

7. INDICATORS OF ABUSE

Recognising that abuse is, or may be happening is not particularly easy, even for those who are experienced in this field. Feelings of shock and anger can interfere with the recognition of abuse and it can be easy for individuals to deny it isn't happening.

It is therefore important to be aware of the possible signs and indicators of abuse and to recognise that these can be both physical and emotional.

This section is not designed to make you an expert but to make you more alert to the possible signs of abuse and/or poor practice.

Neglect

Neglect involves adults consistently or regularly failing to meet a child's basic physical and/or psychological needs, which can result in serious impairment to the child's health or development. Whilst this is something which can go unnoticed for a long time it can have long-lasting and very damaging effects on children. Children who do not receive adequate food or physical care often develop and mature more slowly, whilst those who are left alone or unsupervised will often find it difficult to make friends and socialise.

Physical signs of neglect include:

- Frequently being unkempt (dirty or smelly)
- Constantly hungry (sometimes begging for or stealing food from other children)
- Weight loss or being underweight
- Inappropriate clothing (particularly for adverse weather conditions)

Behavioural signs of neglect include:

- Regularly being left alone or unsupervised
- Being tired all the time
- Not having many friends
- Not attending or being late for school
- Failing to attend medical appointments

Neglect in a sports situation could include a coach failing to ensure that children are comfortable and safe e.g. exposing them to extreme weather conditions (heat or cold) or unnecessary risk or injury.

Physical Abuse

Physical abuse involves deliberately hurting a child, causing injuries such as bruises, broken bones, burns or cuts. It isn't accidental and children who are physically abused suffer violence such as being kicked, punched or slapped, having objects thrown at them or even being burned or poisoned.

Sometimes Parents or carers will make up or cause the symptoms of illness in their child, perhaps giving them medicine they don't need and making them unwell. This is known as fabricated or induced illness (FII).

There is no excuse for physically abusing a child. It causes serious and often long-lasting harm, and in severe cases, death.

Physical signs of physical abuse include:

- Physical injuries, particularly ones which cannot easily be explained
- Non-typical injuries, such as to the cheeks, chest or thighs
- Bruising that reflects hand or finger marks
- Untreated or poorly treated injuries
- Bite marks or cigarette burns
- Scalding

Behavioural signs of physical abuse include:

- Flinching when approached or touched
- Reluctance to get changed in front of others
- Covering up with tracksuit bottoms or long sleeves (even in hot conditions)
- Showing signs of depression or mood swings
- Aggressive behaviour or outbursts
- Running away or fear of going home
- Reluctance to have parents contacted
- Unnaturally compliant to parents

Physical abuse in a sports situation could include where the nature and intensity of training and competition exceed the capacity of a child's immature and growing body. Likewise, encouraging children and young people to train or take part in competitive sport whilst they are injured, or before they have fully recovered. Encouraging the use of performance enhancing drugs would also come into this category.

Sexual Abuse

A child or young person making a disclosure (i.e. telling you they are being sexually abused) is comparatively rare. Concerns about sexual abuse are most likely to be detected through changes in a child or young person's behaviour. Concerns may also be reported to you by a third party, such as the friend of a child or another adult, who has heard or noticed something that gives rise for concern.

We do however need to be mindful that a direct disclosure from a young person will have taken an enormous amount of courage, because it is likely that they will feel ashamed, afraid and confused. They may also have been threatened by the abuser and be worried about the potential consequences e.g. being told by the abuser that they will not be believed and either sent to prison or put into care.

In all cases where children or young people disclose information it is because they want the abuse to stop. It is vital therefore that we listen to the child and take what they are saying seriously, the same as we would if we were being told the information by an adult.

Physical signs of sexual abuse include¹:

- Bruising or bleeding around the genitals
- Pain or itching in the genital area
- Having a sexually transmitted disease
- Vaginal discharge or infection
- Discomfort when walking or sitting down
- Stomach pains
- Pregnancy

Behavioural signs of sexual abuse include:

- Sudden or unexplained changes in behaviour
- Saying they have secrets that they can't tell anyone about
- Unexplained sources of income
- Running away from home
- Apparent fear of someone
- Not being allowed to have friends (particularly in adolescence)
- Taking over a parental role at home beyond their age level
- Sexual knowledge beyond their age or developmental level
- Sexually explicit actions towards adults or other young people
- Using sexually explicit language
- Self-harming, mutilation and possible suicide attempts
- Substance or drug abuse
- Eating disorders
- Having nightmares
- Bed wetting

Or alternatively a child or young person may tell you they are being abused.

Examples of sexual abuse in a sports context include where an individual targets certain sports organisations to gain access to, groom or abuse children or where a coach uses physical contact within a sports activity to mask their inappropriate touching of a child.

Individuals taking photographs or videos of young people semi-clothed or in vulnerable positions would also fall into this category.

Emotional Abuse

¹ If you suspect or become aware of such signs, under no circumstances should you be checking this yourself. You should refer the child/young person to a medical expert immediately and discuss your concerns with your Welfare Officer or Lead Child Protection/Safeguarding Officer.

Emotional abuse is possibly the most difficult form of abuse to measure. Children and young people who on the face of it appear to be well cared for may be being emotionally abused by constantly being taunted, put down or belittled. Similarly, children and young people may be being emotionally abused through a lack of love, affection and attention.

Parents, coaches and other adults involved in sport also need to consider the potential emotional abuse that comes from excessive pressure to constantly perform at a high-level during training and in competition.

Physical signs of emotional abuse include:

- Failure to thrive or grow, particularly if this is happening in other circumstances. e.g. whilst away from the parents
- Delayed development, either physical or emotional
- Suddenly developing speech disorders

Behavioural signs of emotional abuse include:

- Not wanting to play
- Excessive fear of making mistakes
- Fear of parents being contacted
- Self-harm or mutilation

In a sports situation this could include children and young people being subjected to constant criticism, name-calling, sarcasm, bullying or even racism. It could also include children and young people being put under unrealistic pressure to perform to high expectations (either from their parents or the coach).

Bullying

Bullying, although technically not a category of abuse, is a significant issue for many young people and therefore shouldn't be underestimated. It can cause considerable distress to the extent that it affects their health and development, and can cause significant harm.

Physical signs of bullying:

- Physical injuries
- Headaches or stomach aches
- Damage to clothes
- Loss of possessions
- Fatigue (from lack of sleep)
- Excessive use of alcohol and/or smoking
- Binge eating

Behavioural signs of bullying:

- Fear and/or avoidance of a particular individual or group
- Reluctance to go to school and/or training
- A fall in performance at school or in training and competition
- Becoming withdrawn and/or depressed

- Mood swings, including being unusually tearful
- Becoming very clingy
- Self-harm or mutilation
- Attempted suicide

Whilst the information outlined above provides a useful guide to the signs of abuse, it is important to understand that even if children display some or all of these signs, it doesn't necessarily mean they are being abused.

It is however important to be aware of the signs, so that you can identify any causes for concern at an early stage and pass these on to your Welfare Officer without delay.

It is also important to remember that your observations could be the missing piece of information in a much larger jigsaw of concerns being pieced together by child protection professionals, such as the Police and Children's Social Care.

Key Point

The key point to remember being:

It is not your responsibility to decide whether or not a child is being abused

But it is your responsibility to act by passing on the information if you have any concerns.