

## **Advice on dealing with allegations against coaches/volunteers within the Club/Organisation**

If an allegation is made against a coach/volunteer in your club/organisation, you must ensure that everyone involved gets a proper response. This involves making sure that two separate procedures are followed:

- ❖ the reporting procedure in respect of the child;
- ❖ the procedure for dealing with the coach/volunteer

All clubs/organisations should have agreed procedures to address situations where allegations of child abuse are made against a worker. Wherever this happens, the club/organisation has a dual responsibility in respect of both the child and the coach /volunteer.

These guidelines are offered to assist managers in having due regard for the rights and interests of the child on the one hand and those of the person against whom the allegation is made on the other hand.

The club/organisation should, as a matter of urgency, take any necessary protective measures to ensure that no child is exposed to unnecessary risk.

In general, it is recommended that the same person should not have responsibility for dealing with both the reporting issues and the employment/contractual issues. It is preferable to separate these issues and manage them independently.

Coaches/volunteers may be subjected to erroneous or malicious allegations. Therefore, any allegation of abuse should be dealt with sensitively and support provided for staff including counselling where necessary.

It is often very difficult for coaches/volunteers to accept that one of their colleagues, who may also be a friend, has harmed a child. Unfortunately, because of this,

unconscious or unwitting collusion of other coaches/volunteers with the suspected abuser may occur and this possibility must be recognised.

For this reason, it will be necessary for An Garda Síochána, the Health Board and senior staff within the organisation to agree their strategy for investigation and remain in contact.

*The Protection for Persons Reporting Child Abuse Act 1998* applies equally to clubs/organisations provided they report the matter 'reasonably and in good faith'. It must be remembered the primary goal is to protect the child while taking care to treat the coach/ volunteer fairly.

As well as the requirement to respond to the allegation, several other factors will have a bearing on the club/organisation and will need to be considered:

- ❖ possible reactions of other members of staff/volunteers/coaches within the club/organisation including anger, disbelief, doubt, fear, guilt, shock, anxiety and confusion
- ❖ the effects on the alleged abuser of the club/organisation's own internal disciplinary proceedings, the child protection investigation and the criminal investigation
- ❖ the reactions of other coaches/volunteers and the other children towards a child who has been abused or whose allegation is being investigated
- ❖ the reactions of parents/carers and other family members of the child

It is extremely valuable to have thought through and discussed with coaches/volunteers in as objective a way as possible what could happen and how people might feel if an allegation of abuse is made or a suspicion reported. This could happen during training and at reviews.

Rehearsing the issues will give everyone concerned the confidence to face what will inevitably be a very difficult situation, particularly if an allegation is made against a coach /volunteer.

## **Guidance on reporting**

All clubs/organisations providing services to children should have clear written procedures on the action to be taken if allegations of abuse are made against coaches/volunteers and should ensure that both children and coach/volunteers know the steps to take if they wish to report suspected abuse.

Coaches/volunteers should also be aware of the appropriate authorities to whom they should report outside the club/organisation if they are inhibited for any reason in reporting the incident internally or where they are dissatisfied with the internal response. The need for awareness about the possibility of abuse by coaches/volunteers and the requirement to report concerns should be reinforced through training and supervision.

### **Employers' responsibility to report to statutory authorities:**

Where a club/organisation becomes aware of an allegation of abuse by a coach/volunteer, the standard procedure for reporting allegations to the health board should be followed without delay.

Action taken in reporting an allegation of child abuse against a coach/volunteer should be based on an opinion formed reasonably and in good faith. When an allegation is received it should be assessed promptly and carefully. It will be necessary to decide whether a formal report should be made to the health board and this decision should be based on reasonable grounds for concern.

The following examples would constitute reasonable grounds for concern:

- (i) a specific indication from a child that (s)he was abused;

- (ii) a statement from a person who witnessed abuse;
- (iii) an illness, injury or behaviour consistent with abuse;
- (iv) a symptom which may not in itself be totally consistent with abuse, but which is support by corroborative evidence of deliberate harm or negligence;
- (v) consistent signs of neglect over a period of time.

### **Employers' responsibility towards coaches/volunteers**

When a club/organisation becomes aware of an allegation of abuse of a child or children by an coach/volunteer during the execution of that coaches/volunteers duties, the employer should privately inform the coach/volunteer of the following:

- ❖ the fact that the allegation has been made against him/her;
- ❖ the nature of the allegation.

The coach/volunteer should be afforded an opportunity to respond. The employer should note the response and pass on this information when making the formal report to the health board.

### **Procedures for dealing with coaches/volunteers and employer's duty of care to children:**

When an allegation is made against a coach/volunteer, the following steps should be taken:

- ❖ The agreed procedures, the applicable employment contract and the rules of natural justice should be followed

- ❖ The Chairperson (or equivalent head of organisation) should be informed as soon as possible.

The first priority should be to ensure that no child is exposed to unnecessary risk. The employer should, as a matter of urgency, take any necessary protective measures.

These measures should be proportionate to the level of risk and should not unreasonably penalise the coach/volunteer financially or otherwise, unless necessary to protect children. Where protective measures, such as suspension, do penalise the coach/volunteer, it is important that early consideration be given to the case.

Any action following an allegation of abuse against a coach/volunteer should be taken in consultation with the Health Board and An Garda Síochána. An immediate meeting should be arranged with these two agencies for this purpose.

- ❖ After these consultations referred to above and when pursuing the question of the future position of a coach/volunteer, the Chairperson (or equivalent head of club/organisation) should advise the person accused of the allegation and the agreed procedures should be followed.
- ❖ Employers/managers should take care to ensure actions taken by them do not undermine or frustrate any investigations being conducted by the health board or An Garda Síochána.

It is strongly recommended that employers maintain a close liaison with these authorities to achieve this.

There will be situations in which suspicions or allegations may turn out to be unfounded. It is very important that everyone in the club/organisation knows that if they raise a concern which, through the process of investigation, is not validated they have not in any way, been wrong in their initial action.

Responsible action should be encouraged and ‘whistle-blowers’ enabled to feel confident of support.

### **Dealing with Anonymous Complaints**

Anonymous complaints can be difficult to deal with, however they cannot be ignored. All complaints relating to inappropriate behaviour/poor practice should be brought to the attention of the Chairperson/head of organisation. In all cases the safety and welfare of the child/children is paramount.

All complaints should be checked out and handled in a confidential manner. It is important to record all such complaints and actions taken. Specific advice on dealing with anonymous complaints can be got from your local Health Board duty social worker or alternatively the FAI's National Children's Officer (Tel. 0879691422)

### **Rumours**

Rumours should not be allowed hang in the air. Any rumour/s relating to inappropriate behaviour/s circulating in clubs should be brought to the attention to the Chairperson/head of organisation and checked out promptly. All ensuing information should be handled confidentially and with sensitivity.

Should the Chairperson/head of organisation have reasonable grounds for concern that a child has been abused s/he should report the matter to the Statutory Authorities. Should there be any doubt about the requirement to report the substance of a rumour, advice can be sought from your local Health Board duty social worker or alternatively the FAI's National Children's Officer. It is important that children are actively encouraged to report concerns or problems directly the Club's Children's Officer and/or to their parents/guardians, or any trusted adult, regardless of how minor or serious their concern might be.

Parents/guardians should also encourage their children to inform them of any concern or problem they might have. Open trusting relationships between adults and children will help ensure that important issues are dealt with in an appropriate and constructive manner.

Reference: *Our Duty To Care*, Dept. of Health & Children 2002, *Code of Ethics & Good Practice for Children's Sport*, Irish Sports Council 2001.