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PROTECTING VICTIMS

How to identify sexual violence

Why children and young people find it hard to speak out

Sexual violence is rarely something that children and young people are able to talk to an adult about while it is happening to them:

- they may be forced into sexual acts by someone in a position of trust (male or female) and a position of power, such as a coach, doctor, an older team mate or leader;
- they may be threatened about the consequences of telling someone - either to hurt them or their family;
- they may be groomed by an adult building an emotional connection with them to gain their trust and may even believe they are in a "real" relationship with them. Abusers often groom the child's family and sports team making it even harder for the child to feel they will be believed;
- in sport children and young people may be dependent on the adult for selection or for participation in competition but in some sports (like gymnastics) the athletes depend on the adult for safety and well-being. This is a big issue when grooming;
- for talented young people who dream of success is in sport this psychological bond may be even harder to break;
- they may feel ashamed and even be made to feel they are in some way responsible for what has happened;
- in some sports settings there can be a culture of 'initiation ceremonies' which involve sexual violence. This may also be sanctioned or ignored by adults, making it difficult for a child to speak out against older peers.

Remember that sexual violence may include contact or non-contact abuse and may involve grooming in person or online. The indicators may include physical, emotional/psychological and behavioural warning signs.

Signs of sexual violence

Firstly it is important to be able to identify what is normal sexual behaviour for different stages of development. The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) has some useful information about this:

https://www.nspcc.org.uk/preventing-abuse/keeping-children-safe/healthy-sexual-behaviour-children-young-people/

Behavioural signs of sexual violence may include:

- sexualised behaviour which is significantly more advanced than you'd normally expect for a child of a particular age;
- sexual interest in adults, children or young people of very different ages to their own;
- forceful or aggressive sexual behaviour;
- compulsive habits;
- signs of being afraid of a particular adult;
- reports from school or sports club that their behaviour is affecting their progress and achievement;
- poor sleep;
- being withdrawn;
- risk-taking behaviour.

Physical indicators:

- bed wetting, soiling the bed;
- sexually transmitted diseases;
- misuse of alcohol or drugs.

Psychological indicators:

- mental health issues – anxiety and/or depression;
- self harm, thoughts about suicide;
- eating disorders.

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Signs of grooming and inappropriate behaviour in adults or young people may include:

- giving special attention to one or more children or young people;
- giving gifts or special favours;
- offering to provide the transport for the child or young person to training, matches or away events/competitions;
- befriending children or young people who are not their family members on social media sites;
- testing boundaries of sexually appropriate behaviour, language or humour.

Signs in children and young people include those previously described but you may also notice a child receiving expensive gifts that they cannot account for or being unusually secretive about who they are seeing or where they are going.

Grooming for abuse

Children and young people can be groomed for abuse by adults or other young people. Grooming behaviour can be difficult to distinguish from the behaviour of any other trusted individual in a sports setting. 'Groomers' may spend a great deal of time, months or even years, building a relationship with the child's family, social circle, including sports club colleagues. They may seek out positions of trust and make themselves invaluable club/sport members. Grooming may take place online and involve non-contact abuse. This is why it is so important that sports clubs and venues have in place **codes of conduct or behaviour** for all adults and young people both on and off line. These codes should clearly set out what is acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. For more information please refer to: **https://www.researchgate.net/publication/37327383_The_grooming_process_in_sport_Case_studies_of_sexual_harassment_and_abuse**

Key References

Pro Safe Sport website: **www.coe.int/sport/PSS**

The International Olympic Committee has produced written and film resources to help adults (coaches and sport federations) to put safeguards in place for athletes of all ages and to identify and respond to sexual harassment and abuse:
http://sha.olympic.org/home.html
https://hub.olympic.org/safeguarding/

The NSPCC's Child Protection in Sport Unit has a website which has many useful resources to help parents and adults in sport to identify and respond to a range of concerns about sexual violence:
https://thecpsu.org.uk/resource-library/2017/sexually-harmful-behaviour-by-young-people-in-sport/
https://thecpsu.org.uk/resource-library/2015/webinar-understanding-grooming-for-abuse/
https://www.nspcc.org.uk/preventing-abuse/child-abuse-and-neglect/child-sexual-exploitation/

Key messages

Children and young people usually don't tell but rely on adults to see the signs in them and in the behaviour of their abusers. It is essential that sports bodies put in place codes of conduct which set out acceptable and unacceptable behaviour for adults and young people:

- there is NO CONSENT for a sexual relationship when it comes to a child or young person;
- men, women, teens, boys and girls may sexually abuse a child or a teen;
- children and young people have clear limits when it comes to their own bodies and these limits must be respected;
- children and young people have rights and these must be in the centre of all activities;
- success belongs to the athlete. Coaches and entourage are doing their job and/or supporting the child or young person;
- sport is ONE of the many environments in which children and young people develop but not the ONLY one. Family, friends and school environments must continue to be part of the athlete's life as their sporting level advances;
- children and young people have dreams, opinions, ideas and a clear voice about everything that affects them. They must be listened to and taken into consideration in everything to do with their own development;
- you seek help if you break a bone - you can also seek help if you feel emotional pain.

Sexually harmful behaviour in young people

Most people are not aware that sexually harmful behaviour is expressed by young people. It is estimated that around one third of sexual abuse is committed by other children and young people (source: Hackett S., 2014, Children and young people with harmful sexual behaviours). It is essential that adults in sport are aware of the signs and know how to respond.

In sport there have been reported incidents of initiation or 'hazing' rituals in sports teams which have involved sexually abusive and harmful behaviour. They affect victims, bystanders and the lives of young perpetrators. These should be treated as both violations of codes of conduct and potentially criminal offences.

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