

Reporting Child Abuse

It is important to remember that reporting suspected child abuse in good faith is not the same as making an accusation of abuse i.e. reporting does not mean accusing.

Responsibility for the investigation of child abuse cases, suspected or otherwise, lies with the Health Boards and the Gairdai. Responsibility for monitoring and co-ordinating the management of such cases also rests with the Health Boards.

It is not appropriate for individuals, clubs, or leagues to carry out internal investigations into cases where child abuse is suspected.

Any person who knows or suspects that a child is being harmed or is at risk or of being harmed has a duty to convey his/her concern to the local Health Board.

It may be appropriate for a person to discuss concerns they have with another person in the club such as the Children's Officer, or should the concern relate to this person, then the Chairperson of the club should be notified of the concerns.

The type of discussions referred to above would most likely happen in cases where no specific allegation of child abuse has been made, but the concern is based on emotional behaviour and/or physical indications of a particular child. Advice can also be sought from the relevant Health Board or the FAI National Children's Officer.

A senior member of the Club/League other than the Chairperson (who assumes employer responsibilities) should be nominated as a designated officer with responsibility for reporting suspected or actual child abuse to the Health Board.

A designated person reporting suspected or actual child abuse to the Statutory Authorities should first inform the family of their intention to make such a report, unless doing so would endanger the child or impede or undermine any subsequent investigation.

Within a school, concerns relating to child abuse must be reported immediately to the Headmaster/Principal.

In cases where an allegation has been made, then the matter has to be reported immediately to the relevant Statutory Authorities.

Should allegations of a sexual nature be made against a coach/volunteer/official, he/she should be asked to stand aside pending an appropriate investigation.

All concerns and allegations made should be carefully recorded. Confidentiality should be maintained at all stages.

In the case of a suspension, the coach/volunteer/official being suspended should be formally notified by senior personnel within the Club or League. It is advised that this task be undertaken by an approved committee member other than the Chairperson who takes responsibility for reporting to the Statutory Authorities.

A coach/volunteer/official against whom an allegation of abuse has been made should be informed that this is not an accusation and that the procedures being undertaken are in accordance with statutory guidelines.

He or she should be assured that all information will be dealt with in a sensitive and confidential manner within the Club or League and that he/she will be treated with fairness and respect.

The coach/volunteer/official should be made aware of the general nature of any allegations made against him/her and of any allegation being made known to the Statutory Authorities.

The coach/volunteer/official concerned should be afforded the opportunity to present a formal response to the allegation to senior personnel in the Club or League. His/her response should be noted and passed on to the Health Board personnel. From this point onwards the matter should only be dealt with by the Statutory Authorities.

In the case of an allegation of child sexual abuse, it may be necessary to withhold the name of the child and the precise details of the allegation, in the interest of confidentiality and child protection.

It is not always easy to accept that children can be deliberately neglected or harmed. The possibility that parents, who appear to love their children, or that committed workers/volunteers/coaches who are colleagues and friends, could hurt the children in their care is hard to take. Unfortunately, reluctance to think badly of people, or lack of understanding and knowledge about abuse can lead to resistance in hearing, recognising and dealing with it.

Children very rarely tell that they are being abused, for a number of reasons:

- ❖ They may have been bribed or blackmailed not to tell
- ❖ They may be very frightened of the abuser
- ❖ They may be afraid of being blamed or punished, or excluded from the organisation
- ❖ They may be afraid of getting the abuser into trouble
- ❖ Children with learning disabilities may not fully comprehend what is happening

Children who are being abused often feel that they have tried to tell someone else – it must be remembered that they may have different ways of communicating information and workers/volunteers/coaches must be alert and sensitive to this.

Stages in recognising child abuse

Child abuse might come to light because a child tells someone, or because someone sees it happening. However, this does not always happen, and it is often a question of someone feeling uneasy and concerned about a child, and needing to find out more. There are roughly three stages in recognising child abuse to the point where a worker/volunteer/coach knows that action must be taken. These are:

- ❖ **Considering the possibility** – if a child has a mark, bruise or injury for which there is no reasonable explanation, or if she or he is behaving unusually or seems fearful or anxious in the presence of anybody.

- ❖ **Looking out for signs** – a cluster of signs is likely to be more indicative of abuse than a single one. Sometimes children will hint or directly tell that they are being harmed – these disclosures should always be listened to and the information accepted as true in the first instance (See below for guidance on this).

- ❖ **Recording the information** – observations about suspected child abuse should be recorded with dates, times and any other relevant information about the incident or behaviour. Child abuse can be difficult to recognise and can take many different forms.

Coaches/volunteers should always be alert to the possibility of abuse. However, it is important to remember that no one sign should be seen as certain evidence of abuse, and there may be other explanations for it.

Coaches/volunteers who are suspicious about child abuse can seek advice from the club children's officer or the local Health Board duty social worker. Advice can also be sought from the FAI's National Children's Officer.

Response to a Child reporting abuse

Deal with any allegation of abuse in a sensitive and competent manner through listening to and facilitating the child to tell about the problem.

Stay calm and do not show any extreme reaction to what the child is saying and take it seriously.

It should be understood that the child has decided to tell about something that is very important and has taken a risk in doing so. The experience of telling should be a positive one so that the child will not mind talking to those involved in the investigation.

Permit the child to speak without interruption, accepting what is said.

The child should not be questioned unless the nature of what he/she is saying is unclear. Leading questions should be avoided. Open, non-specific questions should be used such as “Can you explain to me what you meant by that”

Reassure the child that he/she was right to tell, and that he/she will be helped.

Alleviate feeling of guilt and isolation, while passing no judgement on the person against whom the allegation is made.

False promises should not be made such as saying no-one else will be told.

Indicate what should happen next, such as informing parents, Club Children’s Officer, reporting to statutory authority etc.

Any and all consultations with others should be entirely confidential and should not involve investigative procedures.

Write a detailed account of any discussion regarding alleged or suspected abuse, as soon as possible after the discussion has taken place. In the event of a child disclosing, make a note of the actual phraseology/words used by the child.

Do not trivialise child abuse issues or trivialise or exaggerate what the child has told you.