- Who will meet the ambulance?

If your team does not have an emergency plan in place, talk to your coach about implementing a plan. The sample emergency plan found on the next page can also be found under the resources section of www.aacca.org.

Questions? Concerns?

Contact Jim Lord, Executive Director of AACCA
Call 800-533-6583 or e-mail jimlord@aacca.org.

Sample Emergency Plan

It is essential that the emergency plan be tailored to fit your squad's specific situation. Coaches may want to write variations of the plan for practice, home games and away games.

PRACTICE

1. BE PREPARED

- A. Create Information Cards for every squad member. Include the following items:**
 - i. Full Name
 - ii. Squad member's home and school address
 - iii. Telephone numbers for the individual's parents and two emergency numbers
 - iv. Allergies
 - v. Previous injuries
 - vi. Family doctor's name
 - vii. Copy of insurance card and/or school insurance number
 - viii. HMO requirements/restrictions

- B. Have medical release forms signed and accessible in the event medical care needs to be administered before a parent can arrive.**

- C. During practice, you must have access to a telephone. Create a sheet for each situation (practice, game, away game, etc.) and fill in the appropriate emergency numbers and addresses. It may seem like a lot of trouble to go through, but it will be well worth it in the event of an emergency. Be sure to keep one copy of the emergency phone list in the squad notebook. Post the following information near the phone.**
 - i. 911 for all emergencies
 - ii. Your school's complete address and phone number
 - iii. The location of the practice/game area ("Auxillary Gym on the corner of Grant and Washington")

2. THE PLAN

- A. Assignments (other than the coach, all other assignments should be shared by at least two cheerleaders in the event one of them is the injured party).**
 - i. During the emergency, the coach will stay with the injured person.
 - ii. Have a reliable person call 911. Give your exact location and the basic information on the injury (head injury, broken leg, etc.) and tell the ambulance service where to enter (south end of the field by the big gym).
 - iii. Send someone to meet the ambulance and direct it to the correct location. Make any additional assignments needed to get the emergency personnel to the practice/game area.
 - iv. Your squad must be properly supervised if you plan to go with the injured person to the hospital.
 - v. Once emergency care is sufficiently under way, immediately contact the cheerleader's parents and then your administration to alert them of the injury and the location of emergency care.

Sample Emergency Plan

B. Practice

- i. At the beginning of the season and periodically during the year, conduct an “Emergency Plan Drill.”
- ii. Have one member act as the injured party and instruct the remaining team members to go through the emergency procedures (other than actually calling 911).
- iii. Evaluate their performance and make any necessary changes to the plan (i.e. construction begins on the side of the building where emergency personnel would normally enter).

3. AWAY GAMES

Before away games, meet with the other team’s cheerleading advisor/coach to confirm the location of the medical staff and telephone.

- i. Any away game emergency plan should also include a passenger list. Make a list of each vehicle’s driver and passengers (check you school’s travel policy on eligible drivers). Keep one copy in each vehicle and one copy with someone at the school in case of emergency. As with the home emergency plan, check all procedures with your athletic trainer, coach, principal and campus security.

Give copies of all plans(s) to your supervisor, to the campus police, to the athletic trainer and to all squad members.