



Physical Contact and Young People in Sport

What is this briefing about?

This briefing offers guidelines for how physical contact between adults and children in sport can take place appropriately and safely. There may be a number of circumstances in a sports context when it is appropriate for an adult to touch (have direct physical contact with) a child. Parents need to feel confident that contact between those running sports activities and children are safe and appropriate. Adults in sport need confidence that their actions cannot be misconstrued. Children have a right to say what level of contact they are comfortable with.

When is physical contact appropriate in sport?

The CPSU is aware of no sports bodies that have banned any physical contact i.e. under any circumstances within the context of coaching or teaching. Physical contact between adults and children in sport should take place only when necessary to:

- Develop sports skills or techniques
- Treat an injury
- Prevent an injury or accident from occurring
- Meet the requirements of the sport
- Comfort a distressed child or to celebrate their success.

What are good principles to follow?

- Physical contact should take place in the interests of and for the benefit of the child, rather than the adult involved.
- Adults should explain the nature of and reason for the physical contact to the child.
- Unless the situation is an emergency, the adult should ask the child for permission, for example to aid the demonstration a specific sports technique.
- Sports clubs and coaches should provide an induction for new young members and their parents/carers that covers 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.
- Well intentioned gestures such as putting a hand on the shoulder or arm, can, if repeated regularly, lead to the possibility of questions being raised by observers. As a general principle adults in positions of responsibility should not make gratuitous or unnecessary physical contact with children and young people.

What about children who need specific assistance due to disability or injury?

In the case of a young person with a disability specific support or assistance may be required. The following guidelines should be followed:

- Parents/carers or their delegated care providers should be asked to undertake all intimate or personal

care tasks for their child. This is not an appropriate role for coaches and others involved in leading activities.

- When children with disabilities are lifted or manually supported, they 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 in order to minimise the risk of injury both to themselves and the child.

What about physical punishment?

Any form of physical punishment of children by anyone other than their parent/carer 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 others
- damaging property

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

What about direct contact in 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 teaching 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 sports governing bodies have developed sport-specific 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.

Is it ok to comfort a child or celebrate 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. A young person 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. Contact that an adult may feel is appropriate may be unwanted or uncomfortable to a young person.

Where do specific sports science and medical roles fit in?

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.

Information adapted with permission from the Child Protection in Sport Unit