

## RECOGNITION OF POOR PRACTICE, ABUSE AND BULLYING

Even for those experienced in working with child abuse, it is not always easy to recognise a situation where abuse may occur or has already taken place. If anyone has a concern about a child or young person, it is not an option to do nothing. The staff and volunteers in sport, whether in a paid or voluntary capacity, are not experts at such recognition. However, they do have a responsibility to act if they have any concerns about the behaviour of someone (an adult or another child) towards a child. Initially any concerns should be shared/discussed with the club/league welfare officer or the ETTA's Child Protection Officer.

- ✓ **Poor Practice** – this includes any behaviour that contravenes the ETTA's Codes of Conduct.
- ✓ **Abuse** – abuse in sport does happen. Young people and disabled adults of any age can be abused. The effects of abuse can be damaging and, if untreated, may follow a person into adulthood. For example, a person who has been abused as a child may find it difficult or impossible to maintain stable, trusting relationships, become involved with drugs or prostitution, attempt suicide or even abuse a child in the future.
- ✓ **Disabled People** – there have been a number of studies which suggest children (or adults) with disabilities are at increased risk of abuse. Various factors contribute to this, such as stereotyping, prejudice, discrimination, isolation and an inability to protect themselves, or adequately communicate that abuse has occurred.
- ✓ **Race and Racism** – young people from black and minority ethnic groups (and their parents) are likely to have experienced harassment, racial discrimination and institutional racism. Although racism causes significant harm it is not, in itself, a category of abuse. However, this may be categorised as emotional abuse, under child protection procedures.
- ✓ **Bullying** – it is important to recognise that in some cases of abuse it may not always be the adult abusing the child. Sometimes the abuser may be the child, for example in the case of bullying. Bullying may be seen as deliberately hurtful behaviour, usually repeated over a period of time, where it is difficult for those bullied to defend themselves. Nancy Duin defined bullying as *repeated (systematic) aggressive verbal, psychological or physical conduct by an individual or group against another person or persons*. Anyone can be the target of bullying although victims are typically shy, sensitive and perhaps anxious or insecure. Sometimes they are singled out for physical reasons – being overweight, physically small, having a disability or belonging to a different race, faith or culture. Girls and boys can be bullies, although it seems to be more conspicuous in boys. Bullying often takes place in schools, although research\* shows it can and does occur anywhere there is inadequate supervision – on the way to and from school, at a sporting event, in the playground and changing rooms.

Bullies come from all walks of life and will bully for a variety of different reasons. Typically bullies may have been abused themselves, can have low self-esteem, be excitable, aggressive and jealous. Crucially they have learned how to gain power over others and there is increasing evidence to suggest that this abuse of power can lead to crime\*\*.

The competitive nature of sport makes it an ideal environment for the bully who can be:

- A parent who pushes too hard
- A coach who adopts a win-at-all-costs philosophy
- A player who intimidates inappropriately
- An official who places unfair pressure on a person

Bullying can include:

- Physical – hitting, kicking and theft
- Verbal – name calling, constant teasing, sarcasm, racist or homophobic taunts, threats, graffiti and gestures
- Emotional – tormenting, ridiculing, humiliating and ignoring
- Sexual – unwanted physical contact or abusive comments

The damage inflicted by bullying can frequently be underestimated and can cause considerable distress to children and disabled adults, to the extent that it affects their health and development or, at the extreme, causes them significant harm (including self harm).

There are a number of signs that may indicate that a child or disabled adult is being bullied:

- Behavioural changes such as reduced concentration and/or becoming withdrawn, clinging, depression, tearful, emotionally up and down, reluctant to go to school, training or sports club
- A drop off in performance at school or standard of play
- Physical signs such as; stomach aches, headaches, difficulty in sleeping, bed wetting, scratching and bruising, or damaged clothes and bingeing for example on food, cigarettes or alcohol
- A shortage of money or frequent loss of possessions

\*Research by Sheffield University reported in the BBC Education publication (1994) by Goldsmiths College, London, showed that 10% of primary school children and 4% of secondary school children are bullied once a week

\*\*The BBC Education publication (1994) also indicates that bullies are four times more likely to become criminals

**Indications that a young person maybe being abused or suffering abuse include the following:**

- ✓ Unexplained or suspicious injuries such as bruising, cuts or burns, particularly if on a part of the body not normally prone to such injuries.
- ✓ An injury for which the explanation seems inconsistent.
- ✓ The child describes what appears to be an abusive act.
- ✓ Someone expresses concern about the welfare of the child.
- ✓ Unexplained changes in behaviour (e.g. becoming quiet, withdrawn or sudden outbursts of temper).
- ✓ Inappropriate sexual awareness.
- ✓ Engaging in sexually explicit behaviour.
- ✓ Distrust of adults particularly those with whom a close relationship would be expected.
- ✓ Difficulty making friends.
- ✓ Difficulty in socialising with other children.
- ✓ Displays variations in eating patterns including overeating or loss of appetite.
- ✓ Weight loss for no apparent reason.
- ✓ Becomes increasingly dirty or unkempt.

This list is not exhaustive and the presence of one or more of these indicators is not proof that abuse is taking place.

**Remember that:**

**It is not the responsibility of coaches, staff or volunteers to decide that abuse is taking place, but it is their responsibility to act on any concerns.**