Harmful or inappropriate sexual behaviour by young people in sport

As parents and volunteers with young people, we all want to do the best we can to protect them, while giving them the freedom they need to develop towards adulthood. But we must ensure this is done in a safe environment with established boundaries.

What is harmful or inappropriate sexual behaviour?
Harmful or inappropriate sexual behaviour may include:

- using sexually explicit words and phrases
- inappropriate touching
- using sexual violence or threats
- sexual activity that involves force, coercion or persuasion
- sexual bullying – both online and offline – for example enticement to perform sexual acts, production of sexual photos, sexting.

Sexual behaviour between children is also considered harmful if one of the children is much older, particularly if there is more than two years’ difference in age or if one of the children is pre-pubescent and the other isn’t.

However, children can be sexually abused by same aged peers, and a younger child can abuse an older child, particularly if they have power over them – for example, if the other child has a disability (Rich, 2011; Yates et al, 2012).

In some instances adults have also been sexually assaulted by young people.

Why is this a concern?
We have become increasingly aware of the risk of sexual abuse that some adults present to children and there is growing understanding that this risk lies mostly within families and communities. But very few people realise that other children can sometimes present a risk. Around a third of sexual abuse is committed by other children and young people¹ and in 2013 over 4,200 children and young people were reported as perpetrators of sexual abuse².

This can include all forms of sexual abuse from sharing sexual images through to penetrative abuse and the impact upon victims is as damaging as sexual abuse by an adult perpetrator. This can be especially difficult issue to deal with, partly because it is hard for us to think of children doing such things, but also because it is not always easy to tell the difference between normal sexual exploration and abusive behaviour.

As with adults who sexually abuse children, young people responsible for sexually harming others may also be well liked and respected individuals who may otherwise pose no concerns.

Why do some children sexually harm others?
For some children this is about exploration with others of a similar age but for others it may be a form of control and in response to their own negative life experiences. Sometimes a child’s reaction to past abuse (including physical, emotional or sexual abuse, or neglect) can lead to them develop harmful sexual behaviour. If these children or young people have experienced abuse and neglect they themselves are in need of protection as well as those who they are harming. If not addressed, this behaviour can escalate into more serious sexually abusive behaviour.

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² NSPCC (2014) FOI request.
In sport, research found that “sexual harassment” (including sexualised bullying) was the second most common form of harm and peers were the most common perpetrators of all forms of harm reported.\(^3\)

Children with a disability may develop at different rates, depending on the nature of their disability, and they can be more vulnerable to abuse. Children with learning disabilities, for example, may behave sexually in ways that are out of step with their age. Particular care may be needed in educating such children to understand their sexual development and to ensure that they can communicate effectively about any worries they have.

**How to respond to concerns about harmful sexual behaviour in sport settings**

Harmful sexual behaviour by young people must be taken seriously by all organisations. It is not the responsibility of sports organisations to distinguish between experimental behaviours and exploitative and harmful behaviours, but they should follow their normal reporting procedures and consult their local statutory services for advice.

Therefore, if you encounter behaviour that you believe to be sexually harmful you should:

- Stop the immediate behaviour that is causing harm by distracting the young people and possibly removing the individual young person and explaining that this behaviour is not acceptable.
- Immediately report the incident to your safeguarding officer, e.g. club welfare officer with all details in line with organisational reporting procedures.
- Record the incident, being as specific as possible about what was seen and heard.
- Give the record to your safeguarding officer who must consider the level of concern and may informally consult statutory authorities before making a formal referral, involving parents (unless this would pose a risk to the young person and with the support of your national governing body if required).
- In discussion with your safeguarding officer, make plans to ensure that the individual has no opportunity for unsupervised contact with other potentially vulnerable children or young people, including the suspected victim. Your organisation may liaise with statutory authorities around further investigation and assessment of the young person and a plan to address any risk that they pose.

**Further information and support**

- NSPCC Helpline 0808 800 5000 help@nspcc.org.uk

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\(^3\) Alexander, Stafford and Lewis (2011) Experiences of children participating in organised sport in the UK