



Cheerleading Safety Guidelines

Cheerleading has fast become a “sport” of its own and many school districts have squads eager to participate in competitions and to press the limits of physical ability, as well as gravity in performing stunts.

Injuries resulting from cheerleading accidents can be very serious, including broken bones and permanent disability.

A litigated case in Los Angeles County Superior Court (*Aaris v. Las Virgenes Unified School District*) involved a cheerleading injury and was decided in favor of the school district (the decision was affirmed in the appellate court).



In the ruling, the appellate judge, Judge J. Yegan, observed that, “Not so very long ago, a row of docile cheerleaders would say, rah, rah, rah... maybe a leg or two would kick up into the air, perhaps a jump under the cheerleader’s own power... That, however, was yesterday. Today, even appellant (*Aaris*) recognizes... the acrobatic gymnastic nature of modern cheerleading. It is not unusual for modern cheerleaders to perform gymnastic stunts which may catapult a cheerleader many feet into the air. What goes up, must come down. This includes cheerleaders. Whenever gravity is at play with the human body, the risk of injury is inherent. While the appellate court has the power to change the law, we cannot change the law of gravity.”

Although the school district prevailed in the decision, it is important to note that several factors played a role in deciding the case. They include:

1. The cheerleader had received formal stunt safety training and knew the stunts were dangerous.
2. She attended cheerleading camps and received hours of instruction regarding stunts and maneuvers.
3. Her coach emphasized safety and properly supervised her when she was injured.
4. Her coach did not increase the risk of harm inherent in the activity.
5. The cheerleader’s mother signed a release on behalf of her child that barred recovery.

The above factors significantly influenced the outcome of the case and should be considered by every school district administrator with respect to the framework of their cheerleading program.

The minimum components of a cheerleading program should include: a knowledgeable (formally trained) coach, adequate practice facilities with matting, written safety procedures with formal instruction, emergency response plan, staff CPR/first aid training, and parent waivers.

Because skill level and physical ability varies dramatically by age, it is imperative that age-appropriate programs are implemented.

The American Association of Cheerleading Coaches and Advisors (AACA) publish guidelines which, if followed, can help increase safety for the participants. The publication Cheerleading Safety Manual can be obtained by calling AACCA at 1-800-533-6583 or by ordering from their website at www.aacca.org

A copy of the current rules and guidelines is also available on the AACCA website. Cheerleading coaches and advisors should check the site at the beginning of each year to make sure they have a current version of the guidelines (updates are made annually).

The guidelines will provide information about prohibited activities, which include, but are not limited to: all vaults, free falling flips, skills or swan dives from any type of toss or pyramid, backward suspended rolls, backward dismounts, twists greater than two rotations, and knee drops. **See the current AACCA document for a complete listing of prohibited activities. Please note there are additional restrictions for elementary, middle and junior high school students.**

General safety guidelines are also outlined in the AACCA guidelines, which provide guidance regarding supervision, training of adult advisors, practice safeguards, clothing restrictions, etc.

Copies of the guidelines should be distributed to all squad members and any administrators involved with the cheerleading program. All guidelines should be understood and accepted by all parties involved in the cheerleading program, including advisors, coaches, assistants, squad members, parents, and administrators.

Even when following the AACCA guidelines, there is still inherent risk involved in cheerleading activities. All cheerleading gymnastics, including tumbling, partner stunts, pyramids, and jumps should be carefully reviewed and supervised by a qualified adult advisor or coach.

For additional information, contact the American Association of Cheerleading Coaches and Advisors (AACCA) on their website at <http://www.aacca.org>

SISC has developed a template CHEERLEADING PARTICIPATION FORM which can be obtained from the Risk Management Services website in the Forms section, at the following address:

<http://sisc.kern.org/safetyandlosscontrol/forms.html>

