



## Introduction to Child Abuse

### Signs and indicators

#### What is child abuse and child neglect?

“Abuse and neglect are forms of maltreatment of a child. Somebody may abuse or neglect a child by inflicting, or by failing to act to prevent, significant harm to the child. Children may be abused in a family or in an institutional setting, by those known to them or, more rarely, by a stranger.”

*The National Guidance for Child Protection in Scotland*

There are four commonly recognised categories of child abuse:

- Emotional abuse
- Physical abuse
- Neglect
- Sexual abuse.

These types are not mutually exclusive, for example, a child experiencing physical abuse is undoubtedly experiencing emotional abuse as well. The following definitions show the different ways in which abuse may be experienced by a child but are not exhaustive, as the individual circumstances of abuse will vary from child to child. (All definitions taken from ‘*National Guidance for Child Protection in Scotland 2010*’).

#### Identifying Child Abuse

Although the physical and behavioural signs listed may be symptomatic of abuse, they may not always be an indicator and, conversely, children experiencing abuse may not demonstrate any of these signs.

Child abuse is often difficult to recognise. It is not the responsibility of anyone involved in sport to decide whether a child has been abused. This is the role of trained professionals. We all, however, have a duty to act on any concerns about abuse.

#### EMOTIONAL ABUSE

“...is the persistent emotional neglect or ill treatment that has severe and persistent adverse effects on a child’s emotional development. It may involve conveying to a child that they are worthless or unloved, inadequate or valued only insofar as they meet the needs of another person.”

*The National Guidance for Child Protection in Scotland*

It may involve the imposition of age or developmentally inappropriate expectations of a child. It may involve causing children to feel frightened or in danger or exploiting or corrupting children. Some level of emotional abuse is present in all types of ill treatment of a child; it can also occur independently of other forms of abuse.





### Examples of emotional abuse in sport:

- Persistent failure to show any respect to a child, e.g. continually ignoring a child.
- Failure to recognise improvements in performance and skill development.
- Constantly humiliating a child by telling them they are useless.
- Continually being aggressive towards a child making them feel frightened or upset.
- Acting in a way which is detrimental to the child's self-esteem.

Signs which **may** raise concerns about emotional abuse include:

- low self-esteem
- running away
- extremes of passivity or aggression
- significant decline in concentration
- indiscriminate friendliness and neediness
- self-harm or mutilation.

### PHYSICAL ABUSE

"...is the causing of physical harm to a child or young person. Physical abuse may involve hitting, shaking, throwing, poisoning, burning or scalding, drowning or suffocating. Physical harm may also be caused when a parent or carer feigns the symptoms of, or deliberately causes, ill health to a child they are looking after."

*The National Guidance for Child Protection in Scotland*

Most children sustain accidental cuts and bruises throughout childhood. These are likely to occur in parts of the body like elbows, shins and knees. An important indicator of physical abuse is where the bruises or injuries are unexplained, or the explanation does not fit the injury, or the injury appears on parts of the body where accidental injuries are unlikely, e.g. on the cheeks or thighs. The age of the child must also be considered. It is possible that some injuries may have occurred for other reasons, e.g. skin disorders, rare bone diseases.

### Examples of physical abuse in sport

Bodily harm that may be caused by:

- Over training or dangerous training of athletes.
- Over playing an athlete.
- Making an athlete play through injury.
- Failure to do a risk assessment of physical limits or pre-existing medical conditions.
- Administering, condoning or failure to intervene in drug use.

Signs which **may** raise concerns about physical abuse include:

- refusal to discuss injuries
- improbable excuses given to explain injuries
- running away
- excessive physical punishment
- avoiding activities due to injuries or possibility of injuries being discovered
- aggression towards others
- fear of parents being approached for an explanation
- untreated injuries
- unexplained injuries, particularly if recurrent
- wearing long or extra clothing to hide injuries.





## NEGLECT

“...is the persistent failure to meet a child’s basic physical and/or psychological needs, likely to result in the serious impairment of the child’s health or development. It may involve a parent or carer failing to provide adequate food, shelter and clothing, to protect a child from physical harm or danger, or to ensure access to appropriate medical care or treatment. It may also include neglect of, or failure to respond to, a child’s basic emotional needs.”

*The National Guidance for Child Protection in Scotland*

Neglect may also result in the child being diagnosed as suffering from ‘non-organic failure to thrive’, where they have significantly failed to reach normal weight and growth of development milestones and where physical and genetic reasons have been medically eliminated. In its extreme form children can be at serious risk from the effects of malnutrition, lack of nurturing and stimulation. This can lead to serious long-term effects such as greater susceptibility to serious childhood illnesses and reduction in potential stature. With young children in particular, the consequences may be life-threatening within a relatively short period of time.

### Examples of physical neglect in sport:

- Exposing a child to extreme weather conditions, e.g. heat and cold.
- Failing to seek medical attention for injuries.
- Exposing a child to risk of injury using unsafe equipment.
- Exposing a child to a hazardous environment without a proper risk assessment of the activity.
- Failing to provide adequate nutrition and water.

Signs which **may** raise concerns about neglect include:

- constant hunger
- poor personal hygiene and/or poor state of clothing
- constant tiredness
- frequent lateness or unexplained non-attendance (particularly at school)
- untreated medical problems
- low self-esteem
- poor peer relationships
- stealing.

## SEXUAL ABUSE

“...is any act that involves the child in any activity for the sexual gratification of another person, whether or not it is claimed that the child either consented or assented. Sexual abuse involves forcing or enticing a child to take part in sexual activities, whether or not the child is aware of what is happening. The activities may involve physical contact, including penetrative or non-penetrative acts. They may include non-contact activities, such as involving children in looking at, or in the production of, pornographic material or in watching sexual activities, using sexual language towards a child, or encouraging children to behave in sexually inappropriate ways.”

*The National Guidance for Child Protection in Scotland*

Some of the activities can occur through the internet. Boys and girls are sexually abused by males and females, including persons to who they are and are not related and by other young people. This includes people from all walks of life.





Some children may never be able to tell someone they have been sexually abused. Changes in a child's behaviour may be a sign something has happened. In some cases, there may be no physical or behavioural signs to suggest that a child has been sexually abused.

### Examples of sexual abuse in sport:

- Exposure to sexually explicit inappropriate language or jokes.
- Showing a child pornographic material or using a child to produce indecent images.
- Inappropriate touching.
- Sexual intercourse and/or sexual activity with a child under 16.

Signs which may raise concerns about sexual abuse:

- lack of trust in adults, over familiarity with adults, or fear of an adult
- sleep disturbance (nightmares, bed-wetting, fear of sleeping alone)
- reluctance or refusal to participate in physical activity or to change clothes for games
- display of sexual knowledge beyond child's age
- sexual promiscuity, over-sexualised behaviour
- pregnancy
- unusual interest in the genitals of adults, children or animals
- discomfort/difficulty in walking or sitting
- fear of bathrooms, showers, closed doors
- fear of medical examinations.

### Disabled children and young people

Disabled children and young people should have the same rights and opportunities as their non-disabled peers. Volunteers/staff should consult with them and their parents/carers in order to understand and meet their needs.

Disabled children and young people are at an increased risk of being abused compared with their non-disabled peers (Jones et al, 2012) and are also less likely to receive the protection and support they need when they have been abused (Taylor et al, 2014).

Professionals sometimes have difficulty identifying safeguarding concerns when working with disabled children (NSPCC, 2016).

- They are often dependent on several people for care and handling, some of which can be of an intimate nature.
- They may be unable to understand the inappropriateness of the actions or communicate to others that something is wrong.
- Signs of abuse can be misinterpreted as a symptom of the disability.
- Like other children, they are fearful of the consequences of disclosing abuse.
- Attitudes and assumptions that disabled children are not abused.
- They may be unable to resist abuse due to physical impairment.
- Negative attitudes towards disabled children.

