

Youth Safety Standards for Combat Sports Organizations

A Framework for Coaches, Gym Operators, Sanctioning Bodies, and Youth-Serving Programs

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Foreword

This document establishes a framework of youth safety standards for combat sports organizations — martial arts gyms, sanctioning bodies, competition organizers, and youth-serving programs that incorporate combat sports training.

These standards are drawn from CS Combat Sambo League's operational experience, Florida regulatory requirements for amateur combat sports (Chapter 548, F.S. and Rule 61K1-4, F.A.C.), federal and Florida child protection law, and broadly accepted best practices in youth-serving organizations nationwide.

They are published freely because the combat sports field as a whole benefits when more organizations operate with genuine, documented safety standards — regardless of discipline, affiliation, or size.

This document is intended for use by:

Martial arts gym operators and coaches developing or improving youth programs

Sanctioning bodies establishing minimum standards for affiliated organizations

Schools and community organizations considering combat sports programming

Parents evaluating programs for their children

Regulatory bodies and policymakers developing standards for youth combat sports

You do not need to be affiliated with CS Combat Sambo League™ to use this framework.

Part 1: Instructor Qualification Standards

1.1 Background Screening

Standard: Every adult who has contact with minor participants must complete background screening before beginning work with youth. No exceptions.

Recommended minimum: Level 2 background screening — a fingerprint-based check searching state and national criminal history databases. This is the standard used in Florida schools, licensed childcare facilities, and other youth-serving settings. Organizations in other states should use the equivalent standard required for youth-serving settings in their jurisdiction.

Renewal: Background screening must be renewed on the schedule required by applicable state law.

Documentation: Organizations must maintain records of completed background screenings for all staff and volunteers with youth contact, including dates of completion and renewal.

Disqualifying factors: Any conviction involving violence, sexual misconduct, child abuse or neglect, or crimes against persons should automatically disqualify an individual from working with minor participants. Organizations should consult applicable state law for mandatory disqualifying offenses.

1.2 SafeSport or Equivalent Training

Standard: Every instructor who works with minor participants must complete training in recognizing and responding to abuse, misconduct, and grooming behaviors in youth sports environments.

Recommended program: SafeSport (safesport.org) is the most widely recognized program in the United States for this purpose and is required by many national sports governing bodies. Equivalent programs meeting the same content standards are acceptable.

Content requirements: Qualifying training must cover, at minimum: definitions of abuse and misconduct; recognizing warning signs of grooming and abuse; appropriate response to disclosures; reporting obligations; and appropriate use of technology and social media in youth sports contexts.

Renewal: SafeSport Core certification must be renewed annually.

For at-risk youth programs: Organizations serving youth in foster care, juvenile justice, or other at-risk circumstances should require additional training in trauma-informed practice before assigning instructors to those populations.

1.3 Instructor Certification and Competency

Standard: Instructors delivering youth programming must demonstrate competency in both the technical content they teach and the developmental and safety considerations specific to working with youth.

Recommended elements of instructor certification:

Demonstrated technical competency in the discipline being taught. Training in age-appropriate instruction and youth development principles

Understanding of mandatory reporting obligations

Completion of background screening and SafeSport or equivalent training

Supervised instruction period before independent instruction of youth participants

Documentation: Organizations should maintain written records of instructor certifications, including dates of completion and renewal for all required training components.

Part 2: Operational Safety Standards

2.1 The Two-Adult Rule

Standard: No adult instructor or staff member should ever be alone with a minor participant. At every session, at every location, at least two qualified adults must be present.

Implementation: "Alone" includes any situation in which an adult could be isolated with a minor, even briefly — in a changing area, in a vehicle, in a closed room, or during one-on-one instruction. The Two-Adult Rule applies to all of these situations.

When two adults are unavailable: If two qualified adults cannot be present for a session, the session must not happen. There are no exceptions to this standard.

Documentation: Session logs should record the names of all adults present at each session.

2.2 Physical Contact Protocols

Combat sports training involves significant physical contact between participants. This contact is inherent to the discipline and cannot be eliminated. What can — and must — be managed is how that contact is introduced, supervised, and bounded.

Standards for all youth programs:

Physical contact must be introduced gradually, with particular care for new and younger participants. The first priority is establishing comfort and trust before introducing more intense contact.

Verbal communication about physical contact must be normalized — instructors should model checking in with partners ("I'm going to grab your wrist, okay?") so that consent and communication become habitual rather than exceptional.

No participant should ever be forced to engage at a level of physical contact beyond their demonstrated comfort. Instructors must be trained to recognize and respond to signs of discomfort or distress.

Contact between instructors and minor participants must always be technical in nature — related to instruction — and must never occur in private.

Additional standards for at-risk youth programs:

Organizations serving trauma-exposed youth must ensure that instructors have received specific training in trauma-informed physical contact before working with those populations. Physical contact that would be unremarkable with a typical youth participant may be highly distressing to a youth with a trauma history. Instructors must be trained to recognize this and adapt accordingly.

2.3 Facility Safety Standards

Standard: Training facilities must meet minimum safety requirements before youth programming begins.

Required elements:

Training surface: Appropriate matting covering the full training area, with no exposed hard surfaces at the edges. Mats must be in good repair — no tears, gaps, or compressed areas that reduce impact absorption.

Perimeter: The training area must be clear of hazards — no exposed equipment, furniture, or obstacles within the training space or within the fall zone around its perimeter.

Environmental conditions: Adequate lighting, ventilation, and temperature control for physical activity. Access to clean drinking water.

Medical readiness: A stocked first aid kit accessible at every session. Instructors must know its location and basic first aid procedures.

Emergency procedures: Written emergency procedures posted visibly in the facility, including emergency contact numbers, location of first aid equipment, and evacuation procedures.

For competition events: Additional facility requirements apply for sanctioned competition, including dedicated medical personnel, competition area specifications, and equipment standards. Organizations should consult the applicable state athletic commission's requirements for their jurisdiction.

2.4 Equipment Standards.Standard: All equipment used in youth training and competition must be appropriate for the participant's age, size, and experience level, and must be maintained in safe condition.

General principles:

Equipment must fit correctly. Ill-fitting protective equipment provides reduced protection and may itself create hazards.

Equipment must be inspected regularly and replaced when worn, damaged, or no longer providing adequate protection.

Participants must not be permitted to train or compete without required protective equipment.

For competition: Equipment requirements for sanctioned competition must be defined in writing and enforced consistently. All equipment used in competition must be approved by the sanctioning organization before use.

2.5 Medical Standards

For training programs:

A stocked first aid kit must be present at every session. Instructors must be trained in basic first aid and know when to refer participants for professional medical evaluation.

Participants with known medical conditions that may affect their safety during physical activity must have written medical clearance before beginning training.

Any injury occurring during training must be documented in writing, including the nature of the injury, the circumstances, and any action taken.

For sanctioned competition:

A licensed physician must be present at every sanctioned competition event involving contact or combat.

Every competitor must complete a pre-competition physical examination by a licensed physician before competing. This requirement admits no exceptions.

A post-competition medical evaluation must be conducted for every competitor following their bout.

Medical suspension protocols must be defined in writing and enforced consistently. Any competitor issued a medical suspension must not be permitted to compete until the suspension has expired and any required medical clearance has been obtained.

Part 3: Youth Protection Policies

3.1 Mandatory Reporting

Standard: Every adult who works with minor participants in a youth combat sports program is a mandatory reporter under the law of their state and must understand and fulfill their reporting obligations.

In Florida: Florida Statute §39.201 requires any person who knows or has reasonable cause to suspect that a child is abused, abandoned, or neglected to report that suspicion to the Florida Department of Children and Families. The DCF Hotline is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week: 1-800-962-2873.

Organizations operating in other states should ensure that all staff understand the mandatory reporting requirements of their jurisdiction. Mandatory reporting obligations vary by state.

Organizational policy: Organizations must have a written mandatory reporting policy that is communicated to all staff and volunteers before they begin working with youth participants. This policy must be reviewed and signed by each staff member and volunteer annually.

No internal reporting requirement: Mandatory reporters are not required to report to their organization before reporting to the appropriate authority. An instructor who has reasonable cause to suspect abuse must report directly to the appropriate authority, regardless of whether they have first reported internally.

3.2 Photography and Video Policy

Standard: Organizations must have a written policy governing photography and video of minor participants before any photography or video is taken.

Minimum requirements:

Written consent from a parent or guardian must be obtained before any minor participant is photographed, filmed, or recorded.

Consent must be specific about how images and video may be used — social media, promotional materials, internal records, etc. — and must not be assumed to extend beyond what was specifically consented to. For programs serving at-risk youth: The default must be NO photography or video of any participant unless affirmatively cleared for each individual. Many youth in foster care, domestic violence situations, or juvenile justice involvement have safety-related reasons why their image cannot be publicly shared. Organizations must not assume that general consent applies to these participants.

Organizations must have a process for identifying which participants have photography restrictions and ensuring that those restrictions are communicated to all staff, volunteers, and event photographers.

3.3 Social Media and Electronic Communication Policy

Standard: Organizations must have a written policy governing electronic communication between instructors and minor participants.

Minimum requirements:

Instructors should not communicate with minor participants through private channels — direct messages, personal email, personal phone — without a parent or guardian copied or informed.

All communication between instructors and minor participants should be capable of review by a parent, guardian, or organizational supervisor.

Instructors should not follow or be followed by minor participants on personal social media accounts. Communications should occur through official organizational channels.

3.4 Participant Confidentiality

Standard: Participant information — including identity, contact information, medical history, and program participation — must be treated as confidential and shared only with those who need it for program delivery purposes.

For at-risk youth programs: Heightened confidentiality standards apply. The identity, program participation, and any information about the circumstances that led to referral must be protected. This information must not be shared with other participants, parents of other participants, media, or the general public without specific written consent.

Part 4: Competition Safety Standards

4.1 Eligibility Verification

Standard: Organizations must verify competitor eligibility before permitting participation in sanctioned competition.

Minimum verification requirements:

Age verification: Competitors must meet the minimum age requirement for their competition category. For adult competition involving striking, competitors must be 18 or older.

Amateur status: In competition categories restricted to amateur athletes, organizations must verify that competitors have not competed professionally in combat sports. Permitting professional athletes to compete against amateur athletes creates significant safety and regulatory risks.

Medical clearance: Every competitor must have completed a pre-competition physical examination by a licensed physician. Competitors without medical clearance must not be permitted to compete.

Identity verification: Competitors must compete under their legal name. The use of ring names or aliases in official competition records creates regulatory and medical record-keeping problems.

4.2 Weight Class Management

Standard: Organizations must use defined weight classes and enforce weigh-in procedures consistently to minimize size disparities between competitors.

Weigh-in timing: Official weigh-ins must be conducted within a defined window before competition — sufficient time before the event to allow competitors to rehydrate and recover, but close enough to competition to be meaningful. CSL follows Florida's requirement of no more than 24 hours before and no less than 2 hours before the first bout.

Weight class documentation: The weight classes used must be defined in writing and published in advance of competition. Competitors must be informed of their weight class assignment before weigh-in.

4.3 Competition Area Standards

Standard: The competition area must meet defined safety specifications before any competition takes place. For fenced competition areas (octagon): The fence must be of sufficient height and construction to prevent competitors from falling through or over it. All fence components must be in good repair with no sharp edges or protrusions. The competition surface must be appropriately padded and in good condition.

Perimeter: The area surrounding the competition surface must be clear of hazards and must provide sufficient space for competitor safety in the event of a fall or exit from the competition area.

Medical station: A dedicated medical station must be established at the competition venue and must be accessible to medical personnel throughout the event.

4.4 Officials Standards

Standard: All competition officials — referees, judges, timekeepers — must be qualified for their role and familiar with the competition rules before officiating.

Referee authority: The referee must have the authority to stop a contest at any time for safety reasons, without requiring agreement from other officials, coaches, or competitors. This authority must be clearly established and communicated before competition begins.

Medical authority: The ringside physician must have the authority to examine any competitor at any time and to stop a contest on medical grounds. This authority supersedes all other considerations.

Part 5: Implementing These Standards

5.1 Documentation Requirements

Standards that are not written down are not standards — they are intentions. The following documentation is the minimum required for an organization claiming to operate under youth safety standards:

Written instructor qualification requirements, including background screening and SafeSport or equivalent training requirements

Written session safety protocols, including the Two-Adult Rule and physical contact guidelines

Written youth protection policies, including mandatory reporting, photography, and electronic communication policies

Written competition safety standards, if the organization conducts sanctioned competition

Records of completed background screenings and training for all staff and volunteers with youth contact

Incident documentation procedures and records

5.2 Staff Training and Communication

Written standards are only effective if all staff understand and follow them. Organizations must:

Communicate all written standards to staff and volunteers before they begin working with youth participants

Require staff and volunteers to sign acknowledgment that they have received, read, and understood the standards

Provide initial training on key standards — particularly mandatory reporting and physical contact protocols — before staff begin working with youth

Conduct periodic refresher training, at minimum annually

Maintain records of all training completed

5.3 Incident Response

Organizations must have written procedures for responding to safety incidents before an incident occurs. At minimum, these procedures must address:

Immediate response to injuries during training or competition

Response to disclosures of abuse or neglect by a participant

Response to alleged misconduct by an instructor or staff member

Documentation requirements for all incidents

Communication with parents or guardians following an incident

Reporting obligations to regulatory authorities

5.4 Quality Assurance

Organizations should establish periodic review processes to verify that written standards are being followed in practice. Reviews should include observation of actual training sessions, review of documentation records, and direct communication with participants and their families.

About This Document

This framework was developed by CS Combat Sambo League™ based on our experience operating youth combat sports programs in Jacksonville, Florida, and our engagement with Florida's regulatory framework for amateur combat sports. We publish it freely because we believe the combat sports field benefits when more organizations operate with genuine, documented safety standards. These standards are not proprietary — they are our best understanding of what responsible youth combat sports programming looks like, offered to the field for use, adaptation, and improvement.

We welcome feedback from coaches, gym operators, sanctioning bodies, regulators, youth-serving organizations, and families. If you have identified gaps, errors, or improvements to this framework, we want to hear from you.

About CS Combat Sambo League™

CS Combat Sambo League™ is operated by AK Legacy INC, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization based in Jacksonville, Florida. We are the first structured Combat Sambo sanctioning and training organization in the United States.

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