

## **What should I do if I have a concern about a child?**

All those working with children within a sporting organisation, whether in a paid or voluntary capacity, have a responsibility to ensure that children are protected from harm. Sporting organisations do not hold responsibility for deciding whether or not abuse has taken place. It is the role of statutory agencies such as Social Services and the Police to make enquiries to assess whether a child is at risk of abuse and to take any necessary action to protect that child or young person. One important responsibility for sports organisations is to ensure that staff and volunteers know how to recognise when a child may be at risk of abuse and to pass on those concerns to the statutory agencies.

The Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 places a statutory duty on social services to ensure the welfare of children. When a child protection referral is made, Social Services have a duty to make enquiries if a child in their area is likely to be or is at risk of 'significant harm'. Where a crime may have been committed against a child or young person enquiries will take place with the police, usually the specialist Child Abuse Rape Enquiry Unit (now under the Public Protection UnitS). These enquiries may involve talking to the child and family and gathering information from other people who know them. Social Services and the police have out of hours duty systems so that they can respond to child protection referrals at all times. If action needs to be taken urgently to protect a child at immediate risk, then the local police can be contacted by dialling 999.

If you are involved in a sports club or organisation and you have a safeguarding concern you must follow the guidelines contained within the child protection policy. You should inform the Club Designated Person who will have the responsibility to inform the social services without delay. If this Designated Person is not available or the concern is about the Club Designated Person, the person with concerns or being informed of them should immediately contact the social services or the police. The club designated person must be informed if the concern relates to a club member. Local numbers are in the numbers are in the telephone directory or visit Contacts for Local Health & Social Services. In these circumstances, you do not have to give your name but it is helpful if you can. The social services, together with the Club Designated Person where appropriate, will decide how and when parents or carers will be informed.

### **If a child or young person talks to you about a concern,**

- try to react calmly;
- remember the setting - the child is likely to be frightened or anxious;
- tell the child he/she that he/she was right to tell and is not to blame;
- take what the child says seriously;
- recognise the inherent difficulties interpreting what is said by young children or children with communication difficulties;

- do not 'interview' the child or ask anymore questions than are necessary to enable you to feel you are clear enough about what has happened to pass your concerns on. They may be asked to recount their story to social services or the police;
- however don't prevent a child from recalling events;
- reassure the child but do not make promises of confidentiality - explain that you will have to speak to someone else who can help;
- make a full record of what had been said, heard and/or seen as soon as possible.
- remember it may not be that all young or disabled children are able to express themselves verbally. Communication differences may mean that it is hard for them to complain or be understood. Sometimes abuse of disabled children has not been recognised due to their behaviour being interpreted as a feature of their disability.

### **Actions to Avoid**

The person receiving the disclosure should not:

- panic
- allow their shock or distaste to show
- probe for more information than is offered
- speculate or make assumptions
- make negative comments about the alleged abuser
- approach the alleged abuser (Unless the alleged abuser is a club coach/volunteer and on the advice from statutory agencies the alleged abuser is asked to stand down)
- make promises or agree to keep secrets.

If you are a parent encourage your children to tell you about anything that happens to them, or another child who they are not happy about or makes them feel uncomfortable. If they do tell you about a concern speak to the club child protection officer or to the local Social Services Office.

You can also contact the NSPCC National Helpline 0808 800 5000.