

Code of Conduct Lesson #1

Youth Soccer Referee Abuse Level 1

A guide for parents, coaches & spectators

Based on U.S. Soccer Policy 531-9



Effective
March 2025

Why This Matters

Youth soccer depends on referees. Abuse drives them away.

50%

of new referees quit
within 2–3 years

75%

cite verbal abuse from
adults as #1 reason

0

calls are **EVER** changed
by yelling or threats

WHAT IS LEVEL 1 ABUSE?

Two categories — both carry REAL penalties.

NON-PHYSICAL (Verbal)

Insulting, belittling, insinuating or taunting behavior that undermines a referee's authority.

- Mocking decisions or competence
- Sarcastic or dismissive comments
- Accusations of bias or cheating
- Degrading tone or language

PENALTY: 2-GAME MINIMUM SUSPENSION

PHYSICAL (Touching)

Any minor or slight deliberate touching of the referee is considered physical abuse.

- Tapping shoulder to get attention
- Touching chest with a finger
- Grabbing jersey to get attention
- Lightly bumping into the referee

PENALTY: 3 GAMES + 1-6 MONTHS BAN

"DO YOU EVEN KNOW THE RULES?"

Non-Physical Level 1 Abuse — Questioning Competence

"Do you even know the rules? That's clearly a foul!"

Heard at youth matches across the country

✗ Why This Is Abuse

This directly attacks the referee's authority and competence. Even when you disagree with a call, this language is demeaning and constitutes verbal taunting under Policy 531-9.

✓ Better Approach: If you disagree with a call, take a breath. After the game, the coach can respectfully request a rules clarification.

PENALTY

2-GAME

SUSPENSION

Minimum Suspension

"DID YOU FORGET YOUR GLASSES?"

Non-Physical Level 1 Abuse — Mocking Abilities

"Are you blind? That was clearly offside!"

A 'joke' that's actually abuse

✗ Why This Is Abuse

Mocking the referee's eyesight or perception — even as a so-called joke — belittles their judgment and undermines their authority. The policy applies regardless of intent.

✓ Better Approach: Remember: referees cannot see everything from one angle. Trust the process and model patience for the young players watching you.

PENALTY

2-GAME

SUSPENSION

Minimum Suspension

"WHAT'S THE OTHER TEAM PAYING YOU?"

Non-Physical Level 1 Abuse — Accusations of Bias

"What's the other team paying you? You're only calling fouls on us!"

✗ Why This Is Abuse

Accusing a referee of being bribed or intentionally biased is a serious form of verbal taunting. It damages the referee's credibility and creates a hostile environment — especially harmful to young or new officials.

✓ Better Approach: Perceived bias rarely holds up on review. Focus on your own team's effort instead of trying to build a case against the ref.

PENALTY

2-GAME

SUSPENSION

Minimum Suspension

"YOU SUCK!"

Non-Physical Level 1 Abuse — Dismissive & Degrading Language

"You suck! You're the worst ref we've ever had."

Said within earshot of children on the field

✗ Why This Is Abuse

Dismissive and degrading statements — however brief — constitute verbal taunting. They create a toxic atmosphere, model poor behavior for kids, and can cause real emotional harm to referees.

✓ Better Approach: Young referees in particular are still learning. Encouragement and patience make youth soccer better for everyone — including your own child.

PENALTY

2-GAME

SUSPENSION

Minimum Suspension

IT'S NOT JUST WORDS — GESTURES COUNT TOO

Non-Physical Level 1 Abuse — Insinuating Behavior & Gestures



Exaggerated Eye-Roll

Performed loudly and visibly after a call to mock the referee's decision.



Head in Hands

Theatrical gestures that publicly shame the referee in front of the crowd.



Thumbs Down / Dismissive Wave

Physically signaling contempt for a referee's call — no words needed.

Policy 531-9 covers 'insinuating behavior' — not just spoken words.

Non-physical gestures that undermine a referee's authority carry the same 2-game minimum suspension as verbal insults.

"I JUST TAPPED THEIR SHOULDER"

Physical Level 1 Abuse — Minor or Slight Touching

"I only touched his shoulder to get his attention — I didn't mean anything by it."

✗ Why This Is Abuse

Any deliberate physical contact with a referee is considered physical abuse under Policy 531-9 — regardless of how gentle or well-intentioned. Outside of a post-game handshake, keep your hands to yourself.

✓ Better Approach: To get a referee's attention: raise your hand, wait for a stoppage, or ask your coach to communicate. No touching — ever.

PENALTY

3 GAMES

+ 1–6 MONTHS

Minimum Suspension

"I GRABBED THE REF'S JERSEY"

Physical Level 1 Abuse — Grabbing / Unwanted Contact

"I grabbed their jersey for a second, just to slow them down and talk."

✗ Why This Is Abuse

Even a brief, light grab constitutes physical abuse under Policy 531-9. Referees must feel physically safe at all times. Grabbing clothing is intimidating and crosses a clear line.

✓ Better Approach: Referees are not obligated to engage. If you need to communicate, do it through your coach — calmly and verbally, without any physical contact.

PENALTY

3 GAMES

+ 1-6 MONTHS

Minimum Suspension

"IT WAS JUST A JOKE."

The policy doesn't have a humor exemption.



The policy applies to intent AND impact. A 'joke' that undermines a referee's authority is still Level 1 abuse.



Children are watching your behavior. When adults laugh at the referee, kids learn that disrespect is acceptable.



A 2-game suspension is not a joke. Consequences are real and apply to first-time offenders.

CONSEQUENCES ESCALATE FAST

Policy 531-9 penalties stack — and there is no gradual warning system for serious offenses.

1st

First Offense

Full minimum penalty applies.
No grace period for first-timers
(except 1 warning per league for minor offenses).

2nd

Second Offense

Double punishment. A 2-game suspension becomes 4 games. A 3-game suspension becomes 6 games.

3rd

Third Offense

Lifetime ban from all U.S. Soccer-affiliated matches. This applies to coaches, parents, and spectators — not just players.

⚠ Offenses against minor referees (under 18) carry TRIPLE the penalty automatically.

WHAT YOU CAN DO INSTEAD

Good sportsmanship is a choice. Here's how to make it.

Pause Before Reacting



Take a breath. Emotional reactions are harder to take back than a bad call.

Use Constructive Words



"Tough call, ref" is not abuse. Express yourself calmly and move on.

Route Concerns Through the Coach



Coaches can ask for clarification after play stops. That's the right channel.

Cheer for Your Team, Not Against the Ref



Focus your energy on encouraging the players, not challenging the officials.

Model the Behavior Your Child Needs to See



Kids replicate what adults do. You are part of their soccer education.

Report Abuse You Witness



The policy only works if abuse is reported. Be part of the solution.

**Let's keep the
beautiful game
beautiful for everyone.**

Remember:

The Ref is Human!

