

Child Protection in Soccer

The protection of under-age players from any form of abuse must be a priority for all those involved in soccer.

If under age players are at risk of harm, it is the duty of those in a position of responsibility to take immediate steps to remove the risk and to ensure that all necessary procedures are undertaken in accordance with statutory guidelines.

The detection and prevention of child abuse depends on the co-operation of all concerned. The following points are central to the success of this effort:

- ❖ Acceptance by all involved with children that abuse, whether physical, psychological or sexual, severely damages children and must be confronted;**
- ❖ Knowledge of the behavioural and physical indicators of various forms of abuse;**
- ❖ Knowledge of the appropriate action and response to be taken when abuse is revealed or detected;**
- ❖ Vigilance and avoidance of all situations conducive to risk;**
- ❖ Open, trusting and co-operative relationships within the club, with parents/guardians and others concerned with children's progress or welfare;**
- ❖ Willingness to co-operate with the Statutory Authorities (Gairdai, Health Boards), in relation to sharing information about child protection concerns at any time.**

Sources of Child Abuse

It is important to realise that children may be subjected to abuse by parents/guardians or other family members, persons outside their family, other children, or those who have responsibility for their care for one reason or another for short or long periods. We cannot ignore evidence which suggests that there are people who have sought access to children through their involvement in sport.

Some facts about abuse:

- ❖ Abuse occurs across all social classes, professions and ethnic groups
- ❖ 75% of children effected by abuse know their abuser
- ❖ A child will seldom make false accusations or take back accusations
- ❖ A child will rarely be moved from the home, it's usual to remove the abuser from the situation
- ❖ Both boys and girls are abused
- ❖ Disabled children are more vulnerable to abuse, less able to speak about it and more dependant on adults for their care
- ❖ 90% of abusers are male heterosexuals but women also abuse

What Parents can do!

Creating a safer place for our children to play is everyone's responsibility... coaches, volunteers, local clubs, leagues and national governing bodies, schools, all levels of government, the participants, and you, the parent.

As a parent, part of supporting your child's involvement in soccer includes ensuring their safety while they're having fun.

All parents have a responsibility to make sure their children are protected from abusive situations. This guide will provide you with information on what to watch for and where to turn if you suspect harassment or abuse.

While there are different degrees of harassment and abuse, all provide serious setbacks to a child's enjoyment of, and participation in soccer.

Abuse is any action, physical or verbal, which exploits or potentially harms or damages a child's physical, emotional or psychological health.

In the sporting context these can include:

Physical

where a child is intentionally injured or made to do excessive exercises as punishment, where training methods are inappropriate for the developmental age of the child, where they are allowed play with an injury or where inappropriate drugs or alcohol are offered or accepted.

Sexual

Sexual abuse can occur in soccer For example:

- ❖ a child is exposed to, or invited to participate in sexual contact, activity or behaviour
- ❖ if photographs are taken or adapted and placed on child pornography websites
- ❖ where there is inappropriate touching or where intimate relationships occur

Emotional

where a child is made fun of, criticised, discriminated against, or put under an unrealistic pressure to perform by parents, coaches or spectators who abuse their power.

Neglect

where a child is not provided an appropriate level of care and supervision. In soccer

neglect can occur if children do not have proper supervision, clothing, drinks or food or if they are allowed or encouraged to play whilst injured.

How can I recognise abusive situations?

As a parent, you know your children best. Look for signs that they are not their normal selves and may be unusually withdrawn, disinterested, unhappy or angry.

There are many signs, both physical and behavioural, to suggest possible abusive situations. Unexplained injuries, sexually explicit actions or language beyond their age, new friendships with older persons, or sudden changes in behaviour are just a few examples. Harassment or abuse can take many forms and these are detailed in Appendix Two.

What can I do about it?

You can protect your child both at home and in the environment in which they participate. Encourage your child to talk openly to you about their activities and let them know that it's okay to tell when something isn't right.

Teach your child to think critically and question adults respectfully. Encourage them to say "No" to anything that makes them feel uncomfortable and to talk to you about any problems or questions.

In addition, you should:

Get involved in their soccer activities by getting to know their coaches, volunteers and other parents;

Attend training and matches; your child will appreciate your interest, and it will give you the opportunity to watch the coach in action, and see how she/he interacts with the other participants;

Talk to your child and their coach about what's okay behaviour and what your child wants to get out of their activity;

Ensure the club has a child protection policy in place for staff and volunteers;

Ask if the club's coach is certified and a member of a coaching association with a code of ethics;

The FAI Technical Department maintains a database of all qualified officially registered coaches and also delivers training courses appropriate to all levels of competency. They can be contacted at (01) 8900700.

Keep an eye out for other children whose parents are unable to attend practices or games;

Be wary of private, closed practices. If they occur on a regular basis, ask the coach for an explanation;

Be wary of any increase in the amount of time the coach spends with your child beyond the training situation.

Part of keeping children safe is not taking offence when asked about your own background. If you volunteer in sport, and you are asked to take part in screening, accept this as a positive step to keeping children safe;

Listen to your child's complaint and no matter how far-fetched it seems, check it out;

If the problem relates to "Poor Practice", try to resolve it with league or club officials;

Have the situation corrected and, if necessary, remove your child from the activity;

Make sure you aren't part of the problem yourself by screaming abuse at referees, coaches, participants or other spectators;

Children learn by example, so model fair play by applauding good performances of both your child and his/her opponents;

Make your child feel like a winner every time by offering praise for competing fairly and trying hard. Never ridicule your child for making a mistake or losing;

Encourage your child to play by the rules and resolve conflicts without resorting to violence or bullying.

Who can I call if I have a concern?

The most important action you can take is to contact someone when you suspect an abusive situation. Because there are different levels of concern and you may be unsure if harassment or abuse is occurring, it is important that you know whom to contact.

If you have concerns about a specific situation, you should try to resolve it at your local level. Talking to someone affiliated with the soccer association, club or league, like the club children's officer, coach, manager or club Chairperson can often clear up a simple misunderstanding.

However, if you feel that the situation cannot be resolved at this level, there are other options for you. You can discuss any concerns you may have with the duty social worker in your local community care area of the Health Board who will provide you with appropriate advice. You may also seek advice from the Football Association of Ireland, National Children's Officer, Tel. 087 9691422