

Boundaries & Consent in Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu

A Safety & Empowerment Guide for Female Students

Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu (BJJ) is a close-contact martial art built on trust, respect, and mutual safety. Every student has the right to train in an environment free from coercion, harassment, and abuse. This handout, available on ACTSelfDefense.org, provides clear information to help you recognize healthy boundaries, understand your rights, and know where to seek support if something feels wrong. It was created to support athlete safety, informed consent, and ethical instruction in Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu and other martial arts. Free to use, share, and distribute.

Key Terms to Know

Consent

A clear, voluntary, and ongoing agreement to participate in training activities. Consent:

- Can be withdrawn at any time
- Is never implied by rank, loyalty, or prior behavior
- Is invalid if pressure, fear, rewards, or threats are involved

Coercion

Pressure or manipulation used to obtain compliance, often without overt force. In BJJ, this may include:

- Suggesting or implying promotions, opportunities, or special treatment in exchange for personal or sexual attention
- Threats to delay promotions or opportunities
- Making someone feel they “owe” an instructor or teammate
- Using rank or authority to pressure someone into a situation they are uncomfortable with
- Making someone feel they “owe” an instructor or teammate

Harassment

Unwanted verbal, physical, or digital behavior that creates a hostile or uncomfortable environment. This may include:

- Sexual comments or jokes
- Repeated unwanted messaging
- Persistent attention after being told no
- Boundary-crossing physical contact

Assault

Any sexual contact without consent, including contact obtained through coercion, intimidation, or abuse of authority. This includes touching, groping, or any sexual act that occurs without clear, voluntary agreement.

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Power Dynamics in Martial Arts

BJJ has a hierarchical belt system that gives instructors and higher belts influence over promotions, competition opportunities, and social standing.

- Legitimate advancement in BJJ is based on skill, time, consistency, and performance. It is never tied to personal, romantic, or sexual favors.
- A respectful instructor maintains professional boundaries and welcomes questions or concerns
- Healthy leadership is transparent, consistent, and accountable.

This structure is designed to provide a positive, supporting learning and safety. However, it can be exploited to manipulate students, especially newer or younger ones.

Recognizing Grooming & Coercive Behaviors

Grooming is a pattern of behaviors used to build trust, test boundaries. It is a gradual process where someone in authority builds trust to exploit it. Instructors or higher belts may exploit their position through:

- **Isolation:** Encouraging one-on-one time away from others, especially in homes, hotel rooms, secluded locations, or late-night training.
- **Favoritism/Special Attention:** Excessive praise, gifts, extra mat time, or sudden "mentorship".
- **Gradual Boundary Crossing:** Starting with innocent touches (e.g., "adjustments"), then escalating to unnecessary or prolonged contact.
- **Implying or Promising Advancement:** Hinting that belt promotions, competition help, or career support depend on compliance or favors.
- **Excessive Messaging:** Frequent personal texts/calls outside class, especially late or personal topics.
- **Secret-Keeping:** Asking you not to tell others about conversations, meetings, or interactions
- **Alcohol/Drugs:** Introducing substances to lower inhibitions or create dependency.
- **Pressure to Ignore Discomfort:** Invalidating your concerns by dismissing them with "It's just BJJ", "Toughen up", or "Don't you trust me?"

Legitimate mentorship does not involve secrecy, isolation, or sexual undertones.

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Bodily Autonomy During Training

BJJ requires close physical contact, but you always have the right to control what happens to your body. You have the right to:

- Decline a partner for any reason
- Stop a drill or roll at any time
- Speak up if contact feels inappropriate or unnecessary
- Leave the mat or a school without explanation

Appropriate vs. Inappropriate Contact

Appropriate:

- Contact required for the technique being taught
- Clear, professional instruction
- Touching that is explained and expected within the drill

Inappropriate:

- Touching unrelated to the technique
- Lingering, intimate, or sexualized contact
- “Adjustments” that involve sensitive areas without explanation
- Any contact after you’ve said no

Your comfort matters as much as your safety. If someone ignores your boundaries, it is not "part of training."

Documentation & Reporting

If you experience or witness misconduct:

- **Preserve Evidence:** Save texts/messages, note dates/times/details/witnesses, take photos if safe (e.g., of inappropriate messages).
- **Report Internally:** Tell trusted gym ownership/management immediately. Many gyms have zero-tolerance policies.
- **Governing Bodies:** For IBJJF-affiliated schools, report via SafeSport training requirements or directly to IBJJF (ibjjf.com/safe-sport for misconduct awareness and reporting resources). They enforce bans for violations.
- **Law Enforcement:** For assault or crimes, contact police. Sexual assault is a crime, regardless of context.

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Support Resources

You are not alone. Seek help anytime:

- **National Sexual Assault Hotline (RAINN):** Free, confidential, 24/7. Call 800-656-HOPE (4673) or chat at rainn.org/hotline. Text "HOPE" to 64673.
- **Local Sexual Assault Services:** Search for rape crisis centers or hotlines in your area (e.g., via rainn.org).
- **Counseling/Legal Aid:** Many offer free/sliding-scale support for survivors.
- **BJJ-Specific Networks:** Women's grappling groups (e.g., Facebook communities like Women's Grappling Network) or leaders in local women's-only BJJ classes

Bystander Intervention

A strong training community looks out for one another

- **Recognize Warning Signs:** See isolation, favoritism, or discomfort? Check in privately ("Are you okay with that?").
- **Intervene Safely:** Use the 5 Ds — Distract (change the subject), Delegate (get help from staff), Document (note details), Delay (follow up later), Direct (calmly say "That's not okay").
- **Support Peers:** Listen without judgment, believe survivors, encourage reporting, and avoid gossip.
- **Promote Culture:** Speak up against inappropriate jokes or behavior, silence enables problems.

Safety on the mat is a shared responsibility, and collective awareness strengthens the entire community.

If something feels off, trust your instincts. Talk to a trusted person or use resources above. BJJ should empower you, never exploit you.