

Safeguarding deaf and disabled children and young people

Background

Despite some traditionally negative misconceptions about young people with a disability or hearing impairment, the reality is that the vast majority of deaf and disabled children and young people are ready, willing and able to participate in sport and physical activity when they have access to facilities and appropriately trained staff to support them. The Child Protection in Sport Unit (CPSU) believe that when supporting the inclusion of deaf and disabled children and young people, sports need to also recognise the additional vulnerabilities these young people experience and that “*child protection procedures, guidance and training help staff and volunteers to recognise the additional vulnerability of some children and the extra barriers they face to getting help.*”¹ For these reasons the CPSU have made safeguarding deaf and disabled children and young people in sport a priority theme and have established a range of multi agency groups to carry out work in this area.

This briefing summarises the key issues around the additional vulnerability of deaf and disabled children and young people which are reaffirmed in statutory guidance.²

Disability

“*Disability itself is a complex concept, with many impairments included in the definition, It is often represented by the wheelchair symbol, but the majority of disabled people have less visible impairments, including learning difficulties, sight or hearing conditions, mental health issues, and long-term progressive impairments*”³. Types of disability can be categorised by severity from mild to moderate or severe. A child with mild autism for example may have impaired social skills but his or her motor skills may be unaffected. Similarly a child with a learning disability or epilepsy will be affected by the severity of the disability not the disability itself.

Increased Vulnerability

The available UK evidence on the extent of abuse among deaf and disabled children suggests that they are at increased risk of abuse and that the presence of multiple disabilities appears to increase the risk of both abuse and neglect.

Deaf and disabled children may be especially vulnerable to abuse for a number of reasons:

¹ Standards for Safeguarding and Protection Children in Sport. Standard 5.2 (CPSU England and Standard 4 CPSU Northern Ireland)

² Department for Children, Schools and Families (2010) *Working Together to Safeguard Children: A Guide to Inter-agency Working to Safeguard and Promote the Welfare of Children*. London: TSO. Ch. 6 & 11.

³ English Federation of Disability Sport (2010) *Engaging disabled people in sport - A resource to help the sports sector increase participation*.



- increased likelihood of social isolation;
- fewer outside contacts than children without a disability;
- dependency on others for practical assistance in daily living (including intimate care);
- impaired capacity to resist, avoid or understand abuse;
- speech and language communication needs may make it difficult to tell others what is happening;
- limited access to someone to disclose to;
- particular vulnerability to bullying.

Sobsey and Doe (1991)⁴ estimated a 78% increased risk to disabled children in comparison to those who did not define themselves as having a disability, due to their exposure to the numbers of service providers alone and identified the following reasons why vulnerability is increased:

- being viewed as a “safe target” for abusers;
- increased grooming opportunities and the increased power inequality;
- children possibly not knowing that the abuse is inappropriate;
- disabled children being less likely to be listened to or believed;
- the denial of the possibility of (particularly sexual) abuse;
- young people having learnt to obey in order to survive;
- the assumed lack of credibility as witnesses;
- inexperience of disabled young people in making decisions;
- a belief by deaf and disabled children and young people that their wishes are not heeded;
- parents being viewed as ‘saints’ coping with the intolerable burden of a disabled child and therefore not considered as potential risks.

Types of Abuse

Deaf and disabled children are up to four times as likely to be abused as non disabled children. Sullivan and Knutson⁵ (2000) found that children were more likely to be abused under the following categories:

- Neglect – 3.8 times as likely to be abused
- Sexual – 3.1 times as likely to be abused
- Physical – 3.8 times as likely to be abused
- Emotional – 3.9 times as likely to be abused

They also reported that 31% of disabled children had been abused compared to a prevalence of 9% in the non disabled population.

Deaf and disabled children may be additionally abused in a number of ways. For example:

- **neglect** – a child could be confined to their room, lack appropriate supervision, or be deprived of visitors;

⁴ Sobsey, D. & Doe, T. (1991). Patterns of sexual abuse and assault. *Sexuality and Disability*, 9 (3), 243-259.

⁵ Sullivan PM and Knutson JF (2000) Maltreatment and Disabilities: a population based epidemiological study. *Child Abuse and Neglect* 24 10 1257–1273.



- **sexual** – a child could be subject to inappropriate personal care or be abused by someone taking advantage of one to one supervision arrangements;
- **physical** – drugs given incorrectly to a child, insufficient treatment, misuse of medication or inappropriate restraint of a child;
- **emotional** – lack of stimulation or over-protection of the child, the child may suffer from a lack of privacy or from too high or low expectations.

Barriers to Participation

Some common barriers deaf and disabled children may face with getting involved in sport include⁶:

- lack of early experiences in sport;
- sports lack of understanding and awareness of how to include people with a disability in sport;
- limited opportunities and programmes for participation, training and competition;
- lack of accessible facilities, such as gymnasiums and buildings;
- limited accessible transportation;
- limiting psychological and sociological factors including attitudes towards disability of parents, coaches, teachers and even people with disabilities themselves;
- limited access to information and resources.

By working towards the lifting of barriers that stop deaf and disabled children from being fully integrated into mainstream life, they can also be more effectively safeguarded from abuse.

‘As practitioners we can too easily collude with standards of care for disabled children that we would not dream of accepting for other children’
Ruth Marchant and Marcus Page⁷

The social model of disability argues that people with impairments are disabled by the way society is structured and the way it functions (Morris, 1998⁸; Oliver, 1999⁹). This is illustrated by quotes from young people with a disability:

*‘How disabled I am depends on where I am and who I’m with.
When I’m with my deaf friends I’m not disabled because we all sign. But when I’m in the outside world I’m disabled.’*

‘If I could change one thing about the way disabled young people are treated I would change the fact that they have to fight for their rights, equipment and some facilities’¹⁰

⁶ International Platform on Sport & Development, (2011). *Barriers to Participation* [online] Available at: http://www.sportanddev.org/learnmore/sport_and_disability2

⁷ Marchant, R. and Page, M. (1993) *Bridging the gap: child protection work with children with multiple disabilities*. London: NSPCC.

⁸ Morris, J (1998) *Accessing Human Rights: disabled children and the Children Act*. Ilford, Essex: Barnardo's.

⁹ Oliver, M (1999) *The Politics of Disablement: A Sociological Approach* Macmillan, London

¹⁰ Quoted in Ruth Marchant - What is disability? (2010, unpublished)



Positive Interventions

If a young person has a sensory impairment or disability that affects their ability to communicate then particular attention needs to be given to involve someone with expertise in that particular area.

Through the reduction of isolation, passivity and the increase of awareness, the additional vulnerability of deaf and disabled children to abuse can be addressed. By involving deaf and disabled children and young people in this work we can draw on their strengths and skills and empower them as active participants.

Inclusion of deaf and disabled children and young people within the work of sports organisations should ensure:

- activities led by the interests and enthusiasms of all participants;
- challenge societal stereotypes with pictures, equipment and resources that reflect the lives of people with a disability;
- effective communication is developed with participants;
- the skills of participants contributes to service developments;
- activity providers understand the specific needs of individual children and are supported to accommodate these (equipment, environment and coaching practices).

Safeguarding training is an essential aspect of protecting deaf and disabled children and young people, a lack of understanding about safeguarding can result in failure to recognising the signs of abuse or neglect. This is all the more worrying given that research indicates that the identification of the abuse of disabled children is most likely to come from observations of physical signs, behaviour or mood changes¹¹.

'Inclusive provision is open and accessible to all, and takes positive action in removing disabling barriers, so that disabled and non-disabled children can participate'

Alison John for KIDSactive and Better Play¹²

For further information on the inclusion and participation of children and young people with a disability contact;

English Federation of Disability Sport: Tel: 01509 227750, Fax: 01509 227777

<http://www.efds.co.uk/>

Scottish Disability Sport: Tel: 0131 317 1130, Fax: 0131 317 1075

www.scottishdisabilitysport.com/

Disability Sport Wales: Tel: 0845 846 0021, Fax: (029) 20 665 781

www.disabilitysportwales.org

¹¹ Ellis, R. and Hendry, EB. (1998) Do we all know the score? Child Abuse Review, 7,pp360-363.

¹² KIDSactive, (2004). *All of Us: Inclusion Checklist for Settings*.



Disability Sports NI: Tel: 028 9038 7062, Textphone: 028 9038 7064, www.dsni.co.uk

There are also a range of courses and resources available to sports to support work with deaf and disabled participants:

Sportscoach UK – *How to Coach Disabled People in Sport* www.sportscoachuk.org.uk

Sportscoach UK – *Inclusive Coaching: Disability* www.sportscoachuk.org.uk

Typhoo Sports For All – Disability Inclusion (in partnership with Federations of Disability Sport)
<http://www.efds.co.uk/microsite.asp?section=1061§ionTitle=Typhoo+Sports+for+All>

NSPCC in partnership with Triangle - *Safeguarding Deaf and Disabled Children – A resource for use in training and professional group learning*
www.nspcc.org.uk or www.triangle.org.uk

A sport specific version of the resource above is currently being developed by CPSU, with a proposed launch date around the end of 2011.

Sign up now to the CPSU E-Newsletter - We can email you the latest information about child protection in sport, simply complete the [online registration form](#).

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