



## What is Child Abuse?

Child abuse is any form of physical, emotional or sexual mistreatment or lack of care that leads to injury or harm. It commonly occurs within a relationship of trust or responsibility and is an abuse of power or a breach of trust. Abuse can happen to a child regardless of their age, gender, race or ability. Abusers can be adults (male or female) and other young people, and are usually known to and trusted by the child and family.

There are four main types of child abuse: **physical abuse**, **sexual abuse**, **emotional abuse** and **neglect**. The abuser may be a family member, or they may be someone the child encounters in residential care or in the community, including during sports and leisure activities. An individual may abuse or neglect a child directly, or may be responsible for abuse because they fail to prevent another person harming that child.

- **Physical abuse:** where adults or other young people physically hurt or injure children, including by hitting, shaking, throwing, poisoning, burning, biting, scalding, suffocating or drowning. This category of abuse can also include when a parent or carer reports non-existent symptoms of illness or deliberately causes ill health in a child they are looking after, as in Munchausen's syndrome by proxy.

Examples of physical abuse in sport may be when a child is forced into training and competition that exceeds the capacity of his or her immature and growing body; or where the child is given drugs to enhance performance or delay puberty.

- **Sexual abuse:** when adults (male or female) or other young people use children to meet their own sexual needs. This could include: full sexual intercourse; masturbation; oral sex, anal intercourse; fondling. Showing children pornography (books, videos, pictures) or talking to them in a sexually explicit manner are also forms of sexual abuse.

In sport, coaching techniques which involve physical contact with children could potentially create situations where sexual abuse may go unnoticed. The power of the coach over young performers, if misused, may also lead to abusive situations developing.

- **Emotional abuse:** the persistent emotional ill treatment of a child, likely to cause severe and lasting adverse effects on the child's emotional development. It may involve communicating to a child that they are worthless or unloved, inadequate, or valued only in terms of meeting the needs of another person. It may feature expectations of children that are not appropriate to their age or development. It may involve causing children to feel frightened or in danger by being constantly shouted at, threatened or taunted which may make the child very nervous and withdrawn. Ill treatment of children, whatever form it takes, will always feature a degree of emotional abuse.

Examples of emotional abuse in sport include subjecting children to constant criticism, name-calling, and sarcasm or bullying. Putting them under consistent pressure to perform to unrealistically high standards is also a form of emotional abuse.

- **Neglect** is when adults fail to meet a child's basic physical and/or psychological needs, to an extent that is likely to result in serious impairment of the child's health or development. For example, failing to provide adequate food, shelter and clothing, failing to protect a child from physical harm or danger, or failing to ensure access to appropriate medical care or treatment. Refusal to give children love, affection and attention can also be a form of neglect.

Examples of neglect in sport could include: not ensuring children are safe; exposing them to undue cold or heat, or exposing them to unnecessary risk of injury.

### **Abuse of disabled children and young people**

Some disabled children and young people are mentally or physically more vulnerable than others, which could make it easier for abusers to exploit them. They may also find it more difficult to recognise and report abuse, and to be believed. For example, if their disability means that they:

- Have limited life experiences and so have not developed the social skills needed to work out what the behaviour and attitudes of others mean. This could make them less able to understand what is appropriate and inappropriate behaviour.
- Have been encouraged to comply with other people's wishes and not to question authority figures.
- Are afraid to challenge potentially abusive situations because of fear of the consequences. It is often easier to be compliant and pleasing rather than risk angering an authority figure and getting into trouble.
- May not be able to report abuse either because there is no-one they can report it to or because they do not have the appropriate language to use.
- May not be able to recognize that abuse has taken place.

- Feel powerless because they have to depend on others for personal support.
- May not be able to physically remove themselves from abusive situations.
- Are not believed because their authority figures cannot accept that anyone would abuse a disabled child.
- May not have anybody they can trust and confide in.
- May feel guilt or shame about the abuse which prevents them from reporting it.
- May not have a sense of ownership of their own bodies because they are so used to being examined physically by others as part of their medical and physical care.
- Have low self-esteem and a poor self image.

### **Racism**

Children 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. All organisations working with children, including those operating where black and minority ethnic communities are numerically small, should address institutional racism, defined in the MacPherson Inquiry Report on Stephen Lawrence as *'the collective failure by an organisation to provide appropriate and professional service to people on account of their race, culture and/or religion'*.

### **Bullying**

Bullying is a form of child abuse. It can be psychological, verbal, or physical in nature. It involves an imbalance of power in which the powerful attack the powerless, and occurs over time rather than being a single act. This might include a coach trying to get rid of unfavoured athletes through differential treatment, using their position, experience or ability to belittle an individual. It doesn't have to be an adult who is doing the bullying. It might be team mates and other young people, examples include:

- Being called names, insulted or verbally abused;
- Being deliberately embarrassed and humiliated by other children;
- Being made to feel different or like an outsider;
- Being lied about;
- Being physically assaulted or threatened with violence;
- Being ignored.
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It is important to recognise the impact and extent of bullying and discrimination in the lives of young people.