

# Physical Contact and Young People in Sport

## Introduction and background

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.

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 use 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. 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 punishment

Any form of physical punishment of children is unlawful, as is any form of physical response to misbehaviour unless it is by way of physical intervention to prevent a young person from;

- Harming themselves
- Harming other
- 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. Even in sports where there is a need to support or touch a child, over – handling should be avoided.

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. It should also be considered that what, as an adult may, be felt appropriate may not be shared by a young person.

### 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.

**Tennis Ireland advise in their Child protection and Good Practice Guidelines 2005 Page 10 Point 12 “...that if physical support is needed, talk aloud to the child/young person explaining what you are doing and why. Any necessary contact should be in response to the needs of the child and it should be in an open environment with the understanding and permission of the young person where possible. The leaders should never do something for the child that they can do themselves. Children/young people should always be consulted before they are touched and their agreement gained. Parental/carers views about manual support should always be carefully considered”.**