

Physical Contact and Young People in Sport

Introduction and background

It is sometimes appropriate and necessary to have direct physical contact with children in order to develop their skills in a safe environment. There is growing concern being expressed about what is and what is not permissible in the area of physical contact with children and young people in sport. Some misleading and inaccurate information has been promoted within the sports sector and this can undermine the confidence of coaches and others in applying safe and appropriate coaching methods.

There have also been instances where some coaches and other adults who are motivated to harm and abuse children and young people have done so by falsely claiming that their behaviours were legitimate teaching, coaching or caring practices.

Many sports governing bodies provide useful guidance to their coaches on this issue, which reflects the specific requirements of their sport, and is proportionate in balancing their responsibility to promote a safe and enjoyable environment for all participants.

The purpose of this paper is to clarify the position of the CPSU in relation to this issue and provide guidance to all those involved in working with young people in sport.

Guidance

There are a number of principles that should be followed when the activity involves physical contact.

Physical contact during sport should always be intended to meet the child's needs, NOT the adult's. The adult should only have physical contact if their aim is to:

- Develop sports skills or techniques
- To treat an injury
- To prevent an injury or accident from occurring
- To meet the requirements of the sport

The adult should seek to explain the nature and reason for the physical contact to the child reinforcing the teaching or coaching skill. Unless the situation is an emergency, the adult should ask the child for permission.

It is good practice for sport clubs, as part of an induction process or pack for new members, to explain to parents/carers and their child or give written guidance about any physical contact that will be required as part of that activity. Children should be encouraged to voice concerns they have if any physical contact makes them feel uncomfortable or threatened.

Contact should not involve touching genital areas, buttocks, breasts or any other part of the body that might cause a child distress or embarrassment. Physical contact should always take place in an open or public environment and not take place in secret or out of sight of others.

The CPSU is not aware of any sports bodies that have stated that any physical contact is not permissible under any circumstances within the context of coaching or teaching.

In the case of a young person with a disability specific support or assistance may be required. For those who require assistance with intimate personal care (eg toileting, feeding or changing) arrangements should be agreed in partnership with the child and carers - before the activity commences - to ensure that these tasks are undertaken by the child's parents or carers, rather than by sports staff, coaches or volunteers. When children with disabilities are lifted or manually supported, the individual child should be treated with dignity and respect. Relevant health and safety guidelines must be followed to ensure the safety of the child and those assisting. It is recommended that those assisting receive appropriate training.



Specific situations

Physical chastisement

It is unlawful for those working with children and young people to administer any form of physical chastisement (eg slapping, hitting and so on). However, on some occasions it may be necessary to physically intervene to prevent a young person from:

- Harming themselves
- Harming others
- Putting themselves or others at risk
- Damaging property

It is particularly important that adults understand this both to protect their own position and the overall reputation of the organisation in which they are involved.

Contact as part of coaching

Some sport or physical activities are more likely to require coaches or teachers to come into physical contact with children and young people from time to time in the course of their duties. Examples include showing a pupil how to use a piece of apparatus or equipment or demonstrating a move or exercise during a coaching or teaching session in order to reduce the risk of injury due to falls or errors when performing. Adults should be aware of the limits within which such contact should properly take place, and of the possibility of such contact being misinterpreted.

A number of sport or physical activities may require physical contact between young athletes and those teaching them, for reasons of both teaching and the participant's safety. A number of sports governing bodies have developed guidance to assist coaches in this area. This guidance should be followed by those teaching these sports. In sports where there is a need to routinely support a child or young person through direct physical contact this should not exceed the requirements of teaching the specific skill or technique, or of protecting the child from physical harm.

It should be recognised that physical contact between an adult and a child that may occur during legitimate teaching or coaching may be misconstrued or misunderstood by a pupil, parent or observer. Touching young participants, including well intentioned informal and formal gestures such as putting a hand on the shoulder or arm, can, if repeated regularly, lead to the possibility of questions being raised. As a general principle adults in positions of responsibility should not make gratuitous or unnecessary physical contact with children and young people. It is particularly unwise to attribute frequent touching to their teaching or coaching style or as a way of relating to young participants.

Responding to distress and success

There may be occasions where a distressed young person needs comfort and reassurance which may include physical comforting such as a caring parent would give. Physical contact may also be required to prevent an accident or injury and this would be wholly appropriate. A young person or coach may also want to mark a success or achievement with a hug or other gesture. Adults should use their discretion in such cases to ensure that what is (and what is seen by others present) normal and natural does not become unnecessary and unjustified contact, particularly with the same young person over a period of time. In all these circumstances physical contact should only be a response to the needs of the child or young person, rather than those of the adult concerned – and any contact should take place in an open environment. It should also be considered that sometimes what to an adult may seem appropriate may not be considered so by a child or young person.

Some children and young people are not comfortable with physical contact from others. This is particularly likely to be the case with those who have experienced sexual abuse, and therefore adults need to ensure that the need for physical contact in these circumstances is led by the child or young person rather than the adult.



Sports science and medicine

There may be some roles within sport or physical activities where physical contact is common place and/or a requirement of the role, particularly sports science or medicine. These tasks should only be undertaken by properly trained or qualified practitioners. This guidance does not seek to replace the specific guidance and codes of practice developed for those professionals and reference should be made to the appropriate body for that discipline.

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