

A photograph of two children wearing hockey helmets and face masks, smiling. The child on the right is wearing a blue jersey with a cartoon character on it. The background is a blurred crowd of spectators.

Chapter 5 **Protection**

PROTECTION

Child protection policies and procedures should be adopted by all Governing Bodies/Sports Clubs and supported by their constitutions.

A central goal for all involved in children's sport is to provide a safe, positive and nurturing environment where children can develop and enhance their physical and social skills. Promoting a child-centred ethos should go hand in hand with identifying and eliminating practices that impact negatively on safe and enjoyable participation in children's sport.

5.1 AREAS OF RISK FOR CHILDREN IN SPORT

Awareness of risk to children's happiness and welfare in sport should be seen as central to protection against harm. Such risk could include the following:

- children suffering significant harm by being deprived of proper supervision and safety
- Sports Leaders, parents/guardians subjecting children to constant criticism, sarcasm, rejection, threatening behaviour or pressure to perform at unrealistic levels
- the infliction of any form of non-accidental injury or other forms of child abuse (See 5.8)

5.2 SUBSTANCE ABUSE IN SPORT

- the use of drugs, alcohol and tobacco should be actively discouraged as being incompatible with a healthy approach to sporting activity
- the use of alcohol before coaching, during sessions and events and on away trips should be avoided
- under-age clubs and teams should be encouraged to organise receptions and celebrations in a non-alcoholic environment and in a manner that is suitable for the age group concerned. Adults should act as role models for appropriate behaviour and refrain from drinking alcohol at such functions
- Sports Leaders should promote fair competition through the development of sound training practice and should actively discourage the use of any substance that is perceived to offer short cuts to improved performances or to by-pass the commitment and hard work required to achieve success
- it is the responsibility of all Sports Leaders to educate and inform those in their care as to the short and long-term effects of substances taken to enhance performances. Officials should also ensure that those in their charge are aware of the harmful side effects or the illegality of proscribed drugs or other banned performance-enhancing substances
- Sports Leaders in children's sport should refrain from seeking sponsorship from the alcohol and tobacco industries

Children and parents/guardians involved in sport should be aware of the Sports Councils' Anti-Doping Programmes, see www.irishsportsCouncil.ie / www.ukSport.gov.uk/did

5.3 PSYCHOLOGICAL STRESS, BURNOUT AND DROPOUT OF CHILDREN IN SPORT

Burnout may be defined as a process resulting from an activity that was once a source of fun and personal satisfaction, but later becomes associated with progressive physical and psychological distress. There is a range of factors, which may cause this change, some of which are not associated with the child's sporting activities. Burnout itself may result from a combination of the number of hours involved in physical training with high expectations and pressure from Sports Leaders and parents/guardians. It represents a loss of energy and enthusiasm for sport and is characterised by anxiety and stress. The child no longer has fun and becomes overwhelmed by the demands of competition and training. S/he may wish to drop out of sport.

Within a sporting context the following practices are harmful to children's health and welfare:

- pressuring a child to perform at a level which is beyond his/her capacity based on age or maturation level
- over-training or the making of demands on a child that lead to burnout
- knowingly permitting an injured child to participate in a sporting activity
- failure to take adequate precautions to protect a child from environmental hazards
- failure to take account of known ailments or relevant weaknesses of a child

Psychological stress within the sporting context can be caused by:

- over-emphasis on winning
- age-inappropriate expectations
- excessive criticism
- inappropriate use of sanctions/discipline
- rejection
- disapproval of skill/performance ability
- failure to provide support and encouragement for effort and achievement
- failure to involve a child/children as fully as possible in the activity
- the use of coarse, inappropriate language

5.3.1 Signs of psychological stress and burnout

- sleep disturbance
- irritability
- tension
- lack of energy
- sadness/depression
- frequent illness
- loss of interest and enthusiasm
- absenteeism, arriving late, leaving early
- no pleasurable anticipation of participation in sporting events

5.3.2 Combating psychological stress and burnout

Children who show an early aptitude for sport are very often asked to participate in a range of team sports or across a range of age groups. This can put them at risk of stress and burnout.

Stress and burnout can be prevented and dropout rates reduced by measures such as:

- listening to and respecting children's views about participation
- parents/guardians and Sports Leaders de-emphasising the importance of winning and encouraging the development of individual skills and effort instead
- attaining an appropriate match between the individual child's ability and the activity in which s/he is participating
- ensuring that the physical or sporting abilities of the child are not viewed by the child as indications of his/her self worth
- ensuring that children have fun and enjoy activities in which they are involved

- encouraging younger children to play a variety of different sports both at individual and at team level. This promotes variety and encourages a range of different sport skills in participants
- using modified games
- maximising the involvement of children by using substitutions
- ensuring that children are not participating in adverse climatic conditions

5.4 BULLYING

The risk of bullying and harassment by adults and by children should be anticipated by taking active steps to prevent it occurring. A prompt and decisive response should be made to any indications that it is taking place.

5.4.1 What is Bullying?

Bullying is *repeated* aggression be it verbal, psychological or physical, which is conducted by an individual or group against others. It is behaviour, which is intentionally aggravating and intimidating and occurs mainly among children in social environments such as schools, sports clubs and other organisations working with children. It includes behaviours such as teasing, taunting, threatening, hitting or extortion by one or more children against a victim. It is the responsibility of Sports Leaders to deal with bullying that may take place in the organisation. Each club/organisation should have a clear policy on bullying which is known to members and implemented by Sports Leaders. Incidents of bullying should be dealt with immediately and not tolerated under any circumstances.

Many children are reluctant to tell adults that they are being bullied. Older children are even more reluctant. This underlines the need for constant vigilance and encouragement to report bullying.

5.4.2 Combating Bullying

All clubs/organisations should have an anti-bullying policy, which includes the following measures:

- raising awareness of bullying as an unacceptable form of behaviour
- creating a club ethos which encourages children, Sports Leaders and parents/guardians to report bullying and to use the procedures of the complaints mechanism of the organisation to address this problem
- providing comprehensive supervision of children at all sporting activities
- providing a supportive environment for victims of bullying
- obtaining the co-operation of parents/guardians to counter bullying

For further information see www.irishsportscouncil.ie/code
and www.sportni.net/childprotection

5. 5 CHILD ABUSE

A sports club/organisation, like any other organisation that includes children among its members, is vulnerable to the occurrence of child abuse. This possibility should be openly acknowledged and addressed in its formal policies and procedures. An environment, in which awareness of what constitutes abusive behaviour and a willingness to tackle the issue head on, is the most likely to contribute to the implementation of effective child protection measures. It is only by discussing and agreeing procedures and best practice that all Sports Leaders can be assured that they are providing the safest and most enjoyable experiences in sport for the children and for themselves.

5. 6 CHILD PROTECTION IN SPORT

The prevention and detection of child abuse depends on the collaborative effort of everyone concerned. The following factors are central to effective child protection in sport:

- acceptance by all involved with children that abuse, whether physical, emotional, neglect or sexual is wrong, severely damages children and must be confronted
- awareness of the behavioural and physical indicators of various forms of abuse
- knowledge of the appropriate response and action to be taken where abuse is revealed or suspected
- vigilance, and avoidance of all situations conducive to risk
- open, trusting and co-operative relationships within the club/organisation, and with parents/guardians and others concerned with children's progress or welfare
- willingness to co-operate with the Statutory Authorities (police authorities, health services executives or social services), in relation to sharing information about child protection concerns at any time

5. 7 HARM

Harm can be defined as the ill-treatment or the impairment of the health or development of a child. Whether it is significant is determined by his/her health and the development as compared to that which could reasonably be expected of a child of similar age, (Children First or Children (NI) Order Article 66 3.2.2).

5. 8 CATEGORIES OF ABUSE

All Sports Leaders should be familiar with signs and behaviours that may be indicative of child abuse. Though a child may be subjected to more than one type of harm, abuse is normally categorised into four different types: neglect, emotional abuse, physical abuse and sexual abuse. For detailed definitions of abuse, refer to Children First: National Guidelines for the Protection and Welfare of Children (R.O.I.) and Co-operating (N.I.) to Safeguard Children. The categories of abuse may be briefly summarised as follows:

1. Child Neglect

Neglect is normally defined in terms of an omission, where a child suffers significant harm or impairment of development by being deprived of food, clothing, warmth, hygiene, intellectual stimulation, supervision and safety, attachment to and affection from adults, or medical care. It may also include neglect of a child's basic emotional needs.

Neglect generally becomes apparent in different ways over a period of time rather than at one specific point. For instance, a child who suffers a series of minor injuries is not having his or her needs for supervision and safety met. The threshold of significant harm is reached when abusive interactions dominate and become typical of the relationship between the child and the parent/guardian.

2. Emotional Abuse

Emotional abuse is normally to be found in the relationship between an adult and a child rather than in a specific event or pattern of events. It occurs when a child's need for affection, approval, consistency and security are not met. It is rarely manifested in terms of physical symptoms. For children with disabilities it may include over-protection or conversely failure to acknowledge or understand a child's disability.

Examples of emotional abuse include:

- (a) Persistent criticism, sarcasm, hostility or blaming;
- (b) Where the level of care is conditional on his or her behaviour;
- (c) Unresponsiveness, inconsistent or unrealistic expectations of a child;
- (d) Premature imposition of responsibility on the child;
- (e) Over or under protection of the child;
- (f) Failure to provide opportunities for the child's education and development;
- (g) Use of unrealistic or over-harsh disciplinary measures;
- (h) Exposure to domestic violence.

Some level of emotional abuse is involved in all types of ill treatment of a child, though it may occur alone. The threshold of significant harm is reached when abusive interactions dominate and become typical of the relationship between the child and the parent/guardian.

3. Physical Abuse

Physical abuse is any form of non-accidental injury that causes significant harm to a child, including:

- (a) Shaking, hitting or throwing
- (b) Use of excessive force in handling;
- (c) Deliberate poisoning;
- (d) Suffocation or drowning
- (e) Munchausen's syndrome by proxy (where parents/guardians fabricate stories of illness about their child or cause physical signs of illness);
- (f) Allowing or creating a substantial risk of significant harm to a child;
- (g) For children with disabilities it may include confinement to a room or cot, or incorrectly given drugs to control behaviour
- (h) Burning or scalding

4. Sexual Abuse

Sexual abuse occurs when a child is used by another person for his or her gratification or sexual arousal, or for that of others, For example:

- (a) Exposure of the sexual organs or any sexual act intentionally performed in the presence of a child;
- (b) Intentional touching or molesting of the body of a child whether by a person or object for the purpose of sexual arousal or gratification;
- (c) Masturbation in the presence of a child or involvement of the child in the act of masturbation;
- (d) Sexual intercourse with the child, whether oral, vaginal or anal;
- (e) Sexual exploitation of a child;
- (f) It may include non-contact activities, such as involving children in looking at pornographic material or watching sexual activities, or encouraging children to behave in sexually inappropriate ways.

5.9 SIGNS OF CHILD ABUSE

Signs of abuse can be physical, behavioural or developmental. A cluster or pattern of signs is the most reliable indicator of abuse. Indicators should be noted. It is important, however, to realise that all of these indicators can occur in other situations where abuse has not been a factor, and that the list is not exhaustive. For further information see Appendix 1, Children First (R.O.I.) or Appendix 2, ACPC Regional Policy & Procedures (NI). Some examples include:-

CATEGORY	Indicators	
ABUSE	Physical	Behavioural
PHYSICAL	Unexplained bruising in soft tissue areas Bites, burns and scalds	Becoming withdrawn or aggressive Reluctance to change clothing
EMOTIONAL	Drop in performance Crying	Regressive behaviour Excessive clinginess
NEGLECT	Weight loss Untreated fractures	Changes in attendance Reluctance to go home
SEXUAL	Torn or bloodstained clothing Inappropriate sexual awareness, behaviour or language	Distrustful of adults Sudden drop in performance

5.10 GROUNDS FOR CONCERN

Consider the possibility of child abuse if there are reasonable grounds for concern. Reasonable grounds for concern (page 38, Children First 4.3.2, ACPC Regional Policy and Procedures Appendix 2), exist when there is:

- a specific indication from a child that s/he has been abused
- an account by a person who saw the child being abused
- evidence, *such as an injury or behaviour* which is consistent with abuse and unlikely to be caused another way
- an injury or behaviour which is consistent both with abuse and with an innocent explanation but where there are corroborative indicators supporting the concern that it may be a case of abuse. An example of this would be a pattern of injuries, an implausible explanation, other indications of abuse, dysfunctional behaviour;
- consistent indication, over a period of time, that a child is suffering from emotional or physical neglect

5.11 PROTECTIONS FOR PERSONS REPORTING CHILD ABUSE ACT, 1998 (IRL)

The Protections for Persons Reporting Child Abuse Act, 1998 provides immunity from civil liability to persons who report child abuse “reasonably and in good faith” to the Health Board (*now Health Services Executives*) or the Gardai. This means that, even if a reported suspicion of child abuse proves unfounded, a plaintiff who took an action would have to prove that the reporter had not acted reasonably and in good faith in making the report.

This Act came into operation on 23rd January, 1999. The main provisions of the Act are:

- (1) the provision of immunity from civil liability to any person who reports child abuse “reasonably and in good faith” to designated officers of Health Boards (*now HSE*) or any member of An Garda Síochána;
- (2) the provision of significant protections for employees who report child abuse. These protections cover all employees and all forms of discrimination up to and including, dismissal;
- (3) the creation of a new offence of false reporting of child abuse where a person makes a report of child abuse to the appropriate authorities “knowing that statement to be false”. This is a new criminal offence designed to protect innocent persons from malicious reports.

This law does not exist in Northern Ireland, but an individual who reports a concern in ‘good faith’ is not deliberately attempting to slander another person’s name. In Northern Ireland there is legislation, the Criminal Law Act (NI) 1967 which places the responsibility on everybody to report offences or to forward information to the police by emphasising the,

‘duty of every other person, who knows or believes,

a) that the offence or some other arrestable offences has been committed; and

b) that he has information which is likely to secure, or to be material assistance in securing, the apprehension, prosecution or conviction of any person for that offence.’

5.12 RECOGNISING AND REPORTING OF SUSPECTED CHILD ABUSE

Each club should have clear procedures for responding to reports or concerns relating to the welfare and safety of children. All Sports Leaders, children and parents/guardians should be aware of how to report and to whom concerns should be reported within the club/organisation. These procedures should be consistent with Statutory Authority guidelines, i.e. Children First (ROI) and Our Duty to Care (NI) and with the procedures outlined in this Code. Copies of the Statutory Authority guidelines should be available in all sports clubs/organisations. Everyone involved in working with young people should be aware of their responsibility to work in co-operation with the statutory child protection authorities.

The ability to recognise child abuse depends as much on a person’s willingness to accept the possibility of its existence as it does on knowledge and information. It is important to note that child abuse is not always readily visible, and may not be clearly observable. If a Sports Leader or a parent/guardian is uneasy or suspicious about a child’s safety or welfare the following response should be made:

5.12.1 Reporting Child Abuse

The following steps should be followed in reporting child abuse to the Statutory Authorities:

- (a) Observe and note dates, times, locations and contexts in which the incident occurred or suspicion was aroused, together with any other relevant information;
- (b) Report the matter as soon as possible to the designated person. If there are reasonable grounds (See 5.10) for believing that the child has been abused or is at risk of abuse, s/he will make a report to the statutory authorities who have statutory responsibility to investigate, assess and validate suspected or actual child abuse;
- (c) In cases of emergency, where a child appears to be at immediate and serious risk and the Designated Person is unable to contact a duty social worker the police authorities should be contacted. Under no circumstances should a child be left in a dangerous situation pending intervention by the Statutory Authorities;

- (d) If the Designated Person is unsure whether reasonable grounds for concern exist or not, s/he should informally consult with the local duty social worker. S/he will be advised whether or not the matter requires a formal report;
- (e) A Designated Person reporting suspected or actual child abuse to the Statutory Authorities should first inform the family of their intention to make such a report, **unless doing so would endanger the child or undermine an investigation;**
- (f) A report should be given by the Designated Person to the Statutory Authorities in person or by phone, and in writing; without delay (see appendix 6)
- (g) It is best to report child abuse concerns by making personal contact with the relevant personnel in the Statutory Authorities and follow up in writing
- (h) In those cases where the sports club/organisation finds that it does not have reasonable grounds for reporting a concern to the Statutory Authorities, the member who raised the concern should be given a clear written statement by the designated person of the reasons why the sports club/organisation is not taking action. The member should be advised that, if they remain concerned about the situation, they are free to consult with, or report to, the Statutory Authorities in their area.

5.12.2 Response to a child reporting any form of abuse

The following points should be taken into consideration:

- (a) The child should understand in an age appropriate way that it is not possible that any information will be kept a secret;
- (b) It is important to deal with any allegation of abuse in a sensitive and competent way through listening to and facilitating the child to tell about the problem, rather than interviewing the child about details of what happened;
- (c) It is important to stay calm and not to show any extreme reaction to what the child is saying. Listen compassionately, and take what the child is saying seriously;
- (d) It should be understood that the child has decided to tell about something very important and has taken a risk to do so. The experience of telling should be a positive one so that the child will not mind talking to those involved in the investigation;
- (e) No judgmental statement should be made against the person against whom the allegation is made;
- (f) The child should not be questioned unless the nature of what s/he is saying is unclear. Leading questions should be avoided. Open, non-specific questions can be used if necessary such as "Can you explain to me what you mean by that". Try to let the child tell their story, use their words
- (g) The child should be given some indication of what would happen next, such as informing parents/guardians, health board or social services. It should be kept in mind that the child may have been threatened and may feel vulnerable at this stage.

5.13 INFORMAL CONSULTATION

Persons unsure about whether or not certain behaviours are abusive and therefore reportable, should contact the duty social worker in the local health services executive or social services department where they will receive advice.

5.14 SOURCES OF CHILD ABUSE

It is important to realise that children may be subjected to abuse by parents/guardians or other family members, persons outside their family, other children, or those who have responsibility for their care for one reason or another for short or long periods of time.

5.15 CHILDREN WHO MAY BE ESPECIALLY VULNERABLE TO ABUSE

Children in certain situations may be especially vulnerable to abuse. These include children who, for short or long periods, are separated from parents or other family members and depend on other adults for their care and protection. Children with disabilities may also be more at risk as the nature of their disability sometimes limits communication between themselves and others and they may depend more than most children on a variety of adults to meet their needs, for example, for care and transport. Those from a minority racial background may also be especially vulnerable. This could be due to the difficulty in recognising that racism is inherent in our society, which impacts on a child's ability to seek help from those in positions of authority.

5.16 PEER ABUSE

In some cases of child abuse the alleged perpetrator will also be a child and it is important that behaviour of this nature is not ignored. Grounds for concern will exist in cases where there is an age difference and/or difference in power, status or intellect between the children involved. However, it is also important to distinguish between normal sexual behaviour and abusive behaviour.

5.17 ALLEGATIONS OF ABUSE AGAINST SPORTS LEADERS

SEE FLOWCHART APPENDIX 12

Each club/sports organisation should have agreed procedures to be followed in cases of alleged child abuse against Sports Leaders. If such an allegation is made, two steps should be taken:

- (i) The reporting procedure (See 5.11)
- (ii) The procedure for dealing with the Sports Leader

5.17.1 Special Considerations

The following points should be considered

- the safety of the child making the allegation and any others who are/may be at risk should be ensured and this should take precedence over any other consideration. In this regard, the sports club/organisation should take any necessary steps which may be immediately necessary to protect children
- if a Sports Leader is the subject of the concern s/he should be treated with respect and fairness

5.17.2 Steps to be taken within the Sports Organisation

Where reasonable grounds for concern exist (See 5.10) the following steps should be taken by the club/organisation:

- advice should be sought from the local duty social worker with regard to any action by the club deemed necessary to protect the child/children who may be at risk
- the matter should be reported to the local statutory authorities following the standard reporting procedure outlined above
- in the event that the concern is connected to the actions of a Sports Leader in the club, the Sports Leader involved in the concern should be asked to stand aside pending the outcome of any investigation by the Statutory Authorities. It is advisable that this task be undertaken by a senior office holder other than the designated person/children's officer who takes the responsibility for reporting

When the Sports Leader is being privately informed by the senior officer of a) the fact that an allegation has been made against him/her and b) the nature of the allegation, s/he should be afforded an opportunity to respond. His/her response should be noted and passed on to the statutory authorities.

All persons involved in a child protection process (the child, his/her parents/guardians, the alleged offender, his/her family, Sports Leaders) should be afforded appropriate respect, fairness, support and confidentiality at all stages of the procedure.

Once the criminal process is completed, employers should consider the need to examine whether there are grounds for disciplinary proceedings for misconduct. The fact that the alleged abuser has not been prosecuted or has been found not guilty does not mean that such proceedings are not necessary or feasible.

5.18 CONFIDENTIALITY

Confidentiality is about managing information in a respectful, professional and purposeful manner. Confidentiality should be maintained in respect of all issues and people involved in concerns about the welfare of a child or bad practice within a club. It is important that the rights of both the child and the person about whom the complaint has been made are protected.

The following points should be borne in mind:

- a guarantee of confidentiality or undertakings regarding secrecy cannot be given, as the welfare of the child will supersede all other considerations
- all information should be treated in a careful and sensitive manner and should be discussed only with those who need to know
- information should be conveyed to the parents/guardians of the child about whom there are concerns in a sensitive way
- giving information to others on a “need to know” basis for the protection of a child is not a breach of confidentiality

5.19 DEALING WITH ANONYMOUS COMPLAINTS

Anonymous complaints can be difficult to deal with but should not be ignored. In all cases the safety and welfare of the child/children is paramount. Any such complaints relating to inappropriate behaviour should be brought to the attention of the Designated Person. This information should be checked out and handled in a confidential manner.

Any such complaints relating to child protection concerns should be handled in accordance with procedures outlined in this Code.

5.20 RUMOURS

Rumours should not be allowed to hang in the air. Any rumours relating to inappropriate behaviour circulating in sports organisations should be brought to the attention of the Designated Person and checked out without delay. Any ensuing information should be handled confidentially and with sensitivity. If the designated person has reasonable grounds for concern that a child has been abused s/he should refer the matter to the Statutory Authorities, using the standard reporting procedure. (See 5.12) If there is any doubt about the requirement to report the substance of a rumour, advice should be sought from the duty social worker in the local health board or social services department.

Children should be encouraged to report problems or concerns directly to their Children's Officer (See Chapter 2) and/or to their parents/guardians, or any trusted adult, regardless of how minor or serious the problem might be. Parents/guardians should also encourage children to inform them of any such problems or concerns.

Open trusting relationships between adults and children will help to ensure that all-important issues are dealt with in a constructive manner.

5.21 DISCLOSING INFORMATION TO OTHERS

Northern Ireland

If as a sport's organisation/club who have information about an individual, who you are concerned poses a risk to children, joining another organisation/club you should seek advice from the police (Child Abuse Rape Enquiry Unit) before disclosing that information. Northern Ireland Office guidance places the responsibility on the police to co-ordinate and lead the risk assessment and management process. The police have a standardised assessment method to consider the risk an individual may pose. Depending on this risk assessment and what access the individual has to children the police will take the decision about sharing information. Sport's people should not feel that they have the burden of this knowledge alone.

Republic of Ireland

In the absence of the above guidance and police service, the ISC recommend that best practice is to disclose information requested by a third party which is given in order to provide protection to a young person now or in the future.